

Hoot



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CARL HIAASEN

Hiaasen grew up in a rural suburb of Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The oldest of four children, he began writing at age six when he received a typewriter for Christmas. Upon graduating high school, Hiaasen attended several Florida colleges, where he contributed humor columns to the schools' newspapers while earning a degree in journalism. In 1976, after briefly working for TODAY in Cocoa, Florida, the *Miami Herald* hired him. He became an opinion columnist for the paper in 1985, a position he held until he retired in 2021. In the 1980s, Hiaasen began writing humorous crime thrillers, first in collaboration with a colleague and then on his own. *Hoot*, published in 2002, was his first novel for young adults and was named a Newbery Honor Book. Nearly all of his novels take place in Florida, where he still lives, and many have environmental themes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The burrowing owl, *Athene cunicularia*, is Florida's smallest owl, standing on average about nine inches tall. Though globally and federally the burrowing owl is either not listed on endangered species lists or is listed as "least concern" (that is, population levels are fine), the state of Florida has designated the owls as "imperiled." As Roy and his friends discover in *Hoot*, this is primarily due to habitat loss—the owls live in flat, open grassy areas that are also often coveted spots for real estate development. And when humans live in close proximity to existing burrows, domesticated animals (and sometimes even people) threaten and harass the owls. Florida requires prospective developers to apply for permits and have site surveys done of prospective building sites, and they also require developers to follow the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. This federal act, which was initially passed in 1918, prohibits killing, capturing, selling, and transporting protected bird species without permission from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Critics note that *Hoot*, Hiaasen's first novel for young readers, shares many similarities with his satirical crime thrillers for adults, including *Skinny Dip*, *Sick Puppy*, and *Strip Tease*. All of Hiaasen's novels take place in Florida, and like *Hoot*, many also tackle environmentalism and political corruption. Following *Hoot*, Hiaasen wrote several young adult novels that follow much the same format (*Flush*, *Scat*, *Chomp*, *Skink – No Surrender*, and *Squirm*), though none have achieved quite the success that

Hoot did. Other novels for young readers that also tackle environmental themes include *The Lord of Opium* by Nancy Farmer, *Washashore* by Suzanne Goldsmith, and *Flight or Fight* by Diane Hayes. For adults and older readers, books as varied as Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, Kate Beaton's graphic memoir *Ducks*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* all explore the complex relationships between human development, the environment, and nature preservation or conservation efforts. Within the novel itself, Roy reads *A Land Remembered*, a 1984 historical fiction novel by Patrick D. Smith. It follows a family for about a century, through three generations, as the family braves the Florida wilderness.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Hoot
- **When Written:** 2001
- **Where Written:** Miami, Florida
- **When Published:** 2002
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel; Mystery
- **Setting:** Coconut Cove, Florida
- **Climax:** The groundbreaking ceremony for the new Mother Paula's location in Coconut Cove turns into an impromptu protest.
- **Antagonist:** Chuck Muckle and the Mother Paula's corporation; Lonna Leep; Dana Matherson
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Audubon Society. Since its incorporation in 1905, the Audubon Society has advocated for birds' protection, much as Roy and his friends do in *Hoot*. What began as a campaign to stop game hunting and so-called plume hunters (people who hunted and killed birds for their feathers, which were then put on ladies' hats) eventually expanded to publishing books, producing television programs, and political activism. Today, the Audubon Society is even responsible for things like certifying whether beef has been grass-fed.



PLOT SUMMARY

Roy only notices the strange, barefoot running boy because the school bully, Dana Matherson, chooses to squeeze Roy's head, which forces Roy to look out the window instead of at his comic book. Roy is so curious about the boy that he spends the next week looking for him, but he doesn't see the boy until the

following Friday. But when Roy tries to race off the bus to catch the boy, Dana chokes Roy. Roy punches at Dana, shoves past a blond girl (Beatrice Leep), and pursues the boy onto a golf course until a golf ball hits Roy in the head. Later, though Miss Hennepin, the vice principal, sees the bruises Dana left on Roy's neck, she maintains that Roy started it (Roy did accidentally break Dana's nose). She suspends him from the bus and asks him to write Dana an apology letter. Roy's parents, Mr. Eberhardt and Mrs. Eberhardt, are upset about this. And inexplicably, the next day at school Beatrice tries to intimidate Roy, insisting that he didn't see a running boy.

At the same time, foreman Curly calls Officer Delinko out to the future site of a Mother Paula's pancake house to inspect some recent vandalism. While there, Delinko trips in big holes. Curly says **owls** live in the holes, but there aren't currently any owls using the burrows. Delinko returns again the following week to find the survey stakes pulled out again and alligators in the portable toilets. When Delinko meets with his captain and sergeant, he offers to patrol the site for free. He just wants to solve the mystery. However, Delinko falls asleep in his car at the site and wakes up to his windows spray painted black. As punishment, Delinko is placed on desk duty.

Deciding he can't let Beatrice and Dana bully him all year, Roy approaches Beatrice at lunch and tells her that in the future, they should just talk things out. Then, after paying Garrett (whose mom is the guidance counselor) to find Dana's address, Roy asks his mom to drive him to Dana's house. He gives Dana the apology letter and takes note of Dana's broken, bruised nose. Later, Roy sneaks out of his house and rides to the golf course. He enters the trees where he saw the running boy disappear and finds a campsite—and a bag of venomous cottonmouth moccasins with glittery blue tails. The running boy pulls Roy away from the snakes, puts a hood over Roy's head, and says people call him Mullet Fingers. He walks Roy out of the trees and leaves Roy there, telling him not to come looking for him again.

A few days later, Roy sneaks out of the house with a shoebox just as a storm is rolling in. He goes to Mullet Fingers's camp, but the boy isn't there—and when Roy gets back to where he left his bike, it's gone. He trudges through the rain until Beatrice rides up on his bike and tells him to get on the handlebars. She takes him to a junkyard, where she accepts the shoes in the box and promises to get them to Mullet Fingers, whom she reveals is her stepbrother. Beatrice then bites Roy's bike tire so he has an excuse for being so late. Roy's parents have reported him missing by now, and Officer Delinko spots and picks Roy up on his way home.

Over the next few days, Curly fields calls from his boss Chuck Muckle, who's the vice president of corporate relations at Mother Paula's. Muckle is incensed that construction hasn't started yet and threatens to fire Curly if Curly can't stop the vandal, so Curly hires attack dogs. However, Curly gets to the

construction site the morning after the dogs arrive to find the trainer, Kalo, in hysterics: there are cottonmouth moccasins with glittery blue tails on the site, and so Kalo refuses to bring the dogs back.

Roy, meanwhile, is allowed back on the bus, and Dana returns to school. Beatrice defends Roy from Dana on the bus, but when Roy is on his own after school, Dana pulls Roy into a janitor's closet and tries to suffocate him. But Beatrice again comes to Roy's rescue—she strips Dana to his underwear and ties him to the flagpole—then insists she needs Roy's help. Lying that they're working on a science project together, Beatrice and Roy get Mrs. Eberhardt to give them ground beef and sneak first aid supplies. In an ice cream truck in the junkyard, Mullet Fingers is feverish and is nursing clearly infected dog bites on his arm. He allows Roy and Beatrice to dress his wounds and then the three go to the Mother Paula's construction site. There, Mullet Fingers explains that the dogs bit him while he was putting snakes through the fence. And he did that because the construction project can't happen: there are wild burrowing owls living on the site, and they'll die when the bulldozers bury their burrows. Watching the tiny owls nibble at raw meatballs, Roy understands now.

Mullet Fingers collapses from the fever, so Beatrice and Roy rush him to the emergency room and tell the doctor that Mullet Fingers is Roy. (Mullet Fingers's mom, Lonna, doesn't want Mullet Fingers and would send him somewhere terrible if she knew he was in town, so they can't give his real name.) Beatrice runs home to make her dad, Leon, dinner, leaving Roy alone. When Roy's parents arrive, Mullet Fingers has already escaped the hospital. Roy tells his dad about the owls and why he lied about Mullet Fingers's identity. Mr. Eberhardt suggests that Mother Paula's is probably following all the permitting requirements, but he notes that Roy can check on that at city hall.

Over the weekend, Mullet Fingers takes Roy to a creek and shows him how he got his nickname; he can catch mullet, which are tiny fish, with his bare hands. The boy also implies that he has more hijinks planned for the Mother Paula's property tonight and invites Roy to join him, but Roy refuses. However, Roy wants to help—so he goes to Dana's house, moons him to draw him outside, and then lies to Dana that there are cigarettes in the construction trailer on the Mother Paula's property. As such, Curly has a harrowing weekend: not having attack dogs means that Curly himself has to spend the night on the property, and after battling mice in the trailer, Curly comes face to face with Dana trying to break in. Dana runs away, ratt traps snapped to his toes, and Officer Delinko arrests him. Curly spends a blissful night at home, proud of his heroics.

On Monday morning, though, Curly discovers that someone took all the seats from the earthmoving equipment. This enrages Chuck Muckle, who insists that Curly has to keep the site locked down until the groundbreaking ceremony on

Wednesday. Kimberly Lou Dixon, an actress and former Miss America contestant who portrays Mother Paula in TV commercials, will be there. Officer Delinko's superiors are impressed with his work catching Dana. So, even though they all believe on some level that Dana isn't the vandal, they praise Delinko and assign him to surveil the property overnight with Curly until Wednesday. Delinko decides to test his theory that Dana isn't the vandal by scaring him with a rubber alligator, which proves to him that Dana isn't capable of handling live ones. The vandal is still out there.

After doing some research on burrowing owls, Roy visits City Hall and discovers that the Mother Paula's permits have been checked out—or are missing. He then stops at the construction site, leaves crickets for the owls to eat, and encounters Curly. Roy deduces that Curly indeed knows about the owls, which tells him that Mother Paula's is in violation of Florida's building laws. That night, when Officer Delinko is patrolling the property, he trips in an owl burrow and comes face to face with a baby owl in the burrow. Noticing the **bulldozers**, Delinko realizes that doing his job and catching the vandal will have horrible consequences: the baby owl will no doubt die.

On Tuesday morning, Roy reads in the paper that the groundbreaking ceremony is the next day. That afternoon, in Mr. Ryan's history class, Roy uses his current events speech to tell his classmates about the owls and his suspicions that Mother Paula's isn't following all the rules. He shares that he's going to the ceremony tomorrow during lunch. Roy also knows from his research that it's illegal to build where there are active burrows, so he also gives Mullet Fingers a camera and asks him to take pictures of the owls—all they need is proof.

Mr. Eberhardt is happy to write Roy a note giving him permission to leave school and attend the groundbreaking ceremony. Beatrice shows up to school with the camera; Mullet Fingers got pictures—and at lunchtime, it turns out that lots of kids from Trace Middle School got permission to attend the groundbreaking. As far as Chuck Muckle is concerned, things seem to be going well at first. But then, Roy and his classmates begin talking and chanting about the owls, and Roy pulls out the camera. The pictures, though, are unidentifiable, and all hope seems lost—until everyone realizes that Mullet Fingers squeezed himself into an owl burrow last night. Mullet Fingers insists they'll have to dig him up to start construction, and he also threatens to dump over a bucket of cottonmouth moccasins if anyone approaches him. The snakes are rubber, but both Roy and Officer Delinko play along. Muckle loses his temper, hacks at the snakes, and then tries to hurt Mullet Fingers, but the children—and then Kimberly Lou Dixon—link arms to form a circle around the boy and start to sing.

The next morning, a reporter, Kelly Colfax, knocks on the Eberhardts' door. Mr. Eberhardt gives Roy a file to give to her; it's the permits, and the Environmental Impact Statement is missing. Over the next few weeks, Mother Paula's erupts in

scandal. Someone discovers the Environmental Impact Statement and a huge check in a councilman's golf bag, and Chuck Muckle loses his job. The company ultimately abandons the Coconut Cove project and turns the site into an owl refuge to try to rehab their public image, while Kimberly Lou Dixon cancels her contract with the pancake house and publicly announces her lifetime membership to the Audubon Society.

Mullet Fingers, meanwhile, spends a few days at home, is arrested when he runs away, and then runs away from juvie after manipulating Dana Matherson into helping him. Roy suspects Mullet Fingers is still in the area: when Roy returns to the spot on the creek to try to catch mullet himself, he hears a boy laughing and finds a mullet swimming in one of his shoes.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Roy Eberhardt – The protagonist of the novel, Roy is a middle school student who recently moved to Coconut Cove, Florida with his parents, Mr. Eberhardt and Mrs. Eberhardt. The family has moved a lot because Mr. Eberhardt works for the government, but Roy considers his previous home in Montana his real home and thus struggles to adjust to life in Florida. Roy begins to feel more at home when he becomes involved with Mullet Fingers's campaign to save native burrowing **owls** who are living on the future site of a Mother Paula's pancake house. As a nature lover and as someone with a firm sense of right and wrong, Roy agrees with Mullet Fingers that it's extremely unjust that a corporation can pay to bury baby owls. With his dad's help, he reveals that Mother Paula's isn't following the rules and organizes a student protest against the company. As Roy does this, he also uses his relative privilege to help Beatrice and Mullet Fingers, sometimes getting into trouble in the process as when he lets Mullet Fingers assume his identity at the hospital to get medical care. Additionally, Roy outsmarts Dana, the school bully, ultimately getting Dana arrested. Roy ends the novel feeling both secure and at home in Florida.

Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy – Mullet Fingers, whose name is eventually revealed to be Napoleon Bridger, is Beatrice's stepbrother and Lonna's son. His nickname comes from his ability to catch mullet (a type of tiny fish) with his bare hands. Roy first sees Mullet Fingers running, barefoot, along the sidewalk and becomes transfixed by the strange boy. As Roy gets to know Mullet Fingers and later, Beatrice, he comes to greatly admire Mullet Fingers. Mullet Fingers has always loved animals and nature and has never gotten along with Lonna. In fact, she's tried to send him away to several military schools, but he keeps running away—and the last time he did so, she didn't bother to look for him and said outright she didn't want him. Thus, Mullet Fingers lives on his own in Coconut Cove's wild areas, with Beatrice and later, Roy, supporting him. Mullet

Fingers is the true Mother Paula's vandal, as he wants to protect the burrowing **owls** that live on the construction site. A lot of his vandalism entails leaving dangerous animals, like alligators and venomous snakes, on the property. When Roy's protest in support of the owls is successful and the construction project shuts down, Mullet Fingers disappears. However, Roy suspects that Mullet Fingers is still lurking around Coconut Cove.

Beatrice Leep/The Girl – Beatrice is a hulking, athletic blond girl at Trace Middle School who eventually becomes Roy's friend. In addition to having a reputation as a skilled athlete, Beatrice is also feared: she once broke a football player's collarbone when he touched her bottom. Though she attempts to intimidate Roy, Roy sees through her tough demeanor, and she eventually begins to trust him. She reveals to Roy that the running boy, Mullet Fingers, is her stepbrother, and for his safety, she's the only person who knows he's in town. Her home life is difficult and borders on unsafe, as her dad, Leon, and stepmom, Lonna regularly get into physically violent fights. And Beatrice is also mature beyond her years, as she cares for Mullet Fingers and makes sure her dad has meals to eat. As she gets to know and trust Roy, she proves herself to be a loyal friend who, like Roy, values doing the right thing and standing up for the weak and innocent, whether that be Roy or the burrowing **owls**.

Dana Matherson – One of the novel's antagonists, Dana is an older bully at Trace Middle School who rides the bus with Roy. He's huge, strong, and smokes cigarettes, though he's not very smart. And because he's terrified all the students at Trace Middle with his violent and incessant bullying, nobody is brave enough to report him—so therefore, as far as the administration is concerned, Dana isn't actually a bully. Dana targets Roy specifically, though this never ends well for Dana: Roy is small and spry enough to dodge many of Dana's hits, and Roy even ends up breaking Dana's nose on accident. Ultimately, Dana gets his comeuppance when Roy tricks him into trying to break into the construction trailer at the Mother Paula's construction site. Dana is arrested for vandalizing the site, and because he has a previous criminal record, he's incarcerated at the local juvenile detention center.

Officer David Delinko – Officer Delinko is a young police officer who works in Coconut Cove. He's bored with his job and dreams of being a detective one day, so he's intrigued when he begins responding to claims of vandalism at the future site of a Mother Paula's pancake house. Believing that catching the vandal will prove he has what it takes to be a detective, Delinko volunteers to work without pay surveilling the site—but this backfires when Delinko falls asleep and the vandal spray paints his cruiser, landing Delinko on desk duty as punishment. For much of the novel, Delinko is righteous, pushy, and unquestioningly believes in finding out who the vandal is. Though Delinko redeems himself at work when he catches

Dana (whom his superiors insist is the vandal), Delinko privately realizes Dana isn't at fault. He also begins to wonder if he's doing the right thing trying to catch the vandal at all when he sees the burrowing **owls** living on the property and realizes that doing his job right will have consequences for the baby owls. And because of this, he becomes an unexpected ally to Roy, Mullet Fingers, and Beatrice on the day of the groundbreaking ceremony.

Curly – Curly is the foreman at the Mother Paula's construction site in Coconut Cove, Florida. Curly is bald, has no sense of humor, and is desperate to keep his job. This is why, he implies, he's more than willing to pretend that there are no burrowing **owls** on the site—acknowledging their existence would lead Chuck Muckle to fire Curly immediately. Mullet Fingers, the real Mother Paula's vandal, regularly tricks and thwarts Curly by pulling up survey stakes, setting venomous snakes loose on the property, and even putting alligators and Curly's pistol in the portable toilets. Though Curly thinks of himself as brave and competent, he's humorously afraid of the wild animals that end up on the site. Though Curly seems willing to support the Mother Paula's corporation and its plan to build on the burrows as long as it's convenient for him, once Muckle fires him and the project is scrapped, Curly acknowledges the owls' existence and even admits that they're cute.

Mr. Eberhardt – Roy's dad, Mr. Eberhardt, works for the Department of Justice; it's implied that he's particularly skilled in interrogation. However, Roy doesn't know or even care all that much what his dad does for work, though he often fears telling his dad things—such as Mullet Fingers's nickname or Dana's name—because he's worried his dad will get the kids in more trouble than they might get in otherwise. This fear seems somewhat overblown, as Mr. Eberhardt is certainly interested in justice. He's also more concerned, for instance, with the fact that Mullet Fingers isn't safe at home than he is that Mullet Fingers isn't attending school. Mr. Eberhardt encourages Roy to be smart, safe, honest, and to stand up for what he believes is right. He even becomes an unexpected ally when Roy is trying to fight the Mother Paula's development project: Mr. Eberhardt is the one to discover that the company is missing an Environmental Impact Statement and consult a lawyer.

Mrs. Eberhardt – Mrs. Eberhardt is Roy's mother. She's a kind and generous woman who encourages Roy to follow rules and make good choices, but she also pushes him to follow his heart and do what he believes is right. She's extremely proud of him after the lunchtime protest in support of the burrowing **owls** at the Mother Paula's building site, though Roy infers that she's not actually all that concerned about the owls—her focus is on her son.

Miss Hennepin – Miss Hennepin is the vice principal at Trace Middle School. A stern woman, Miss Hennepin is nevertheless difficult for Roy to take seriously, due to a long hair growing on

her upper lip that changes color nearly every time Roy sees her. Mr. Eberhardt and Mrs. Eberhardt, meanwhile, take issue with Miss Hennepin for what they see as her cowardice: she refuses to punish Dana for choking Roy, despite having proof Dana did so, for fear that Dana's parents would sue the school. At the end of the novel, Roy is amused to hear that Miss Hennepin told reporters she encouraged kids to protest in support of the burrowing **owls**—from Roy's experiences with her, Miss Hennepin would never do such a thing.

Chuck Muckle – One of the novel's antagonists, Chuck Muckle is the vice president of corporate relations for the Mother Paula's pancake house company. He's a suave older man, with wavy silver hair, sunglasses, and impeccable suits. Muckle is also clearly corrupt and drunk on power. It's implied that he knew about the burrowing **owls** on the prospective Coconut Cove restaurant site and was involved in hiding the Environmental Impact Statement. He also regularly taunts and threatens Curly when the Mother Paula's vandal is on the loose. At the groundbreaking ceremony (which turns into an impromptu protest), Muckle loses his temper and embarrasses himself by hacking up a bucket of rubber snakes and choking a reporter. He's demoted and forced to take an anger management course, but he ends up quitting his job and becoming a cruise director.

Kimberly Lou Dixon – Kimberly Lou Dixon is a former Miss America runner-up who plays Mother Paula in commercials. She's also just beginning to get into film, so the hurry to break ground on the Coconut Cove Mother Paula's site is mostly due to the fact that Dixon will start filming a new movie soon. Though she's relatively young and gorgeous, she has an absurdly sandpapery voice. At the groundbreaking, once Roy alerts her to the burrowing **owls'** existence, Dixon joins the protest. She later breaks her contract with the Mother Paula's corporation and goes public about her lifetime membership to the Audubon Society.

Leon Leep – Leon is Beatrice's dad. A former NBA player who retired more than a decade ago, he hasn't yet figured out what he wants to do with himself—and so he spends his days watching television. Following his divorce from Beatrice's mom, he married Lonna. Though Leon seems like his heart is in the right place—he has no issue with his stepson, Mullet Fingers, and loves Beatrice—Leon is totally checked out. Beatrice prepares all his meals, and for the most part, he seems unaware of how cruel and selfish Lonna is. He and Lonna, however, do get in several loud and violent fights, one of which frightens Beatrice enough that she runs away to spend the night at Roy's house.

Lonna Leep – One of the novel's antagonists, Lonna is Mullet Fingers's mom and Beatrice's stepmother. She married Beatrice's dad, Leon, several years ago. Lonna is cruel, selfish, and controlling—when she couldn't stop Mullet Fingers from rescuing animals or running off, she began sending him away to

military schools. The last time, when he ran away, she never looked for him and told Beatrice outright that she doesn't want him anymore. She's also cruel to Beatrice and forces Beatrice to essentially act as a maid in the Leep home, though Beatrice does occasionally fight back against her stepmother. Lonna is more than willing to use Mullet Fingers and the publicity that the protest against Mother Paula's generated to try to get news outlets to pay attention to her, but true to form, she has no issue accusing her son of theft to get him arrested when the media stops returning her phone calls.

Garrett – Garrett is a skater boy at Trace Middle School who befriends Roy. He's a poor student and is best known for his impressive fake fart noises. He's also a huge gossip and has lots of insider information on his classmates, due to his mom being the guidance counselor at Trace Middle. Though Roy isn't much of a skater, he appreciates Garrett's attempts to be friendly—and appreciates it even more when Garrett procures Dana's home address for Roy and later attends the lunchtime protest in support of the burrowing **owls**. However, Roy does find Garrett's exaggerated suggestions to get plastic surgery or transfer to a private school (to escape Dana and Beatrice, respectively) a bit annoying.

Councilman Bruce Grandy – Bruce Grandy is on Coconut Cove's city council. Following the Mother Paula's groundbreaking ceremony and the revelation that there are indeed burrowing **owls** on the construction site, someone finds the Environmental Impact Statement and a check for several thousand dollars in his golf bag. It's implied (though never proven) that Mother Paula's bribed him to hide the paperwork and push the project through, no matter the environmental damage the project would cause.

The Captain – The Coconut Cove Public Safety Department's captain is close to retirement age; after a career in the Northeast, he planned to work a few easy years in Florida and then retire. However, he's extremely disappointed with how hard he must work and finds the Mother Paula's vandalism mystery particularly trying. In order to smooth things over with the city council and other higher-ups, the captain insists that they keep Dana imprisoned as the Mother Paula's vandal, despite evidence suggesting they have the wrong kid.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Sergeant – Officer Delinko's sergeant is his direct boss at the Coconut Cove Public Safety Department. He's willing to do what it's implied he knows is wrong—keep Dana imprisoned as the Mother Paula's vandal—to make himself and his employer look good.

Kalo – Kalo is the German guard dog trainer whom Curly hires to provide guard dogs for the fenced Mother Paula's construction site. He removes the dogs and threatens legal action when he discovers cottonmouth moccasin snakes on the

property.

Dr. Gonzalez – Dr. Gonzalez is the emergency room doctor who treats Mullet Fingers’s infected dog bites. She encourages Roy and Beatrice to work on their unbelievable story, though she’s willing to treat Mullet Fingers regardless.

Mrs. Matherson – Mrs. Matherson is Dana’s mom. A hulking woman, it’s implied that she’s physically violent like her son is.

Mr. Matherson – Mr. Matherson is Dana’s dad. A small and unhealthy-looking man, Roy suspects that Mr. Matherson has no control over Dana and is ashamed of his son.

Kelly Colfax – Kelly Colfax is a local reporter who breaks the news that Mother Paula’s actively tried to hide their Environmental Impact Statement, which showed three nesting pairs of burrowing owls on the prospective building site.

Mr. Ryan – Mr. Ryan is Roy’s American history teacher.



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.



CONSERVATION AND THE NATURAL WORLD

Hoot follows middle school student Roy and his new friends, Beatrice and a boy known only as Mullet Fingers, as they work together to stop the Mother Paula’s All-American Pancake House corporation from building a new location in Coconut Cove, Florida. They do this because the vacant lot where Mother Paula’s plans to build is home to several nesting pairs of burrowing **owls**, which are endangered and are thus protected under state and federal law. As the novel progresses and as Roy becomes increasingly enthusiastic about protecting the owls, *Hoot* illustrates how nature conservation works and why it’s important. The natural world, the novel suggests, is worth protecting simply because it’s beautiful and existed long before humans began developing. And it’s only possible to protect it because of people like Roy—ordinary people who are willing to be animals’ voices, create laws to protect animals and natural areas, and make sure those laws are ultimately enforced.

When Roy’s mom, Mrs. Eberhardt, is putting together a scrapbook of newspaper cuttings about Roy’s student protest in support of the owls, Roy mentally scoffs at his mom’s implication that the protest itself is what matters most. Roy thinks that he’d rather show his kids and grandkids the owls one day, assuming the owls still live in Florida decades into the future. This view highlights what Roy (and the novel on the

whole) thinks is most important: preserving nature, if only because an area’s plants and animals have the right to live and can also bring a sense of joy and wonder to people who are lucky enough to catch sight of them. The novel’s conclusion supports this view, as in an attempt to rehabilitate their public image, Mother Paula’s announces that the Coconut Cove site will become an owl refuge. Though Roy sees this as the company’s shameless attempt to make itself look good, it’s impossible to ignore that Roy and many others in Coconut Cove—even those who were involved in trying to push the construction project forward—can and do stand at the fence and admire the owls. Nature conservation, this suggests, doesn’t just benefit the animals—it also benefits the people who live in close proximity to those animals.



BULLYING AND CORRUPTION

There are two primary antagonists in *Hoot*: Dana, a bully who incessantly targets Roy, and Chuck Muckle and the Mother Paula’s All-American Pancake House corporation, which plans to build a new Mother Paula’s location on a vacant lot in Coconut Cove, despite sightings of protected burrowing **owls** on the lot. As Roy and his friends take on both Dana and Mother Paula’s, *Hoot* highlights how corruption and intimidation function, highlighting how money and fear can routinely impede justice and righteousness. When it comes to Dana, Roy explains that technically speaking, nobody has complained about him and therefore, Dana isn’t officially considered a problem at school. But really, Dana has terrified the entire student body into not reporting his bullying by threatening to beat up anyone who reports him. And even when Roy does tell Miss Hennepin, the vice principal, that Dana choked him, Miss Hennepin only believes Roy when she sees the obvious bruises on Roy’s neck. Still, out of fear that Dana’s parents would sue the school, Miss Hennepin refuses to discipline Dana, highlighting how Dana and his family are able to create a culture of fear and threaten expensive legal consequences, which allows Dana to continue his reign of terror over the Trace Middle School student body.

The same dynamic plays out on a much larger and more expensive scale when it comes to the Mother Paula’s corporation’s plan to build a new pancake house in Coconut Cove. Per Florida law, it’s illegal to build where there are owl burrows. Mother Paula’s “solves” the owl burrow problem by simply insisting that there are no owls on the vacant lot—and by threatening to fire, sue, or otherwise discipline anyone who acknowledges the owls’ existence. Given the circumstances, it’s possible to see foreman Curly’s insistence that there are no owls as proof that, like his bosses, he genuinely doesn’t care about the birds. But it’s also worth keeping in mind that his and his wife’s livelihoods depend on him doing as Chuck Muckle tells him. Fear and self-preservation, in other words, lead Curly to support his employer’s corruption in much the same way

that Miss Hennepin allows Dana to terrorize students to avoid a lawsuit, clearly illustrating how fear, intimidation, and threats create situations where corruption can thrive.



MORALITY, THE LAW, AND PROTEST

Hoot's protagonist, preteen Roy, is extremely concerned with doing the right thing, particularly when it comes to situations where what's right or wrong isn't entirely obvious. When Roy's new friend Mullet Fingers shows him the burrowing owls living on a vacant lot where the Mother Paula's pancake house corporation plans to build a new location, Roy is convinced the building project is morally wrong—it's wrong, Roy believes, to bury baby owls just so people can eat pancakes. However, though Roy sees the situation as very black and white, his parents, Mr. Eberhardt and Mrs. Eberhardt, suggest that things might not be so simple—Florida requires permits and an environmental review to build, after all, and they suggest that Mother Paula's is no doubt complying with those requirements. This impresses upon Roy that the law isn't always moral and just. Ultimately, Roy and his friends decide that the best way to advocate for laws that are more moral and just is a combination of public oversight and political protest.

Roy isn't sold on his parents' suggestion that a company can get a permit to bury baby owls and that, therefore, it's okay to do so. And indeed, his trip to the local building records department suggests he's right: Mother Paula's file is missing permits and environmental reviews, and it's later implied that the corporation bribed a local councilman to hide evidence that there are federally protected burrowing owls on the prospective building site. So, at least in this case, Roy is right: the law does *not* condone destroying owl burrows and burying baby owls; in this instance, the law is morally in the clear. However, as Roy is piecing this together, he and his friends organize an impromptu protest, something the novel suggests is another effective way to fight for what's right. Faced with dozens of children accusing him on live television of prioritizing profit over adorable owls, Mother Paula's higher-up Chuck Muckle loses his temper and ultimately, his job—and the Mother Paula's corporation is forced to abandon the project due to the terrible publicity. Thanks to Roy and other likeminded classmates who are willing to stand up for what they believe is right, the owls are saved. In this way, *Hoot* makes the case that anyone is capable of advocating for positive change and for those, like the owls, who have no voice of their own.



PARENTING AND SUPPORT

While *Hoot*'s main focus is on its young protagonists, it nevertheless offers readers glimpses into the role parents play in children's

lives. It's possible to trace why Roy, Beatrice and Mullet Fingers, and Dana behave the way they do to how their parents support them (or don't). The novel shows how present parenting prepares kids to tackle complex challenges while still giving them opportunities to be kids, while absent, neglectful, or abusive parenting fosters bad behavior and forces kids to grow up long before they're ready. Mr. Eberhardt and Mrs. Eberhardt, Roy's parents, are presented as ideal parents. When Roy gets into trouble, he trusts that his parents will still love and support him. Additionally, they coach Roy through learning to trust his gut and make good choices. Trusting his parents, and learning from them in this way, helps Roy become independent. But it also means that Roy is able to ask for help when he needs it and simply be a carefree kid a lot of the time.

In contrast, *Hoot* presents what Roy refers to as “shaky example[s] of motherhood” (and, it should be noted, fatherhood) in Beatrice, Mullet Fingers, and Dana's parents. Dana, the school bully, experiences physical abuse from Mrs. Matherson and seems to bully timid Mr. Matherson just like he bullies his classmates. This, the novel suggests, has taught Dana to bully others to get his way—and when it comes to those he can't intimidate, like his mother, to fight back violently. While the novel frames Dana as something of an absurd joke, Beatrice and Mullet Fingers's family situation is far more tragic. Beatrice's dad, Leon, married Mullet Fingers's mom, Donna, several years ago. And while Leon is totally checked out, Donna is cruel and neglectful. Donna has said outright that she doesn't want her son anymore—so after sending him to several military academies from which Mullet Fingers ran away, she didn't look for him when he ran away the last time. Thus, Mullet Fingers now lives on his own in Coconut Cove's wild areas, supported by Beatrice. And Beatrice, in addition to parenting her stepbrother, is essentially a maid to the adults at home: Donna forces her to perform all household chores, and Beatrice has been planning and cooking Leon's meals for years. Due to their parents' neglect, both Beatrice and Mullet Fingers are functionally adults, something *Hoot* frames as both tragic and damaging.



FRIENDSHIP

Even as *Hoot* illustrates how neglectful or absent parenting can hurt children and make their lives extremely difficult, it also shows that there's an antidote to some aspects of questionable parenting situations. While *Hoot* doesn't go so far as to suggest that having close friendships with peers is enough to totally remedy an unsupportive or dangerous situation at home, it does show that having a friend can make one's home life more bearable and, in some cases, provide a much-needed escape. Roy, having grown up with stable and supportive parents, takes an interesting view of friendship: because he's so close with Mr. Eberhardt and Mrs. Eberhardt, he doesn't feel such a pressing need to try

to make friends after the move to Coconut Cove. But for Beatrice and Mullet Fingers, who eventually become Roy's best friends, friendship with Roy offers not just an outside perspective on how to best go about saving the burrowing owls on the future site of a Mother Paula's pancake house, but emotional and physical support they don't have access to at home. Despite Beatrice's rough and tough demeanor, for instance, Roy discovers that she still sometimes needs emotional support and a safe place to stay. So, when her dad Leon and stepmom Lonna get in a loud and physically violent fight, Roy lets Beatrice sneakily spend the night in his room, offering her a much needed break from her guardians. Similarly, Roy uses his relative privilege to make sure that when attack dogs bite Mullet Fingers and the bites get infected, the boy gets treatment without his parents finding out that he's in town (Lonna, his mom, doesn't want Mullet Fingers and sends him away to military schools). It's worth noting that on the whole, *Hoot* presents the fact that Roy, a child himself, must provide this kind of care and support to his friends as tragic. However, the novel still presents friendship and the support friends can show each other as something wholly positive and capable of making bad situations bearable.



SYMBOLS

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



OWLS

The tiny burrowing owls that Roy and his friends save broadly represent the natural world, particularly the idea that on the whole, nature isn't usually able to advocate for itself. Florida's burrowing owls stand only about nine inches tall when fully grown, and their adorably diminutive size helps create the impression that the owls are innocent, helpless, and fragile. In turn, the novel shows how easy it is for people who would rather not acknowledge the owls' existence, such as Curly and the Mother Paula's corporation, to ignore them and move forward with development projects that will destroy the owls' burrows. The burrows themselves are impossible to ignore—they constantly trip people—but the owls that inhabit the burrows are, characters find, much easier to miss.

Still, Mullet Fingers (and eventually, Roy) argues that despite being small and seemingly inconsequential, the owls deserve to have their habitat protected. Mullet Fingers in particular suggests that animals, including the owls, have the right to continue to live in undisturbed natural areas. As Roy joins Mullet Fingers's campaign and rallies his classmates to protest on the owls' behalf, the owls' tiny size—and how cute they are—works in his favor; it's easy, he discovers, to drum up

support for a creature as small and fragile-looking as a nine-inch owl. Officer Delinko has much the same thought process; it's not until he sees one of the owls land on a **bulldozer** that he fully comprehends what will happen to the owls if the construction project goes through. He then begins to see the owls as deserving of protection. In this way, the owls act as an easy and accessible symbol for how vulnerable nature is and the necessity of protecting it.



BULLDOZERS

In contrast to the tiny burrowing **owls**, which represent nature, the massive bulldozers at the future site of a Mother Paula's pancake house symbolize corporate greed and human development. Throughout *Hoot*, the bulldozers and other earthmoving machinery sits at the construction site, silent, unused, and ominous—a sign of what's to come when Curly is finally able to move forward and break ground. Their capacity to destroy the natural world is clear; they are, as Curly and Chuck Muckle discuss, the first tools that will begin transforming a wild, untamed lot into a suburban chain restaurant. The narrative often highlights their potential to destroy the natural world by comparing them to the tiny burrowing owls that the bulldozers will displace, if the Mother Paula's corporation has its way. Roy and even Officer Delinko are struck by how tiny and helpless the owls look when they perch on the massive machinery. And the novel again highlights the machines' massive size and capacity for destruction when it describes Roy, Beatrice, and Mullet Fingers—all preteens—sitting in the bulldozer's bucket. Even as humans, they too seem tiny and inconsequential next to something as large as a backhoe.

However, *Hoot* also makes the case that the bulldozer itself (and the greed and development it represents) isn't infallible. Mullet Fingers is able to stall the construction project for several weeks by pulling up survey stakes, highlighting that the bulldozer and its operator can't actually develop the property without an obvious plan or map. And when Mullet Fingers later removes the earthmovers' seats, it becomes extremely clear that the machines on their own are useless—it's essential that human operators be able to sit and drive the equipment. When Roy and his friends are ultimately able to stop the construction project altogether, their victory stands as a final insistence that corporate greed isn't all-powerful. When people like Roy stand up for what they believe in and make a fuss, they can, in fact, successfully push back.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Yearling edition of *Hoot* published in 2005.



Chapter 1 Quotes

●● Roy gasped.

“Whassamatter, cowgirl? Had enough?”

This was Dana, hissing in Roy’s right ear. Being the new kid on the bus, Roy didn’t expect any help from the others. The “cowgirl” remark was so lame, it wasn’t worth getting mad about. Dana was a well-known idiot, on top of which he outweighed Roy by at least fifty pounds. Fighting back would have been a complete waste of energy.

Related Characters: Dana Matherson (speaker), Roy Eberhardt, Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy, Beatrice Leep/The Girl

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Dana, the school bully, is squeezing Roy’s head and forcing him to look out the bus window. Roy thus catches sight of Mullet Fingers running, which is what’s making him gasp here, not Dana. Interestingly, this passage paints Dana’s bullying as something that’s par for the course—it’s unfortunate, and as far as Roy is concerned, it’s unavoidable. But it’s worth noting why it’s unavoidable: Roy is the new kid and hasn’t made friends yet, so he doesn’t have anyone to stand up for him. He’s totally on his own until later in the novel, when Beatrice begins defending him. This highlights what the novel implies is one of the dangers of being friendless: a total lack of support. Without a community and friends, a person like Roy must tackle Dana on their own. And as Roy notes, this isn’t an easy prospect. Due to Dana’s size and the fact that nearly everyone at school is afraid of him, Dana has outsize power to pick on other kids and get his way.

●● “Mr. Branitt, there’s one more thing I wanted to ask. I’m just curious.”

“Fire away,” said Curly, wiping his brow with a yellow bandanna.

“It’s about those owls.”

“Sure.”


“What’s gonna happen to them?” Officer Delinko asked. “Once you start bulldozing, I mean.”

Curly the foreman chuckled. He thought the policeman must be kidding.

“What owls?” he said.

Related Characters: Curly (speaker), Officer David Delinko

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 7-8

Explanation and Analysis

As Officer Delinko prepares to leave the construction site after his first visit to investigate vandalism, he can’t help but ask Curly what’s going to happen to the owls who live in underground burrows on the site. Curly’s answer is telling. Prior to this, Curly told Delinko that the burrows belong to owls, but that “strictly speaking,” he hadn’t seen one. However, the narrative nevertheless describes several signs that there are nesting pairs of owls currently using the burrows, such as disturbed sand (and later, Delinko and several other characters catch sight of the owls themselves). So, when Curly asks, “What owls?,” it suggests that Curly has no interest in acknowledging openly that the owls exist.

Later, it comes to light that this is because it’s illegal in Florida to build where there are active burrows, and the Mother Paula’s corporation (Curly’s employer) is trying to hide evidence of the owls so they can move forward with building a new Coconut Cove location. This highlights how money and corporate greed make it difficult to prioritize the environment: Curly depends on his paycheck, which means getting the construction project off the ground, which in turn means ignoring the owls. And for now, at least, Curly is willing to turn a blind eye to the owls if it means he stays employed and his family has an income.

Chapter 2 Quotes

●● “Matherson is the menace! He hassles all the smaller kids on the bus.”

“Nobody else has complained.”

“Because they’re scared of him,” Roy said. Which was also why none of the other kids had backed up his story. Nobody wanted to nark on Dana and have to face him the next day on the bus.

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Miss Hennepin (speaker), Dana Matherson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Roy is speaking to the vice principal, Miss Hennepin, about how he supposedly instigated a fight with Dana on the bus earlier that morning. Miss Hennepin believes Dana's story rather than Roy's, as no one is willing to corroborate Roy's story. As the narration explains here, this is because Dana has created a culture of fear at school: everyone fears what he might do to them if they cross him, and so they never cross him. And as Miss Hennepin's behavior toward Roy suggests, Dana has somehow tricked the administration into believing that he's a perfect angel as well. This, of course, allows Dana's bad behavior to continue unchecked, since as far as the administration is concerned, there is no problem, and supposed liars like Roy (as opposed to dangerous bullies like Dana) are the ones at fault. This represents corruption on a relatively small scale, but seeing Dana (and later, seeing Dana's parents intimidate the school administration), primes Roy to identify corruption, intimidation, and foul play in the Mother Paula's construction project.

This raises an early red flag that not all is above board with the pancake house construction project. At the end of the novel, it's revealed that someone at Mother Paula's, possibly Chuck Muckle, paid off Councilman Grandy to hide the Environmental Impact Statement, which found three nesting pairs of burrowing owls on the site (thereby making it illegal to develop the land). Thus, it's possible to deduce that the only reason Councilman Grandy is involved in these petty vandalism claims at all is because it's in his best interest to make sure the project continues as originally planned.


Further, this passage lays out how the "big shot[]" at Mother Paula's, Councilman Grandy, and other authority figures use their power and prestige to threaten and intimidate those under them to get their way. This highlights how corruption functions at this scale: everyone wants their money, which means catching the vandal and making sure the pancake house gets built on schedule. And in turn, that means ignoring the owls and the missing permits—until later, when Roy and his friends make enough of a fuss to uncover the corruption and stop the project.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ Normally an officer of his rank wouldn't get involved in such a silly case, but the company building the pancake franchise had some clout with local politicians. One of Mother Paula's big shots had called Councilman Grandy, who immediately chewed out the police chief, who quickly sent word down the ranks to the captain, who swiftly called for the sergeant, who instantly summoned (last and least) Officer Delinko.

Related Characters: Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy, Officer David Delinko, Chuck Muckle, Councilman Bruce Grandy, The Sergeant, The Captain

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Officer Delinko is in a meeting about the vandalism on the Mother Paula's construction site with his superiors, the captain and the sergeant. This passage explains why this meeting is happening at all: petty vandalism is well outside of the captain's purview, but because of the relationships between Mother Paula's and Councilman Grandy, he feels compelled to care and involve himself in the investigation.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ Beatrice Leep had laughed. "No, he's not an Indian! I call him Mullet Fingers 'cause he can catch mullet with his bare hands. You know how hard that is?"

A mullet was a slippery, free-jumping baitfish that traveled in schools of hundreds. The bay near Coconut Cove was full of them in the spring. Throwing a cast net was the customary method of capture.

"Why doesn't he live at home?" Roy had asked Beatrice.

"Long story. Plus, none of your business."

"What about school?"

"My brother got shipped off to a 'special' school. He lasted two whole days before he ran away. Then he hitchhiked back, all the way from Mobile, Alabama."

"What about your parents?"

"They don't know he's here, and I'm not gonna tell 'em. *Nobody* is gonna tell. You understand?"

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Beatrice Leep/The Girl (speaker), Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy, Leon Leep, Lonna Leep

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 80-81

Explanation and Analysis


Beatrice intercepted Roy when he attempted to deliver a pair of shoes to Mullet Fingers. She's just revealed that he's her stepbrother and is now answering some of Roy's questions about the strange boy. First, Roy is interested in Mullet Fingers's nickname. The fact that the boy can catch small, slippery mullet with his bare hands highlights how connected he is to the natural world. Notably, when Roy later watches Mullet Fingers perform this trick, Mullet Fingers lets the fish go, suggesting that while he may enjoy having the power to catch the fish, he doesn't want to hurt them. In fact, he wants so badly to protect the natural world in general that he's willing to risk legal trouble to perform acts of petty vandalism to try and stop the Mother Paula's pancake house project, which puts burrowing owls in danger.

Then, though Beatrice says little of substance about her and Mullet Fingers's home situation, she offers enough to impress upon Roy that things aren't good at home. In fact, Mullet Fingers's mom, Lonna, has said outright that she doesn't want her son. This is why she routinely sends him away to military schools, and this is why she hasn't looked for him this time when he ran away. Beatrice's dad Leon, on the other hand, is so checked out that it never occurs to him to ask what's going on with his stepson. This combination of cruelty from one parent and apathy from the other means that Mullet Fingers is on his own—or, that is, he would be if Beatrice hadn't stepped up into a parent and protector role. In other words, the kids' parents' treatment has forced Beatrice to grow up and assume an adult role when she is only a young teen. This deprives her of her childhood, for one, and it also poses significant problems later in the narrative, such as when she doesn't know how to get Mullet Fingers treatment for infected dog bites.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ In Montana, ospreys lived in the cottonwoods all along the big rivers, where they dived on trout and whitefish. Roy had been pleasantly surprised to find that Florida had ospreys, too. It was remarkable that the same species of bird was able to thrive in two places so far apart, and so completely different. If they can do it, Roy thought, maybe I can too.

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 93



Explanation and Analysis


On the morning that Roy begins riding the bus again after being suspended, he stops on his way to the bus stop to look at an osprey nest on top of a pole. As Roy considers the ospreys and the fact that they can happily, successfully live in such different environments, he begins to commit more to making things work for himself in Florida. Up to this point, Roy has been pretty unenthusiastic about Florida in general. He didn't want to come, and he's upset that he's no longer surrounded by grizzly bears, bison, and other creatures that live in Montana and not in Florida. Not being in the same kind of wilderness made it harder for Roy to settle and integrate—knowing and enjoying his local wilderness is how Roy feels more at home. Here, though, the osprey gives Roy a way to make sense of the move and decide that perhaps Florida isn't so bad. Nature, this shows, is more than just something that exists alongside people and their settlements. It can provide entertainment, pleasure, and comfort to those who love and respect it, such as Roy.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ “Them cottonmouths can kill a person,” Curly said.
 “Really. Can they kill a bulldozer, too?”
 “Well... probably not.”
 “Then what are you waiting for?”
 Curly sighed. “Yes, sir. First thing Monday morning.”
 “Music to my ears,” Chuck Muckle said.

Related Characters: Curly, Chuck Muckle (speaker), Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Curly is on the phone with his boss, Chuck Muckle, explaining what happened when he hired attack dogs (Mullet Fingers, otherwise known as the Mother Paula's vandal, let cottonmouth moccasins loose on the property, causing the dog trainer to refuse to allow his dogs to stay on the site). As his sarcasm in this exchange might suggest, Muckle isn't impressed with Curly's story and isn't taking it seriously. As Curly points out, cottonmouth moccasins are venomous snakes that are capable of killing people and dogs with their bites, so they're not animals to joke about or

ignore. That the snakes are so scary (and that they manage to again shut down construction for another several days) is another indication the novel gives that the natural world can overpower human greed and corporate development, which bulldozers symbolize. As Muckle points out, the snakes can't literally kill an inanimate bulldozer; the bulldozers themselves are safe from the snakes. But the snakes can kill, hurt, or just intimidate the human operators the bulldozers need to tell them what to do, so Muckle's point doesn't exactly hold much water. Instead, he looks simply out of touch about what developing wild areas in Florida entails, while Curly is left to do his best to follow his boss's demands.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Roy trailed him back to the bulldozer, where Beatrice remained perched on the blade, cleaning her eyeglasses.

[...]

Mullet Fingers tapped him on the arm. "Listen."

Roy heard a short high-pitched *coo-coo*. Then, from across the open lot, came another. Beatrice's stepbrother rose stealthily, tugged off his new sneakers, and crept forward. Roy followed closely.

The boy was grinning through his fever when he signaled for them to stop. "Look!"

"Wow," Roy said, under his breath.



There, standing by the hole and peering curiously at one of the meatballs, was the smallest owl that he had ever seen.

Mullet Fingers chucked him gently on the shoulder. "Okay—*now* do you get it?"

"Yeah," said Roy. "I get it."

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy (speaker), Beatrice Leep/The Girl

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

On the afternoon that Beatrice pressures Roy into getting her first-aid supplies and hamburger meat, she and Mullet Fingers show Roy why he's been vandalizing the Mother Paula's construction site: tiny burrowing owls live there, and their burrows (and likely the babies inside) will be buried

once construction gets underway.

Seeing the owl in person has Mullet Fingers's desired effect on Roy: Roy suddenly understands that the vandalism and dangerous things Mullet Fingers has done (including putting alligators in portable toilets and cottonmouth moccasins on the property, which resulted in him getting bitten by an attack dog) are actually morally correct, even if they're technically illegal. As all three kids see it, Mullet Fingers is standing up for the owls, who have no voice of their own, but who nevertheless deserve to raise their babies in peace. This reminds readers that the natural world and its animals need advocates like Roy and Mullet Fingers, and it also broadens Roy's understanding of right and wrong. While Roy is extremely concerned with following the law and not getting in trouble thanks to his dad working for the U.S. Department of Justice, he also begins to understand here that protesters like Mullet Fingers have their place and perform a really valuable service. Put differently, standing up for what's right sometimes requires being willing to break the law.

Finally, note that this revelation takes place with the three preteens sitting in the bulldozer's blade and moving around the earthmoving machine. This reminds readers of how huge the bulldozer is—and it establishes the bulldozer and the other earthmoving equipment as symbols of corporate greed and human development. At this point, the equipment's size suggests that it's impossible to fight back, but as Roy and Mullet Fingers discover later, this isn't true: advocating for what's right and exposing the Mother Paula's corporation's corruption ends up being possible.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ Roy stood rooted in the center of the road. He had an important decision to make, and quickly. From one direction came the police car; running in the other direction were his two friends...

Well, the closest things to friends that he had in Coconut Cove.

Roy drew a deep breath and dashed after them. He heard a honk, but he kept going, hoping that the police officer wouldn't jump out and chase him on foot. Roy didn't think he'd done anything wrong, but he wondered if he could get in trouble for helping Mullet Fingers, a fugitive from the school system.

The kid was only trying to take care of some owls—how could that possibly be a crime? Roy thought.

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy, Beatrice Leep/The Girl, Officer David Delinko, Mr. Eberhardt, Lonna Leep

Related Themes:**Related Symbols:****Page Number:** 128**Explanation and Analysis**

Mullet Fingers is seriously ill after dog bites on his arm get infected, and Roy tries to flag down a police car to ask for help. Beatrice, who's carrying Mullet Fingers, has run into a housing development to escape the police car, leaving Roy alone to make his choice.

It's worth noting that due to his upbringing and his positive relationship with his parents, Roy sees the police (and adult authority figures in general) very differently than Beatrice and Mullet Fingers do. Roy's dad, Mr. Eberhardt, works in law enforcement, and Roy's behavior throughout the novel suggests that Roy has been raised to see authority figures as safe and helpful. The police, Roy reasons, will absolutely help a boy with infected dog bites; it's their job to help people. But to Beatrice and Mullet Fingers, the police represent a liability, as they'd no doubt want to return Mullet Fingers to his abusive mother, Lonna. Therefore, avoiding the police is absolutely essential, even if it means that Mullet Fingers goes a bit longer without medical treatment.

Then, Roy realizes in this passage that he's beginning to make friends in Coconut Cove—and he also realizes that he must show them loyalty in order to keep them. This is a huge turning point for Roy, as he's been mostly alone prior to this point and hasn't even expressed much interest in making friends.

Roy's relationships with his new friends prompt him to reevaluate how he thinks about what's right, wrong, and just. Roy himself doesn't want to get in trouble with the law, and he doesn't want his friends to get in trouble, either. But Roy also begins to wonder here if perhaps the law isn't always just and moral. This is because of what Mullet Fingers showed him earlier: the tiny burrowing owls on the Mother Paula's construction site, which will die or be displaced if construction moves forward. Roy acknowledges, essentially, that although Mullet Fingers's acts of vandalism are technically illegal, they're acceptable in the grand scheme of things if it means that the owls get to remain in their homes. Advocating for what's right and for those who don't have a voice, Roy decides, can't possibly be illegal—or at least, it shouldn't be.

Chapter 13 Quotes

“They’ve probably got all the necessary paperwork and permits.”

“They’ve got permits to bury owls?” Roy asked in disbelief.

“The owls will fly away. They’ll find new dens somewhere else.”

“What if they’ve got babies? How will the baby birds fly away?” Roy shot back angrily. “How, Dad?”

“I don’t know,” his father admitted.

“How would you and Mom like it,” Roy pressed on, “if a bunch of strangers showed up one day with bulldozers to flatten this house? And all they had to say was ‘Don’t worry, Mr. and Mrs. Eberhardt, it’s no big deal. Just pack up and move to another place.’ How would you feel about that?”

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Mr. Eberhardt (speaker), Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy, Mrs. Eberhardt

Related Themes:**Related Symbols:****Page Number:** 156**Explanation and Analysis**

Roy lied to hospital staff earlier, telling them Mullet Fingers was him so Mullet Fingers's infected dog bites could get treatment. Now, he's telling his dad why he lied and explaining that he and Mullet Fingers have done what they've done to try to save the burrowing owls on the Mother Paula's construction site.

This conversation with Mr. Eberhardt is difficult for Roy, as for the first time, Roy has to acknowledge the possibility that the law isn't actually as moral and righteous as he's been brought up to believe it is. It is certainly possible, as Mr. Eberhardt notes, for governments to create permitting requirements that do, in fact, allow a company or individual person to destroy wildlife and habitats during construction. Such a rule might be ethically wrong, as Roy maintains, but it nevertheless means that people can indeed disturb wildlife legally. Indeed, this passage highlights Roy's empathetic nature when Roy tries to put things in human terms that, he hopes, his dad will understand: what if it was their family being displaced, and what if the government didn't care about them? Babies are babies and families are families, Roy seems to suggest, and whether they're human or animal, they don't deserve to be displaced just because someone with more power wants their home.

Notably, Mr. Eberhardt expresses a fair bit of blind faith in the local building regulations during this conversation with



Roy. It later comes out that Roy is right, and Florida *doesn't* permit construction projects that will disturb active owl burrows. Seeing his son's well-developed sense of right and wrong, as well as how much this upsets Roy, seems to propel Mr. Eberhardt to actually help Roy uncover this fact and eventually leak it to the media.

“They were asking him all kinds of nosy questions, Mom, and meanwhile he’s about to keel over from the fever,” Roy said. “Maybe what I did was wrong, but I’d do it all over again if I had to. I mean it.”

Roy expected a mild rebuke, but his mother only smiled. Smoothing the blanket with both hands, she said, “Honey, sometimes you’re going to be faced with situations where the line isn’t clear between what’s right and what’s wrong. Your heart will tell you to do one thing, and your brain will tell you to do something different. In the end, all that’s left is to look at both sides and go with your best judgment.”

Well, Roy thought, that’s sort of what I did.

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Mrs. Eberhardt (speaker), Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Roy is explaining to his mom why he doesn’t feel bad at all about lying to hospital staff that Mullet Fingers was him; lying, Roy maintains, was the only way to get Mullet Fingers the medical care he desperately needed. That Roy can articulate this so clearly suggests that the advice his mom gives him next (that right and wrong sometimes aren’t clear, and he must use his best judgment to make choices) is advice that Roy has probably gotten before, even if his parents have never said anything to this effect so explicitly. Indeed, Roy’s indignant response—that “that’s sort of what [he] did”—suggests that he learned to make those hard choices somewhere, likely from his parents. Furthermore, Mrs. Eberhardt doesn’t really scold Roy for lying, like he expects her to. It almost seems like on some level, Mrs. Eberhardt feels like she must scold Roy for lying, even though she’s very proud of him for doing what she may privately agree was the right thing. That Roy doesn’t quite pick up on this, though, speaks to his youth. He respects and loves his parents, but he doesn’t always see them as relatable people who deal with similar struggles. So, while this passage focuses explicitly on the choice Roy made

earlier, it’s nevertheless possible to see his mom trying to make the exact same type of choice: her heart is telling her Roy is morally in the clear, while her brain is telling her that really, it’s her responsibility as a parent to remind him that lying isn’t okay.

Chapter 14 Quotes


“Ever since I was little,” Mullet Fingers said, “I’ve been watchin’ this place disappear—the piney woods, the scrub, the creeks, the glades. Even the beaches, man—they put up all those giant hotels and only goober tourists are allowed. It really sucks.”

Roy said, “Same thing happens everywhere.”

“Doesn’t mean you don’t fight back.”

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy (speaker), Mr. Eberhardt

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Roy has come to visit Mullet Fingers with bad news: according to Mr. Eberhardt, it’s legal for Mother Paula’s to build over the owl burrows—and as Roy sees it, there’s nothing he and Mullet Fingers can do for the owls. Here, Mullet Fingers maintains that it’s nevertheless important and necessary to keep fighting to keep Florida’s wild areas wild.

While Mullet Fingers certainly has a more intimate relationship with the natural world than many of the novel’s other characters (he lives in Coconut Cove’s wild areas, mostly camping), the novel in general supports Mullet Fingers’s view: that it’s a tragedy to develop so many of Florida’s natural areas and create places, like beaches, that one must pay to access. Nature, both boys believe, is something that should ideally be accessible to everyone, whether they’re a tourist with money to burn or a local. The novel repeatedly suggests that nature should be preserved for a variety of reasons, including for leisure and because it can be fulfilling for people—but also because the plants and animals that live in nature deserve to keep their homes and live their lives. Thus, Mullet Fingers insists that despite it being technically legal to destroy the owl burrows, it’s still morally right to try to stop the construction.

●● Roy was dazzled by the wondrous quiet, the bush old mangroves sealing off the place from the honking and hammering of civilization. Beatrice's stepbrother closed his eyes and gustily inhaled the salty breeze.



A lone osprey hovered overhead, attracted by a glimmer of baitfish in the shallows. Upstream a school of baby tarpon rolled, also with lunch on their minds. Nearby a white heron posed regally on one leg, in the same tree where the boys had hung their shoes before swimming to the derelict boat.

[...]

The creek was incredibly beautiful and wild; a hidden sanctuary, only twenty minutes from his own backyard.

I might have found this place all by myself, Roy thought, if I hadn't spent so much time moping around being homesick for Montana.

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Mullet Fingers brought Roy to the *Molly Bell*, a crab boat that washed up a stream in a storm decades ago and now offers a lovely spot for the boys to sit and admire the scenery. First, note the description of the animals and the natural world: it's "dazzl[ing]," "incredibly beautiful," and a "hidden sanctuary," according to Roy. He takes note of the various birds and fish, and Mullet Fingers notes at one point that he saw an alligator here as well as a blue crab. In short, this spot is teeming with wildlife. This is something that Roy finds particularly meaningful, as he generally loves nature and natural areas. Indeed, one of the most notable things to come out of this outing with Mullet Fingers is that Roy decides he can, perhaps, feel at home in Florida, just like he felt at home in Montana. Nature, in this sense, offers Roy a way to connect with his new home and learn to see it as something beautiful and worthy of appreciating in the first place.

In a more overarching sense, the narrative encourages readers to emulate Roy's awe and wonder at the natural world. Though the novel focuses on Florida's wild areas and one particular wild animal that needs protection (the burrowing owl), the novel's overarching message is that all wild areas deserve protection from development and are, more generally, worthy of appreciation.

Chapter 15 Quotes

●● In addition to a fear of getting caught, Roy had serious qualms about trying anything illegal—and there was no dodging the fact that vandalism was a crime, however noble the cause.

Yet he couldn't stop thinking ahead to the day when the owl dens would be destroyed by bulldozers. He could picture the mother owls and father owls, helplessly flying in circles while their babies were being smothered under tons of dirt.

It made Roy sad and angry. So what if Mother Paula's had all the proper permits? Just because something was legal didn't automatically make it right.

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy, Dana Matherson

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Roy refused Mullet Fingers's invitation to join him in vandalizing the Mother Paula's property later this evening for a variety of reasons, but he can't stop thinking that Mullet Fingers is doing the morally right (if illegal) thing. Ultimately, this helps Roy make the choice to go out and frame Dana by telling the bully that there are cigarettes in the construction trailer at the site, thereby leaving the site unattended for Mullet Fingers to vandalize.



Roy's moral dilemma here is clear: he doesn't want to get in trouble, and he definitely doesn't want to run afoul of the law, but he also can't in good conscience sit idly by while the Mother Paula's corporation buries baby owls. Once again, he's beginning to recognize that something being technically legal doesn't make it morally right, and conversely, that something that's illegal can at times be morally correct. And ultimately, it comes out that it's not legal to bury active owl burrows, so Roy and Mullet Fingers discover that their personal feelings about the situation actually align with the law. But for now, it's their personal beliefs that it's not okay to disturb owl families that motivates them to action and results in the revelation that Mother Paula's is trying to hide evidence that the owls exist. This makes the case that regular people, even kids like Roy and Mullet Fingers, can make a difference in their communities and fight for what's right.

Chapter 16 Quotes

●● He wasn't in the mood to turn somersaults, though he couldn't deny experiencing a sense of liberation. He was tired of being Dana Matherson's punching bag.

And while he felt guilty about making up the bogus cigarette story, Roy also couldn't help but think that putting Dana behind bars was a public service. He was a nasty kid. Maybe a hitch at juvenile hall would straighten him out.

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Dana Matherson, Mrs. Eberhardt, Garrett

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Garrett has just shared with Roy that Dana was arrested last night for trying to break into a construction trailer on the Mother Paula's site—and that because he has a previous criminal record, he's going to spend some time in juvenile detention.

Roy has conflicted feelings about Dana's arrest. On the one hand, Roy knows he did something morally (and possibly legally) questionable by framing Dana. He could get in big trouble if anyone found out that he purposefully encouraged Dana to break into the construction trailer. But on the other hand, Roy has seen Dana bully him and others, intimidate the school administration, and generally be an unpleasant and dangerous person. So, given that, it doesn't seem like such a bad thing that Dana will do some time in jail: at the very least, it will give kids like Roy a break from Dana's bullying for a while. This shows Roy continuing to grapple with how what's morally right and legally right intersect. In this case, there are lots of ways to look at the situation, some of which would place more value on doing the legally correct thing and others that instead prioritize what Roy believes is the morally right thing to do. Roy is, in other words, taking to heart the advice his mom gave him earlier. She reminded him that it won't always be clear what the right thing is in a given situation and suggested that he use his best judgment. In this case, while it's certainly possible to take issue with Roy's choices, he has done just as his mom told him to do.

●● The driver's seat was gone!


Dropping the rock that he'd been carrying for protection, Curly dashed to the next machine in line, a backhoe. Its seat had disappeared, too.

In a snit, Curly stomped toward the third and last piece of equipment, a grader. Again, no driver's seat.

Curly spat out a cuss word. Without seats, the earthmoving machines were basically useless. The operators had to sit down in order to work the foot pedals and steer at the same time.

Related Characters: Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy, Dana Matherson, Officer David Delinko, Curly

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis



Curly has just discovered Mullet Fingers's latest act of vandalism: stealing the driver's seats from all the earthmoving equipment. This is particularly vexing because Curly and Officer Delinko caught Dana Matherson trying to break into the construction trailer last night and assumed he was the vandal.


Notable here is how simple and yet wildly effective Mullet Fingers's vandalism is. As Curly explains, the operators can't drive any of the earthmoving machines without seats, as it's unsafe and ineffective (if not impossible) to stand and operate multiple pedals. This means that the construction timeline will be pushed back once again. And this is particularly meaningful given the way that the novel has framed the earthmoving equipment, particularly the bulldozer, as a symbol for how powerful the Mother Paula's corporation is. The bulldozer and the other machines often tower over the construction site, people, and the tiny owls that Mullet Fingers is trying to save. They're huge and imposing, while nearly everything else is small and vulnerable next to them. However, Mullet Fingers's vandalism highlights that really, the machines aren't all-powerful. They're inanimate objects, and while they can totally reshape the vacant lot in a matter of days, they need seats, operators, and a plan in order to do so.

Again Roy was astounded by the immense flatness of the terrain, the lush horizons, and the exotic abundance of life. Once you got away from all the jillions of people, Florida was just as wild as Montana.

That night, lying in bed, Roy felt a stronger connection to Mullet Fingers, and a better understanding of the boy's private crusade against the pancake house. It wasn't just about the owls, it was about everything—all the birds and animals, all the wild places that were in danger of being wiped out. No wonder the kid was mad, Roy thought, and no wonder he was so determined.

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

Roy and his parents take a trip to the Everglades, where Roy again has an opportunity to admire all manner of plants and animals. The trip is an important one for Roy's development. First, it reminds him again that he can, in fact, feel at home in Florida, even though it's a different kind of wild than Montana. It's not an "armpit," as Roy angrily informed his parents prior to the move—it has plants and animals galore, and as long as Roy is willing to seek out the wild areas, it's possible to spend time in nature even in such a populous state. Then, Roy also begins to understand better why Mullet Fingers is fighting so hard to save the owls living on the Mother Paula's construction site. They may be just one type of animal, but they are, in a sense, a jumping-off point for Roy (and later, his classmates and the nation) to get excited about preserving nature. Preserving the owls, in other words, can be the first step that a person takes in a lifelong journey to preserve Florida's wild animals and spaces. And indeed, Roy seems poised to do just that by the end of the novel.

Chapter 17 Quotes

“I got a quick question about the owls.”

“What owls?” Chuck Muckle shot back. “Those burrows are abandoned, remember?”

Curly thought: I guess someone forgot to tell the birds.


“There's no law against destroying abandoned nests,” the vice-president was saying. “Anybody asks, that's your answer. ‘The burrows are deserted.’”

“But what if one a them owls shows up?” Curly asked.

“What owls!” Chuck Muckle practically shouted. “There are no owls on that property and don't you forget it, Mr. Branitt. Zero owls. *Nada*. Somebody sees one, you tell him it's a—I don't know, a robin or a wild chicken or something.”

Related Characters: Curly, Chuck Muckle (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 213-214

Explanation and Analysis

Curly is on the phone with Chuck Muckle, discussing the upcoming groundbreaking ceremony that will happen in three days' time. In the course of this conversation, Curly makes the mistake of asking about the burrowing owls living on the property—owls that, this passage makes clear, both he and Chuck Muckle are both very well aware are there. This conversation is important first in that it confirms outright that the Mother Paula's corporation knows about the owls and is doing everything it can to cover up that fact (and the owls' existence). They also know that while, as Muckle notes, it's legal to develop land with uninhabited burrows on it, it's extremely illegal to develop land where the owls live. This establishes that the Mother Paula's corporation at large (and Muckle specifically) is corrupt: it prioritizes its earnings potential over following the law, and it's willing to sacrifice a protected species to make more money and expand the business.

Also notable here, though, is the way that Muckle intimidates and even goes on to threaten Curly if Curly acknowledges to anyone else that the owls exist. Throughout the novel, Muckle has threatened to fire Curly if Curly wasn't able to stop the vandalism happening on the property, and this threat runs through everything Muckle says to the foreman—even if Muckle doesn't say so outright. He doesn't have to be obvious about it, either; Curly knows full well what the consequences are for contradicting or

displeasing his boss. This highlights once again how fear, intimidation, and the threat of taking away a person's paycheck can corrupt a person.

“We need a warm body, and the only one we've got is sitting in juvenile detention. So officially he's our perpetrator, understand?”

Officer Delinko and his sergeant agreed in unison.

“I'm going out on a limb here, so you know what that means,” the captain said. “If another crime happens on that property, I'll look like a complete bozo. And if I end up looking like a bozo, certain people around here are going to spend the rest of their careers cleaning dimes out of parking meters. Am I making myself clear?”

Again Officer Delinko and his sergeant said yes.

Related Characters: The Captain (speaker), Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy, Dana Matherson, Officer David Delinko, Curly, Chuck Muckle, Councilman Bruce Grandy, The Sergeant

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

Officer Delinko is in a meeting with his captain and sergeant to discuss the necessity of keeping the Mother Paula's construction site locked down for the next three days, until the groundbreaking ceremony. Delinko and his sergeant have brought up that they suspect Dana, who's currently in juvie for vandalizing the site, isn't actually the vandal.

As with Curly and Chuck Muckle's conversation about this same subject, this passage reveals the corruption running rampant in the Coconut Cove police department. It's implied that all three men involved in this conversation are pretty sure Dana isn't the vandal, meaning that really, the police department's job isn't done: they still have a vandal to catch. But instead of prioritizing true justice, the captain instead chooses to prioritize his reputation and public image. He does this by threatening his subordinates with parking duty if they don't cooperate or otherwise rock the boat. While the sergeant remains a pretty opaque character whom readers learn little about, readers know very well that Delinko dreams of becoming a detective. Achieving that dream means impressing his superiors—and so, even though Delinko is the person here who's most certain that Dana isn't the perpetrator, Delinko nevertheless agrees to go along with the captain's plan.

It's also worth noting that the captain is only involved in this case in the first place because of corrupt relationships between Mother Paula's, Councilman Grandy, and the police department. The corruption, in other words, runs much deeper than just through the Mother Paula's corporation and the police department separately. They're instead part of a much larger web, where powerful people are willing to do favors for others to boost their careers and businesses.

Chapter 18 Quotes


Officer Delinko had clonked directly into one of Curly's earthmoving machines. He glared up at the steel hulk, rubbing his bruised shoulder. He didn't notice that the seat was gone, and even if he had, he wouldn't have given it a worry.

The policeman was grimly preoccupied with another concern. His gaze shifted from the massive bulldozer to the bird burrow, then back again.

Until that moment, Officer David Delinko had been so worried about solving the Mother Paula's case and saving his own career that he hadn't thought much about anything else.

Now he understood what was going to happen to the little owls if he did his job properly, and it weighted him with an aching and unshakeable sorrow.

Related Characters: Officer David Delinko (speaker), Roy Eberhardt, Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 233-234

Explanation and Analysis

While surveilling the Mother Paula's construction site one night a few days before the groundbreaking ceremony, Officer Delinko is delighted when he sees a baby burrowing owl. He's then devastated when he notices the bulldozers and realizes that baby owl will possibly die if the construction project proceeds as planned.

This passage brings the bulldozer and owl symbols to the forefront. The bulldozer, as Delinko and others sees it, represents human development and greed. It's a huge, hulking thing capable of hurting even a grown man like Delinko—against it, the owls don't seem to stand a chance. And in contrast to the bulldozers, the owls look particularly small, innocent, and in need of protection. This symbolic

opposition is what causes Delinko to have this revelation and ultimately, a change of heart. Seeing the baby owl causes Delinko to develop sympathy for the owls, which in turn turns him into an unlikely ally to Roy and Mullet Fingers at the protest in a couple days.



Delinko's transformation also highlights how the owls function as an easily accessible and sympathetic starting point for a person to begin thinking about nature conservation and preservation. Delinko wasn't swayed at all by finding alligators on the property, or when he heard about venomous cottonmouth moccasin snakes. While neither species is endangered, other animals that are dangerous to people are endangered all over the world, and yet they're far more difficult for some to sympathize with. The owls, on the other hand, are adorable, and contemplating their deaths is too much for Delinko to stand idly by.

☝ “Dad wants my brother to come back and live with us again, but Lonna says no way, José, he's a bad seed. What the heck does that mean, Tex? ‘Bad seed.’ Anyway, they're still not speakin' to each other, Lonna and my dad. The whole house feels like it's about to explode.”

To Roy, Beatrice's situation sounded like a living nightmare. “Need a place to hide out?” he asked.

“That's okay. Dad says he feels better when I'm around.”

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Beatrice Leep/The Girl (speaker), Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy, Mr. Eberhardt, Mrs. Eberhardt, Leon Leep, Lonna Leep

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

Beatrice and Roy are chatting on the way to the bus about the huge fight Leon and Lonna had over the weekend, which resulted in Beatrice spending the night in Roy's room to escape the tension and violence in her house. First, it's worth noting how nonchalant Beatrice is about the whole situation, even as she does describe her house feeling “like it's about to explode.” This reflects how normal the fighting and violence are in her home, even if she did feel the need to escape this one time. She continues to normalize this when she refuses Roy's offer to let her stay at his house on the grounds that her dad feels better when Beatrice is at home. Beatrice, this shows, has been forced into an adult role

when she herself is just a teenager or preteen—like a parent might, she's also doing as much as she can to care for Mullet Fingers, who's living in Coconut Cove's wild areas and stops in now and then for clothes and other supplies. So, between Lonna's overt dislike for her own son and Leon's unwillingness to stand up for his stepson (and Beatrice), Beatrice and Mullet Fingers are left mostly on their own.

This sounds like such a “nightmare” to Roy in part because his parents are supportive and safe. They love Roy unconditionally and would never kick him out, let alone say that he's a “bad seed” or anything similar.

Roy's offer to let Beatrice come stay at his house highlights the novel's suggestion that when someone's parents aren't supportive, friends can step in and help make that undesirable home situation a bit better. Beatrice might refuse Roy's offer here, but she nevertheless knows that she has someone to lean on and a place to go if she ever needs to leave her house again.

☝ “Honest,” Roy said. “I looked it up on the Internet. Those owls are protected—it's totally against the law to mess with the burrows unless you've got a special permit, and Mother Paula's permit file is missing from City Hall. What does that tell you?”

Mullet Fingers fingered the camera skeptically. “Pretty fancy,” he said, “but it's too late for fancy, Tex. Now it's time for hardball.”

“No, wait. If we give them proof, then they've got to shut down the project,” Roy persisted. “All we need is one lousy picture of one little owl—”

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis


Having done some research on local building laws and borrowed his mom's fancy digital camera, Roy has left school to visit Mullet Fingers and ask the boy to take pictures of the burrowing owls on the Mother Paula's construction site. A picture of an owl, Roy knows, will shut down the construction project.

It's worth noting that while Roy and Mullet Fingers are fighting here, they both represent two important sides of what it can take to successfully protest. Roy, having been raised by parents who work in law enforcement, is far more comfortable digging into the legal aspect of the proposed Mother Paula's location and discovering that, in fact, it's not legal for the company to build on their site. He trusts that the law is on his side, and that all he must do is get proof that he's correct (in the form of the photos he's asking Mullet Fingers to take) and then the law will work as intended. Mullet Fingers, on the other hand, believes the only way to change anything and save the owls is to slow down the construction project with petty acts of vandalism (and later this evening, in preparation for the groundbreaking ceremony, he buries himself on the property and refuses to move). While many of the things Mullet Fingers does to vandalize the property are technically illegal, the novel nevertheless suggests that they still have merit: they slow down construction enough for Roy to get the law on his side and organize an impromptu protest at lunch the following day. Both approaches, *Hoot* shows, are valuable—and it takes a variety of different people with different skillsets, like Roy and Mullet Fingers, to stage a successful protest and fight for what's right.

“Look,” said Roy, “every day we’ve been reading about regular people, ordinary Americans who made history ‘cause they got up and fought for something they believed in. Okay, I know we’re just talking about a few puny little owls, and I know everybody is crazy about Mother Paula’s pancakes, but what’s happening out there is just plain wrong. So wrong.”

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt (speaker), Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy, Beatrice Leep/The Girl, Mr. Ryan

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

The day before the Mother Paula's groundbreaking ceremony, Roy uses his current events speech in Mr. Ryan's class to tell his classmates about the owls and invite them to the groundbreaking to stage an impromptu protest in support of the owls. As Roy pleads his case, he highlights one of the novel's main ideas: that a person doesn't need to be wealthy, important, particularly powerful, or even an adult to stand up for what they believe is right. Mr. Ryan has

been teaching them all about “regular people, ordinary Americans” who protested and changed things for the better. As Roy sees it, he and his classmates, despite being kids, are “ordinary Americans” too, and so they have just as much power to stand up and protest as any of the people they've read about in their history textbook.

Once again, Roy also casts the burrowing owls—which are tiny, standing about nine inches tall at most—as cute and therefore, as very sympathetic. It's easier to sympathize with an adorable owl than other animals that are, for instance, dangerous or just not cute to look at. This allows Roy to drum up support and engage classmates who might otherwise not be super interested in protesting on behalf of wild animals. Nevertheless, though, the novel suggests that animals without voices of their own need “regular people” to advocate on their behalf, which is exactly what Roy, Mullet Fingers, and Roy's classmates do with their protest.

Chapter 21 Quotes

“Don't be silly. I'm making a whole scrapbook, honey, something to show your children and grandchildren.”

I'd rather show them the owls, Roy thought, if there are any left by then.

Related Characters: Mrs. Eberhardt (speaker), Roy Eberhardt, Mullet Fingers/The Running Boy

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

The day after Roy and his classmates protest in support of the burrowing owls at the Mother Paula's groundbreaking ceremony, Mrs. Eberhardt cuts newspaper clippings and photos to make Roy a scrapbook of the protest. To Roy, that his mom is doing this suggests that she is missing the point somewhat. The protest itself turns out to be wildly successful and gets the Mother Paula's project shut down. But as Roy sees it, what really matters is that the protest preserves the burrowing owls' habitats so that in the coming years, the owls continue to have a place to live. Put another way, the protest is meaningful, but it's not as important as its impact. So, instead of showing his children and grandchildren a scrapbook that chronicles the protest itself, Roy would much rather be able to take them to the Mother Paula's site and show them the owls themselves.

This attitude is in line with one of the reasons the novel implies it's worth preserving natural areas and protecting wild animals—that is, spending time in nature and having the opportunity to see animals in their natural habitat can be fun and fulfilling for people. It benefits the animals, of course, but as Roy explains at multiple points throughout the novel, there's nothing like seeing an alligator lurking in the water, or an owl popping up out of its burrow. Preserving nature benefits both animals and people.

Epilogue Quotes

●● It turned out that a thorough E.I.S. *had* been completed, and that the company's biologists had documented three mated pairs of burrowing owls living on the property. In Florida the birds were strictly protected as a Species of Special Concern, so their presence on the Mother Paula's site would have created serious legal problems—and a public-relations disaster—if it had become widely known.

Consequently, the Environmental Impact Statement conveniently disappeared from the city files. The report later turned up in a golf bag owned by Councilman Bruce Grandy, along with an envelope containing approximately \$4,500 in cash. Councilman Grandy indignantly denied that the money was a bribe from the pancake people; then he rushed out and hired the most expensive defense lawyer in Fort Myers.

Related Characters: Roy Eberhardt, Curly, Chuck Muckle, Councilman Bruce Grandy

Related Themes:



Related Symbols:



Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

In the months after Roy and his classmates protest at the Mother Paula's groundbreaking ceremony, it comes out that the Mother Paula's corporation completed the required Environmental Impact Statement (E.I.S.), didn't like the results, and so paid off a local councilman to make it disappear. While the narrative doesn't ever come out and say that this is what happened (the book ends, for instance, before anyone holds Councilman Grandy accountable for his actions, and it's never revealed who at Mother Paula's asked and paid him to do), it nevertheless makes it very clear that the Mother Paula's building project in Coconut Cove was corrupt almost from the start. Because of the pancake house company's financial clout and public image, they had the cash and the other resources to make it worth Councilman Grandy's while to hide the E.I.S. and okay the project. Readers may also recall that Councilman Grandy was the one to put the vandalism on the local police department's radar, thereby extending the web of corruption to Coconut Cove's police department. Money and power, this passage shows, have the power to facilitate corruption in all sorts of ways, from bribing local city council members to Chuck Muckle threatening to fire Curly if Curly acknowledged that the owls existed.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Roy usually reads comic books on the bus. But on this Monday, he notices the strange running boy along the sidewalk because Dana Matherson, an older bully, sneaks up behind Roy and squeezes his head, forcing his gaze up. It looks like the boy is running to catch the bus, but the boy isn't really dressed for school—Trace Middle School requires shoes, and the boy is barefoot. The boy keeps running, down the sidewalk and then through a yard. Dana digs his nails into Roy's scalp, but Roy barely feels it. He's too curious about the running boy and gasps as the boy evades a big German shepherd dog. Calling Roy "cowgirl," Dana asks if Roy has had enough. Roy calmly says he has and Dana, who's 50 pounds heavier and stinks of cigarettes, lets Roy go. Did anyone else see the running boy?

Later that morning, police officer David Delinko stops in at the future site of another Mother Paula's All-American Pancake House to investigate some vandalism. A bald man named Curly meets Officer Delinko there and walks him through the vacant lot on the corner of East Oriole and Woodbury. Suddenly, Curly stops and points to a stick with pink plastic tied around it. It's a survey stake, and Curly explains that the vandals pulled all the stakes out and filled the holes. Now, they have to remark the site before they can start construction. Officer Delinko asks Curly to estimate the monetary damage, since the vandals didn't destroy any of the cheap stakes. Annoyed, Curly says it'll be very expensive to mess up the construction schedule.

Officer Delinko turns to head back to his car and think—but he trips in a hole and falls. Curly pulls him up and mutters, "Stupid owls." He explains that the pancake-size holes in the ground are owl burrows; the owls are only the size of a beer can, though he's never actually seen one. At the car, Officer Delinko says the crime isn't technically vandalism; kids just pulled sticks out of the ground. He acknowledges that it's weird for prankster kids to fill the holes, but technically, the crime here is trespassing and malicious mischief. Curly doesn't care as long as he can file an insurance claim. As Officer Delinko gets in his car, he asks what's going to happen to the owls once the bulldozers get going. Curly asks, "What owls?"

The running boy presents quite the mystery—who is he, and why is he running?—but what stands out about this scene is the fact that Roy is on his own to fend for himself. It doesn't seem like anyone else on the bus, child or adult bus driver, is willing or able to stand up for Roy. For his part, Dana reads as a stereotypical bully: he's big, he's unintelligent, he smells, and he picks on kids who are way smaller than he is. This makes Roy's nonchalant response even more humorous: Roy is, of course, in some degree of pain, but he doesn't seem to take Dana very seriously.



Humorously, Delinko and Curly aren't on the same page about the severity of the damage. Delinko is focused on the fact that the stakes themselves are inexpensive, while Curly maintains that the stakes signify something way more expensive (an entire construction project). What's clear, though, is that money is a major motivating factor for Curly and Delinko. It's implied, for instance, that Curly wouldn't necessarily have called Delinko out here just for the principle of it—he called the police because the vandalism costs money.



This passage continues to establish that money is a big deal to Curly: the particulars of the crime aren't important to him, as long as he and his company can file the insurance claim and be compensated for the construction schedule being pushed back. Then, as the narrative introduces the burrowing owls, it becomes clear that the owls are causing problems at the construction site. For whatever reason, Curly isn't willing to openly acknowledge that the owls exist at all, which suggests that he may in fact be trying to cover up their existence.



Roy thinks about the running boy all day and looks for him at school, but he sees no one who resembles the boy. Florida is flat and good for running, except for the fact that it's so hot and humid—the boy must be tough. At lunch, Roy eats alone since he's the new kid. But he's good at being the new kid because his dad works for the government and his family moves a lot. A boy named Garrett sits down across from Roy and invites Roy to come skateboard at the mall with him and his buddies. Roy tries to accept with enthusiasm since Garrett is being nice, but he doesn't like malls and prefers snowboarding to skateboarding.

Garrett is an awful student and the class clown; he's known for his farting noises. His mom, ironically, is the guidance counselor—maybe she's too busy guiding other kids to guide Garrett. Roy asks if there are more schools in the area and tells Garrett about the running boy he saw earlier. Garrett says there's a Catholic school in Fort Myers, but they wear uniforms. He figures the running boy was probably a high school kid skipping class, but Roy isn't convinced: nobody skips school alone. Roy suggests the kid was an "outlaw," which just makes Garrett laugh.

CHAPTER 2

For the rest of the week, Roy sits in the front of the bus and looks for the running boy without success. But on Friday, when he's given up, he glances up from his comic and sees the boy running. Just as the bus stops and Roy gets up to chase after the boy, Dana grips Roy around the neck and squeezes. Annoyed, Roy punches behind him, Dana cries out, and then Roy races off the bus, brushing past a tall blond girl as he does so. For several blocks, Roy pursues the boy. They run through a construction site and onto a golf course as Roy's legs tire. Roy doesn't see the golf ball until it hits him above his ear and knocks him to the ground.

It's Roy's own fault that Dana calls him "cowgirl." Though Roy was born in Detroit, Michigan, he lived in Montana before coming to Florida and told his new classmates he was from Montana. Roy liked Montana better than anywhere else the Eberhardts have lived. In fact, he liked it so much that he tried to run away the night Roy's father announced they were moving. Now, in vice principal Miss Hennepin's office, Roy explains that he punched Dana because Dana was choking him to death. She says Dana told her Roy's attack was unprovoked and the bus driver saw nothing, but Roy sarcastically says he punches big kids for fun and the driver was probably paying attention to the road.

This passage illuminates why Roy was on his own on the bus: he's the new kid and hasn't made friends yet. Garrett tries to be friendly, but generally speaking, Roy seems to be having a hard time fitting in with his new classmates and appreciating his new home. He and Garrett seem to have very different ideas of what constitutes a good time, for instance, and Roy seems to find Florida itself unimpressive.



Roy might not want to be Garrett's best friend, but he can still try to wrangle important information out of him. Based on Garrett's intel, Roy can deduce that the running boy isn't a student here or in Fort Myers. Roy's curiosity, meanwhile, reveals the kind of person he is. He follows rules himself, but he's interested in people he refers to as "outlaw[s]," or those who don't follow the rules to the letter.



Dana is objectively cruel and dangerous, but notice that Roy doesn't seem genuinely afraid—he's just upset he can't chase after the running boy as easily. Once again, nobody comes to Roy's rescue when Dana attacks, and Roy is also on his own to try to figure out what's going on with the running boy. Notably absent, of course, is an adult response—the bus driver, who is ostensibly responsible for Roy's safety, does nothing to either protect Roy from a bully or keep Roy on the bus.



Here, readers learn why Roy is having such a hard time adjusting to Florida: he much preferred Montana and didn't want to move. Though Roy is being sarcastic with Miss Hennepin, he has a point: it doesn't seem like any adults at school are willing to challenge Dana. It's still unclear why this is, but Dana does seem to be pretty used to manipulating adults and getting his way. Readers know Roy is telling the truth, but to an adult who believes Dana's tale, Roy comes off as snotty and like he's the one telling stories.



Miss Hennepin isn't convinced that Dana is a bully, since no other kids have complained. Roy argues that this is because everyone is too afraid of Dana to upset him (this is also why no kids will corroborate Roy's story). Studying a black hair sprouting from Miss Hennepin's upper lip, Roy says he ran because he's scared of Dana. Miss Hennepin asks Roy to step closer. She inspects the lump above his ear and then turns down his shirt collar and says, "Hmm." She says it seems like Roy learned his lesson, so she's suspending him from the bus and he must write an apology letter to Dana. Roy tries not to look thrilled as he leaves her office. In the bathroom, he inspects his neck—Miss Hennepin certainly saw the bruises Dana left on Roy's neck. And Roy did tell the truth, though he didn't mention the running boy.

By now, it's lunchtime. Roy eats his chili burger, but the cookie is disgusting. Just as he stands up, a strong hand lands on his shoulder. But it's not Dana; it's the blond girl from the bus. She tells Roy he could've hurt her this morning and asks why he ran. Roy is intimidated—this isn't something he wants boys to see happening, and the girl is clearly a strong athlete. He insists he was trying to escape Dana, but the girl isn't convinced. She backs Roy into the wall when Roy mentions the running boy with no shoes. Ominously, she tells Roy to mind his own business and then walks off.

CHAPTER 3

Officer Delinko is once again called out to the Mother Paula's construction site, where Curly shows him the pulled-out stakes and the filled holes. Curly then leads Officer Delinko to a flatbed truck with flat tires—though Officer Delinko notes that the air has just been let out of them. Officer Delinko promises to speak to his sergeant about adding patrols to the area, and he then notices the portable toilets strapped onto the flatbed. He asks to take a look at them, though Curly insists nobody would mess with a toilet. Inside one of the toilets, everything seems fine—until Officer Delinko hears a splash. He shines his flashlight into the toilet hole and promptly leaps out of the toilet. There are live alligators in the tanks.

Miss Hennepin is trying to oversimplify things when she notes that kids haven't complained about Dana, implying by extension that Dana isn't really a bully. This makes it clear that Dana uses fear and intimidation to control his classmates and the administration alike. It seems, at first, like things might change when Miss Hennepin actually sees the bruises Dana left on Roy's neck, which corroborate his story. But when she still suspends Roy from the bus and makes him apologize, it suggests there may be more to Dana than readers know yet. For some reason, Miss Hennepin is more willing to put kids like Roy in danger than she is to punish Dana and tell him to stop bullying others.



The girl's behavior is wildly confusing, to say nothing of intimidating: Roy is described as a pretty small kid, while this girl is, like Dana, big and strong. When Roy notes that he doesn't really want boys to see the girl intimidate him, it shows he does care about making friends in Florida—or, at least, he cares about impressing other boys and looking reasonably strong and confident. As with Miss Hennepin and Dana, this girl also seems to know something about the running boy that she doesn't want to share with Roy.



At this point in the narrative, the vandalism at the construction site mostly adds humor—it's not yet apparent how this connects to Roy, the novel's protagonist. Interestingly, the vandal seems more interested in slowing things down and generally causing mayhem than in actually destroying things. This is especially clear when Delinko notes that someone just let the air out of the truck's tires rather than slashing them. The alligators, though, are certainly an escalation—they could've hurt someone if Delinko hadn't found them first.



When Roy gets home from school, he has to tell his parents about the incident with Dana. Mr. Eberhardt tells Roy it's never okay to fight, but Roy maintains he only punched Dana in self-defense. Mrs. Eberhardt reveals that Roy broke Dana's nose. To Roy's surprise, his dad looks proud. Roy pulls down his shirt collar to reveal the bruises Dana left and says that Miss Hennepin knows about them, but she didn't punish Dana at all. Mr. Eberhardt is angry and asks for Dana's name. Roy hesitates. His dad works for the Department of Justice, and Roy doesn't want Dana to get in that much trouble, since he's just a "big stupid bully." Mr. Eberhardt assures Roy that Dana won't be arrested, but he must be disciplined.

As Roy sits in his bedroom thinking about his apology letter to Dana, he studies his poster of a bull rider on a bull and another warning Yellowstone tourists not to approach buffalo, lest the buffalo gore them. Dana is exactly the sort of person to approach a wild buffalo and expect it to go well. Roy writes his letter. In it, he apologizes for breaking Dana's nose and promises not to hit Dana again, so long as Dana stops bothering Roy on the bus. When Roy shows it to Mrs. Eberhardt, she says the tone is too "forceful." But Mr. Eberhardt says it's perfect.

Things aren't going well for the police captain. He moved to Coconut Cove, Florida after a career in Boston, figuring he'd work a few easy years and retire. But now, Officer Delinko is telling him about finding six alligators in the portable toilets. Delinko's sergeant adds that the reptile wrangler got the alligators out. The captain shakes his head. He's only involved because the Mother Paula's people called Councilman Grandy, who then chewed out the local police force. The captain asks why kids would vandalize this construction site, and Officer Delinko says he's not sure this is kids—what kid can handle a four-and-a-half-foot gator? Delinko thinks it's a rival pancake house out for revenge, though there's no rival pancake house in Coconut Cove. Officer Delinko asks to work the extra patrols around the construction site, even if it's unpaid. He just wants to solve the mystery.

Roy's parents' reactions are a bit confusing for Roy to navigate: Mr. Eberhardt says fighting is inappropriate but seems quietly pleased Roy fought, for instance. What matters most to Roy, however, is the injustice of it all. He has bruises around his neck and a bus suspension, while Dana has nothing. Still, Roy doesn't want to just get Dana in trouble for kicks; he recognizes that sending his dad and the entire U.S. Department of Justice after Dana is overkill.



As Roy (and Mr. Eberhardt) sees it, he has nothing to apologize for except for causing Dana so much physical pain. He's only writing the letter, after all, because Miss Hennepin told him to—and Roy doesn't exactly take Miss Hennepin seriously or respect her opinion after she chose to punish him instead of Dana. This shows how Roy and his dad are more interested in real justice rather than the appearance of justice.



There are several clues here that suggest corruption runs rampant in Coconut Cove: the captain, who clearly doesn't want to have to care about a silly vandal, is forced to get involved because someone on city council, who's somehow close to the Mother Paula's corporation, made him. This implies there's some untoward relationship between Mother Paula's and Councilman Grandy, which will be important to keep in mind for later. Also important here is Delinko's burning desire to solve the mystery and prove himself. He, like Roy, is curious about what's going on, and he's not thinking more critically yet about the vandal's motive.



CHAPTER 4

Mrs. Eberhardt makes Roy stay home all weekend to monitor him after the golf ball incident. Medically, Roy is fine, but he's anxious—what will happen when Dana seeks revenge? Fortunately, on Monday, Dana isn't at school. Garrett says Dana is out sick and shares some of the rumors: Dana will need plastic surgery, and there were "guts" all over the bus. He adds that now, kids think Roy is really tough. Garrett suggests that Roy consider plastic surgery himself so Dana won't recognize him and beat him up. Ignoring this, Roy asks Garrett who the tall girl with blond hair is; she's mad at Roy for no reason. Alarmed, Garrett says Beatrice "The Bear" Leep is dangerous. She's a soccer jock and broke a football player's collarbone when he touched her bottom last year. Roy, Garrett suggests, should transfer to the Catholic school.

Officer Delinko is excited to patrol the construction site. He's bored with his job, which is mostly traffic enforcement. He wants to lock up bad guys and ultimately become a detective, so catching the Mother Paula vandal will prove he has what it takes. So, on Monday morning, Officer Delinko gets up at five a.m. and heads for the site. It's still dark and nothing is amiss, so he parks. Noticing movement ahead, Officer Delinko squints and turns his headlights on. They illuminate a pair of burrowing **owls**, each about eight inches tall, which fly away. Officer Delinko hopes he didn't scare them away from their burrow. He turns off his lights, leans against his window, and falls asleep.

Some time later, Officer Delinko wakes up to the dispatcher on his radio, asking where he is. Delinko rouses himself slowly, but shockingly, it's darker than when he fell asleep. Something starts pounding on the car and finally, the car door flies open. Light pours into the car and Curly scowls at Delinko. Delinko gets out and sees that someone spraypainted his windows black. It's also 9:30; he's late for work. As Officer Delinko whimpers about his car, Curly growls and picks up an armful of pulled-up survey stakes.

Roy knows he has to do something. He can't spend the year hiding from Dana and Beatrice. So, at lunch, he sits down next to Beatrice and her soccer friends. Roy says he's not sure why Beatrice has a problem with him—he didn't mean to upset her and whatever he did, he's sorry. Beatrice just stares at Roy in shock as he asks how much she weighs. He pleasantly says he's certain she outweighs him and can beat him up easily, but he'd rather they talk things through in the future. Standing up, Roy tells Beatrice he's glad they chatted and eats his lunch on the other side of the cafeteria.

Roy hasn't seemed all that frightened of Dana up to this point. But now, he realizes he's crossed a line: breaking Dana's nose, even unintentionally, made Dana look weak and silly, so Roy knows Dana is going to target him and punish him for his transgression. Garrett, humorously, doesn't help Roy feel any better. Garrett (and, it seems, other kids at school) see Dana as all-powerful, which highlights how Dana has terrified everyone at school into letting him do whatever he wants. Beatrice has done much the same thing by breaking the football player's collarbone. Now, nobody is willing to mess with her.



This passage makes it really clear that Officer Delinko isn't thinking through what it will mean to catch the vandal. If he catches the vandal, the construction project will continue and the little owls he sees will be displaced. For now, though, Delinko's main focus is on excelling at work and impressing his superiors. Similarly, Roy is so caught up in figuring out what's going on with the running boy that he's not considering, for instance, that the running boy might not want his identity revealed.



Delinko has, unwittingly, gotten himself into huge trouble: he not only missed scaring off the vandal, falling asleep meant that the vandal could target him by causing extensive damage to his police cruiser. This establishes Delinko as somewhat bumbling and prone to mistakes, even though he has good intentions.



Roy knows full well that even if he's not going to have an easy time making friends, it's still essential that he gets the bullies to leave him alone—otherwise, he'll never have the opportunity to make friends since people will fear associating with him. For her part, Beatrice seems shocked that Roy acts so unafraid. This success suggests to Roy that calling a bully's bluff can be a really effective way to minimize their power.



Roy pays Garrett a dollar to sneak into his mother's office and copy down a home address. After school, Roy asks Mrs. Eberhardt to stop at the address—she assumes it's a school friend's. Really, it's Dana Matherson's house. Mrs. Matherson answers the door and calls for Dana, who appears wearing pajamas and a mound of gauze taped to his nose. Both his eyes are black. Roy offers Dana his apology letter and tells Dana's mom that he's the one Dana tried to strangle the other day. She chuckles and reaches for the letter, but Dana snatches it away. As they fight over it, Roy returns to the car and tells his mom whose house this is.

Roy attempts much the same tactic with Dana as he did with Beatrice. It's a bit more complicated here, though, as Mrs. Matherson's behavior suggests that Dana has learned from her to see fighting as a valid option when he doesn't get his way. Put another way, it may be the situation in Dana's home that has turned him into the powerful, terrifying bully he is at school. Roy and his mom's calm conversation contrasts sharply with the Mathersons' fighting. It also suggests that just as Dana learned violence from his mom, Roy perhaps learned to be calm and collected from his mom.



CHAPTER 5

When Roy comes downstairs after finishing his homework an hour later, he hears Mrs. Eberhardt telling Mr. Eberhardt that the school doesn't want to discipline Dana because they're afraid Dana's parents will sue. Roy sneaks his bike out of the garage and rides to Beatrice's bus stop. From there, he retraces his steps from last Friday and locks his bike up at the golf course. He finds the impenetrable mess of pines and pepper trees where the running boy disappeared and shoulders his way through the sharp branches. Roy slides into a shadowy ditch and notices bare footprints and a campfire. Continuing to search, Roy finds three garbage bags. Two contain trash and clean clothes. The third, Roy realizes *after* dumping it out, is full of venomous cottonmouth moccasins. Strangely, the tips of their tails are painted a glittery blue. A voice behind Roy tells him not to move.

The revelation that the school doesn't want to punish Dana for fear of a lawsuit shows that there's small-scale corruption taking place: the Mathersons are using their monetary clout to make it so Dana can be cruel without suffering consequences. For now, though, Roy isn't as interested in that as he is in figuring out who the running boy is. It's a sign of how trusting Roy is that he seems to see no problem with rifling through the boy's bags, though the snakes put a damper on his searching. That the snakes' tails are painted is an intriguing detail, and it suggests that the running boy (or whoever's camp this is) is pretty familiar with and comfortable handling dangerous snakes.



Once, when Roy was on a hiking field trip back in Montana, he decided to sneak away from the class, hike over the hill on his own, and reach the campsite before anyone else. However, Roy was too quiet and came upon a mother grizzly bear and her two cubs about 100 feet away in a clearing. Roy stood still as the mother bear growled, coughed, and faked lunges at him. Eventually, the bear decided Roy wasn't a threat and wandered off, but Roy stood totally still for two hours and 22 minutes. A teacher finally rescued him. Roy stands just as still now and protests when the voice tells him to step back on the count of three. But a hand snatches Roy backwards and just as Roy lands on his bottom, a hood covers his head and the person—the running boy—ties Roy's wrists together.

Fortunately for Roy, he has some experience with deadly wild animals and knows that standing still like this is his best bet at survival. Flashing back to Montana like this, though, also speaks to how much Roy misses his last home and helps explain why he's having a hard time still integrating in Coconut Cove. The running boy also begins to seem a bit dangerous, given his clear comfort with wild animals and the fact that he ties Roy up. It seems that this boy is someone who's more comfortable in nature and less comfortable chatting calmly with Roy.



Trying to disguise his voice, the running boy asks who Roy is and why he's here. The boy insists that Roy didn't see him running from the bus. Then, he pulls Roy up and says they'll go out the back way—and he compliments Roy for not peeing his pants at the sight of the snakes. Roy asks if the snakes are cottonmouths, and the boy seems happy Roy recognizes the species. The boy just says the snakes have sparkly tails because they're "goin' to a party" and marches Roy forward.

The running boy doesn't act like he'd like to really get to know Roy at all. But they do have something in common: they both seem knowledgeable about the snakes, what species they are, and the dangers they pose. The boy saying that the snakes are headed for a "party" is interesting, particularly since Delinko found alligators at the construction site—the running boy may have something to do with that.



Eventually, the air gets warmer and the boy starts to untie Roy. With prodding, the boy says people call him Mullet Fingers, but he refuses to say if he really lives out here on his own. Mullet Fingers threatens to put a cottonmouth in Roy's bed if he turns around and peeks before he counts to 50. When Roy gets to 50 and pulls the hood off his head, he's alone. He races for his bike, excited rather than frightened.

Roy is nothing if not honest: he's extremely curious about the running boy and the snakes, of course, but he also sees no reason to push his luck here and peek before counting to 50. This is also why Roy is excited instead of frightened, since he trusts the running boy to stay true to his word.



CHAPTER 6

The next morning, Roy asks his parents if it's illegal for a kid to not go to school. Mr. Eberhardt explains that it is illegal and is called truancy. But they just make kids go to school rather than arrest them. Mrs. Eberhardt frets that Roy's apology letter to Dana was too forceful and now he wants to drop out. Fearing that Mr. Eberhardt would have to report Mullet Fingers, Roy decides not to tell his parents why he's asking about truancy.

Roy is surprisingly concerned about kids getting in huge trouble for objectively minor things like skipping school, at least compared to what Mr. Eberhardt may be investigating as part of his job with the DOJ. So, though Roy trusts his parents with a lot of things, he feels unable to ask them for help or guidance when it comes to Mullet Fingers.



Mr. Eberhardt changes the subject and reads from the newspaper about a police cruiser that was vandalized at a construction site on East Oriole Avenue. The officer in the car was asleep because he was on medication that causes drowsiness. Roy laughs. Mr. Eberhardt reads that vandals have also pulled up survey stakes and put alligators in portable toilets, and Mrs. Eberhardt is thrilled that Coconut Cove is getting a Mother Paula's. Roy recognizes the construction site's address: it's near Beatrice's bus stop, about where Roy saw Mullet Fingers running.

Roy is beginning to put the pieces together and suspect that Mullet Fingers (and his wild menagerie) might be involved with the vandalism at the construction site. Note too that at this point, Roy finds the vandalism humorous: it's hard to feel too sympathetic for such a huge corporation, and it's funny that a vandal can stop a big corporation by simply pulling up stakes. This is an early indicator that huge and seemingly powerful entities like Mother Paula's aren't as powerful as they might seem.



The police captain asks Officer Delinko if he'd like to add anything to the report. The captain informs Delinko that his name didn't make it into the paper because he wouldn't release it—and if he says Delinko had the flu and was on medication, that's exactly what happened. Then, the captain puts the bill for cleaning up the squad car in Delinko's file. Delinko offers to pay the car repair bill, but the captain says Delinko will be on desk duty for a month. As the meeting adjourns, the captain says Delinko will be fired if anything happens again, and the sergeant reminds Delinko that he can only drive to and from work in the squad car now. That's okay; Delinko knows a route that will take him past the construction site morning and night.

The police captain tries to make it seem like he did Delinko a huge favor by keeping his name out of the newspaper. But really, the captain essentially uses Delinko's mistake to lord his control over the younger officer and ensure that Delinko remains committed to doing his job to his superiors' satisfaction. Intimidating and threatening to fire Delinko, in other words, is supposed to make Delinko more yielding and obedient. However, Delinko still maintains some of his curiosity—he's not going to just give up on the vandal because he might be fired.



Fortunately, Dana is out of school again. Garrett suggests Roy run away and then shares that other kids are taking bets on how many times Dana is going to beat Roy up when he does come back. Roy just rolls his eyes. When Roy and Mrs. Eberhardt get home that afternoon, Mrs. Eberhardt answers the phone and Roy slips out of the house with a shoebox. He rides his bike to the Mother Paula's construction site, where a bald man (Curly) races toward him, shouting about there being guard dogs tonight. Frightened, Roy pedals away, noticing thunder in the distance. It's drizzling by the time Roy reaches the golf course and heads on foot into the pepper tree thicket. But when Roy reaches Mullet Fingers's camp, the running boy isn't there. The camp is gone, too.

That kids are taking bets not on if Dana will beat Roy up, but on how many times Dana will beat Roy up, speaks to how much Dana and his parents have been able to normalize Dana's bullying—the students think it's inevitable that Dana will beat Roy up. This again implicates the school's administration, which has given in to the Mathersons' threats. It's a mystery what Roy has in the shoebox, but it seems as though Roy perhaps scared Mullet Fingers away from his campsite. Mullet Fingers doesn't yet trust Roy.



By now, it's raining hard and Roy knows it's unsafe to be on a golf course. Thinking of how worried Mrs. Eberhardt must be, Roy races for his bike—but his bike isn't where he left it. Roy sits for a moment in a covered kiosk, but the weather doesn't let up, so he ventures out into the storm. The streets are so flat that they're already flooded. When the streetlights come on, Roy knows his parents will be really upset—he's so late. But as Roy waits to cross the highway at West Oriole, Beatrice rides up behind him on his bike and asks what's in the shoebox.

This passage highlights how close Roy is with his parents, and how much he wants to please and respect them. He doesn't want them to worry, so he's far more concerned about their emotional wellbeing than he is about his own safety being out in such a dramatic storm. It begins to look increasingly like Beatrice and Mullet Fingers are in cahoots, given that she insisted earlier the running boy didn't exist and now stole Roy's bike when he tried to visit Mullet Fingers's camp.



CHAPTER 7

Beatrice obviously followed Roy to the golf course and stole his bike. Now, she tells Roy to get on the handlebars and begins to pedal along the flooded streets. They stop when they reach a dirt road; by now, it's only misting. Beatrice leads Roy through a hole in a chain link fence, which encloses a junkyard. Soon, they reach an old ice cream truck and Beatrice drags Roy inside. He refuses to hand over his shoebox, though he insists it's just shoes inside. Beatrice snatches the box and asks why Roy is carrying around extra shoes. Roy says they're for the running boy—the boy needs shoes so he doesn't step on a nail or a cottonmouth. Beatrice just sneers at Roy, so Roy asks if she'll beat him up quickly so he can get home to his parents.

Beatrice asks why Roy cares about the running boy, but Roy can't answer. She stops Roy from running but doesn't seem mad. They fall silent for a moment as a security guard walks by outside, and then Beatrice says she'll make sure the shoes get to the running boy if Roy leaves him alone. She also reveals that he's her brother.

Officer Delinko works late. By the time he heads for the motor pool at six, it's pouring. He stands outside, thinking about how it'll take him longer to achieve his dreams of becoming a detective, until lightning strikes a power pole and the lights at the station go out. Inside now, Delinko thinks about the incidents at the Mother Paula's site. Kids aren't usually so daring or persistent. Finally, the rain lets up enough for Officer Delinko to run to his car without getting too wet. As he drives past the Mother Paula's site, the dispatcher reports a missing boy named Roy. Ten minutes later, Delinko sees a boy matching Roy's description standing on the corner with a bike. Delinko offers to give Roy a ride—maybe now he can redeem himself.

As Roy sits in the police car, he can't stop thinking about what Beatrice told him: that Mullet Fingers is her stepbrother and is called Mullet Fingers because he can catch mullets, which are slippery, schooling baitfish, in his bare hands. He had been sent to a "special" school, but he ran away and their parents don't know he's in town. Then, Roy remembers how Beatrice picked up his bike and chomped a hole in the back tire so he'd have an excuse for being late. Officer Delinko interrupts Roy's thoughts to ask if he's heard anything about the hijinks at the Mother Paula's construction site. Roy says he read the article in the paper, but nobody's talking about it.

Roy does as Beatrice says because he wants his bike back, but she's also still intimidating—Roy's attempt to speak calmly to her in the cafeteria was something of a front. Still, he decides that honesty is the best policy, even with someone trying to bully him. And the fact that Roy has shoes for Mullet Fingers makes it abundantly clear that Roy doesn't have malicious intent—he's just trying to help out a kid who seems to be in need. Roy tries again to call Beatrice's bluff when he asks her to beat him up quickly so they can finish. It's not clear if Beatrice actually plans to hurt Roy or just intimidate him, but making this request helps Roy to look less afraid and more reasonable.



Finally, revealing that Mullet Fingers is her brother explains why Beatrice has been so adamant that Roy leave him alone. Somehow, Beatrice thinks that she can protect Mullet Fingers by keeping Roy away from him, though it's unclear why this is so.



Officer Delinko remains focused on his career as he thinks about the Mother Paula's vandal—and about picking up Roy. Essentially, Delinko isn't necessarily focused on doing the right thing. He's focused on getting ahead and doing whatever it takes to do that. And while he can acknowledge that kids normally aren't so persistent, he also doesn't entertain any other reasons why the vandal might be targeting the construction site. That Roy's parents reported him missing, meanwhile, indicates that Roy was right to worry: his parents are clearly concerned for his safety.



Mullet Fingers's nickname suggests that he's pretty connected to nature and animals (his ability to wrangle venomous snakes supports this, too). And the fact that Mullet Fingers was sent away, ran away, and that his parents don't know he's in town indicates that his and Beatrice's relationship with their parents is very different than Roy's relationship with his parents—and is likely less functional and respectful.



They've now reached the Eberhardts' house. Officer Delinko hands Roy a business card and asks him to call if he hears anything about the Mother Paula's situation. Roy takes the card, but he doesn't feel like telling on his classmates—and shouldn't the officer just get a thank-you for getting him home safe? As Officer Delinko pulls Roy's bike out of the trunk, Mr. Eberhardt comes out to chat about law enforcement stuff. When Mr. Eberhardt wheels Roy's bike into the garage, Officer Delinko quietly asks Roy if Mr. Eberhardt might write a letter to the police chief about tonight's events. Roy nods noncommittally. Just then, Mrs. Eberhardt rushes out and thanks Officer Delinko for his help—she'd lost faith in the police after the story in the paper. Roy sees Officer Delinko blanch, and the officer speeds away rather than answer if he knows the officer who fell asleep.

As far as Roy is concerned, Officer Delinko should focus on doing the right thing and helping people. It's inappropriate, in Roy's opinion, for Delinko to essentially try to pressure Roy into thanking him for the ride home by tattling on his classmates. Delinko's request that Roy ask Mr. Eberhardt to write him a letter of commendation also reads as inappropriate to Roy. Taken together, this suggests that Officer Delinko, if not the entire Coconut Cove police department, isn't exactly the most ethical workplace in town.



CHAPTER 8

True to his word, Roy stops looking for Mullet Fingers. The rain keeps him inside anyway and, given the immense damage Beatrice did to Roy's bike tire, his bike is unusable until a new tire arrives. On Thursday, when Mrs. Eberhardt picks Roy up, she excitedly reveals that Miss Hennepin has lifted Roy's bus suspension. Roy is far less thrilled and suspects his mom just wants to get back to her morning yoga classes. But he knows he'll have to face Dana sometime—tomorrow might as well be the day.

Despite the brave face Roy has put on thus far, he reveals here that just like his classmates, he is afraid of Dana. He sees his parents—his mom in particular—as a convenient, safe buffer to protect him from the bully. But ultimately, Roy knows he has to do what he can to push back against Dana's cruelty, and he also seems aware that no adult will help to do so.



Curly is under a lot of stress. It's hard work supervising a construction site when work is two weeks behind, and he's certain he'll be fired if anything else happens. Chuck Muckle, the Vice President for Corporate Relations, said as much. When Muckle called Curly, he refused to talk reasonably (what pancake lover is going to care about the gators, anyway?) and told Curly to hire guard dogs. There can be no more delays, since actress Kimberly Lou Dixon, a former Miss America contestant who portrays Mother Paula in commercials, is booked for a big movie—*Mutant Invaders from Jupiter Seven*—and has a short window of time to attend the Mother Paula's groundbreaking ceremony before filming starts.

Here, the novel offers insight into the pressure Curly is under to keep things moving along smoothly. The threat to fire Curly is, essentially, a threat to take away Curly's livelihood—he depends on his paycheck to live, after all. This creates a lot of incentive for Curly to do as Muckle asks. Further, Muckle implies that he really doesn't care much about Curly himself. His focus is on his business and on making sure everything runs smoothly. And this means making sure that Kimberly Lou Dixon can be there for the groundbreaking.



Curly finds a company willing to install a chain-link fence in the rain and then hires a guard dog trainer. Finally, at 4:30 p.m., a red truck pulls up and the beefy, mustached driver introduces himself as Kalo, the trainer. In a heavy German accent, Kalo tells Curly to go home and to not interact at all with the dogs. Curly waits outside the fence while Kalo lets out four big, snarling Rottweilers. At a command in German, they all sit. Kalo says their names are Max, Klaus, Karl, and Pookie Face. Curly heads to his truck, relieved—nobody is going to mess with those dogs.

Symbolically, bringing in big, snarling Rottweilers makes Curly—and the Mother Paula's corporation he represents—look strong, mean, and powerful. That one of the dogs is named Pookie Face, though, is a humorous suggestion that the dogs are perhaps not as intimidating as Curly would like to think. The vandal, perhaps, will find a way to get the better of these dogs.



It's not raining the next morning, so Roy walks to the bus stop. He notices some ospreys nesting on a utility pole, mullet skeletons littering the ground below them. There were ospreys in Montana, too—maybe if the birds can live in such different environments, Roy can figure it out, too. Roy boards the bus and kids immediately move away from him. As expected, Dana appears behind Roy. There's a new injury on Dana's lip; maybe Mrs. Matherson hit him. In any case, Dana has a lisp now and he tells Roy they have business to settle.

Roy is beginning to feel a bit more at home in Florida—or, at least, he's willing to entertain the possibility that it might be a good idea to put more effort into being happy here. It's significant that the ospreys are what cause Roy to think this, as this shows how the natural world can provide Roy a framework as he thinks about where he belongs. The new injury on Dana's lip offers more possible evidence that Dana's home life isn't as safe and pleasant as one might hope: he may bully others because he suffers violence at home.



Roy is done playing, and he's had lots of experience with bullies like Dana. He slaps Dana's hand away and calmly tells Dana to hit him. Once Dana does, Roy turns back to his comic book. Dana slaps Roy off his seat and then continues to pummel the smaller boy. The bus driver doesn't notice, but to Roy's surprise, Dana stops hitting him after the driver makes another stop. Roy finally looks up at Beatrice and greets her.

Things start to change for the better for Roy now that he and Beatrice have come to a truce of sorts—they may be on their way to being friends. And Roy must turn to friends or peers when it comes to Dana, as the bus driver is clearly not going to intervene. It's not evident, though, whether the bus driver legitimately doesn't notice, or if he's ignoring Dana and maybe fears the boy, too.



CHAPTER 9

Kids look at Roy, surprised he's still alive, all day Friday. Near the end of the day, Garrett drags Roy into a bathroom and says that Roy should go home sick. Dana will be waiting after seventh period and plans to beat Roy up before Roy gets on the bus. Roy knows if he goes home early today, Dana will just snatch Roy on Monday. Deciding he has no other option, Roy knows he has to stand and fight—even though he's pretty sure Mr. Eberhardt would characterize this choice as “stupidity.” He also worries about Mrs. Eberhardt, who will be devastated if something happens to Roy. Roy isn't supposed to know, but he almost had a little sister; his mom had a miscarriage halfway through her pregnancy. Since learning that, Roy has done his best to not make his parents worry.

Aside from Beatrice, Roy is totally on his own to fight Dana. Garrett tries to be helpful by warning Roy, but Roy recognizes that heeding Garrett's warning isn't going to help him in the long run. Without friends his own age, Roy again turns to his parents and highlights how much he loves and cares about them. His concern is less for his own safety and more about the fact that his mom is going to be really upset. Still, Roy doesn't seem to fear that his parents are going to be upset with him, which gives him the confidence to vow to face Dana.



Roy's last class is American history. He lets the other students leave and then peeks into the hall: no sign of Dana. The teacher, Mr. Ryan, appears behind Roy and they walk together to the staff lounge. Mr. Ryan quizzes Roy briefly on the War of 1812—there's a test on Monday—and then Roy is on his own. With four minutes to get to the bus, Roy decides to take a shortcut through the gym. He almost makes it.

Roy figures that if he can get to the bus without incident, he'll be okay. Interestingly, though Roy uses Mr. Ryan as a shield of sorts, he's unwilling to ask Mr. Ryan to escort him to the bus. This shows again that Roy doesn't trust any adults at school to stand up to Dana—they are, in Roy's mind, unreliable like Miss Hennepin is.



Curly has had another terrible day and is on the phone again with Chuck Muckle. After assuring Muckle that he didn't file a police report (so there's nothing to leak to the press), Curly told him the whole story. He got to the construction site this morning to find Kalo chasing the attack dogs and shrieking in German. Officer Delinko had pulled up, but Curly waved him away. Kalo accused Curly of trying to kill the dogs with venomous snakes and pointed out nine cottonmouth water moccasins, all with glittery tails. Fuming, Kalo tripped in an owl burrow. He promised to send his bills to Mother Paula's—and if they won't pay for his now-busted ankle, he'll consult a lawyer. Curly then waited for the reptile wrangler to arrive, but the man couldn't find any snakes. Now, Muckle tells Curly to break ground on Monday, no matter what.

Dana has pulled Roy into the pitch-black janitor's closet. Roy evades Dana's sweaty grip and hides on the floor while Dana punches cleaning supplies above him. When Roy finds the doorknob, he tries to run out—but Dana pulls Roy back in and grips him in a fierce bear hug from behind. Roy can't breathe. He begins to thrash his legs and suddenly, Dana lets him go. But Roy is too weak and breathless to run, so Dana begins to choke Roy. Suddenly, the door swings open and someone hoists Dana up and away. After a minute, Roy gets up himself, checks the hallway, and races for an exit. He almost makes it.

CHAPTER 10

Beatrice saved Roy from Dana—she stripped Dana to his underwear and tied him to the flagpole. She then stole a bike, made Roy get on the handlebars, and they're now pedaling quickly for Roy's house. Roy can tell she's upset, and she says she needs a favor. She needs first-aid supplies and can't get them at her house. Mrs. Eberhardt opens the door and is thrilled that Roy has brought home a friend. Beatrice tells her that they're working on a messy science experiment and they'll do it at her house. While Mrs. Eberhardt fixes snacks, Roy grabs first-aid supplies. When he returns to the kitchen, Beatrice says they forgot the ground beef for the experiment. Mrs. Eberhardt says Beatrice can have the two pounds of beef in her fridge and sends the kids on their way.

Readers may deduce that the Mother Paula's vandal is none other than Mullet Fingers, since Roy noted earlier that the boy's cottonmouth moccasins had painted, glittery tails. However, the reason Mullet Fingers is targeting the Mother Paula's construction site isn't entirely clear yet. The fiasco with the attack dogs is humorous, but when Kalo threatens legal action if Mother Paula's doesn't pay for the dogs and his medical bills, it again reminds readers of how powerful money is. Curly, though, is caught in the middle, since he's trying to please both Kalo and Muckle—who doesn't seem like the sort to be sympathetic to the frightened dogs, or to Kalo's ankle injury.



Pulling Roy into a closet increases Dana's power; the likelihood that someone is going to notice what's going on and come to Roy's aid is now much lower than if they were out in the open. Still, someone appears to help Roy, which suggests that Roy is no longer quite as alone at school as he thought he was. Not revealing who saves Roy, or who intercepts him before he reaches the exit, creates tension: Roy's harrowing afterschool experience is in no way over yet.



Tying Dana to the flagpole is not only extremely satisfying—he's finally gotten his comeuppance—but it also suggests that there are kids at school, namely Beatrice, who can take on Dana when they have enough motivation to do so. However, things then become a bit more concerning. Beatrice never says, for instance, why she can't get first-aid supplies at her house. Are there no first-aid items there, or would she get in trouble for taking whatever is there? In any case, thanks to Roy's positive and trusting relationship with Mrs. Eberhardt, he and Beatrice are able to get what they need.



Beatrice lives with her father, Leon Leep. A former pro basketball player, he retired young. Beatrice's mom divorced Leon and two years later, Leon got engaged to a woman named Lonna. Though Leon tried to connect with Lonna's son, Mullet Fingers, they had nothing in common (Leon liked TV, while Mullet Fingers liked wild animals). Things came to a head when Mullet Fingers brought home an orphaned baby raccoon. Though Leon didn't seem perturbed, Lonna sent her son to a military school. Mullet Fingers has now been sent to several, and he only lasts a few weeks before running away. When he ran away from the last school, Lonna didn't tell Leon. She doesn't know where her son is and doesn't care; she's "fed up with the little monster." The only person who knows Mullet Fingers is in town is Beatrice, who's been looking out for her little brother.

Beatrice shares this with Roy on their bike ride to the abandoned ice cream truck. Inside, Mullet Fingers is sweaty, feverish, and has a purple arm. With prodding, he tells Roy that dogs bit him. Roy and Beatrice clean and dress the wounds, and Roy insists Mullet Fingers needs a tetanus shot. Mullet fingers ignores this and with more prodding from Beatrice, says there were four dogs behind a chain-link fence. He stands and says that since Beatrice got the hamburger, they need to go—and he races away. Roy notices that Mullet Fingers is wearing the sneakers. Beatrice tells Roy to get back on the handlebars, but Roy says he'll have no part in poisoning dogs. Beatrice laughs; they won't poison any dogs.

Beatrice bikes to the construction site where Curly yelled at Roy the other day. Roy asks if this is connected to the spray-painted police car and the gators in the toilets, but Beatrice says nothing. Mullet Fingers is already there and reaches for the beef, but Roy won't let him have it without an explanation. Mullet Fingers scales the fence—the dogs are gone—and tells Roy and Beatrice to follow. Sitting in a **bulldozer's** blade, Roy asks why Mullet Fingers cares so much if they build a pancake house here. At this, inexplicably, Beatrice and Mullet Fingers explain that the dogs bit Mullet Fingers when he was reaching through the fence to put cottonmouths on the site; the snakes' mouths were taped shut and once the dogs were gone, Mullet Fingers retrieved the snakes and set them free somewhere safe.

This passage helps explain why Beatrice has been so protective of Mullet Fingers: she doesn't want Lonna to find out he's in town. The siblings have little or no support at home, as Leon seems fully checked out (though with good or at least neutral intentions) and Lonna seems shockingly cruel and even dangerous. Leon and Lonna's differing, questionable parenting habits feed off each other, though: Lonna's cruelty puts Mullet Fingers in potential danger, while Leon being so distant and uninvolved means he has no idea that as a legal guardian to a kid, he should probably step in and figure out where his stepson is. And this combination means Beatrice—a preteen herself—is taking on an adult role. This seems to influence her rough and frightening demeanor at school, as she doesn't have any adults to truly support her.



This passage as much as confirms that Mullet Fingers is the Mother Paula's vandal—and that playing this role isn't without risk. Since Roy doesn't yet know why Mullet Fingers is targeting the site, he feels like he must make it really clear that he's not interested in doing anything cruel or illegal—his well-developed moral compass won't stand for poisoning dogs who were just doing their job. However, it's worth noting that Mullet Fingers seems to not have done anything thus far that actually hurts any animals, so poisoning dogs in the first place seems somewhat out of character.



As Mullet Fingers and Beatrice explain what Mullet Fingers has been up to, it's important to note that Mullet Fingers has done nothing to hurt any of the animals he's handled. His goal, this implies, isn't to cause pain, though what he wants to get out of this vandalism is still a mystery. Finally, while the bulldozer isn't doing anything right now, this passage draws attention to how huge and ominous it is when it describes three preteens comfortably sitting in its blade. The bulldozer represents development, and for now, it seems like development is going to win out over a few kids.



Roy still doesn't get what this has to do with a pancake house, so Mullet Fingers asks for the hamburger. He rolls the beef into meatballs and quietly leads Roy to a hole in the ground. Mullet Fingers places meatballs next to several holes around the property and then leads him back to Beatrice and the **bulldozer**. Soon, Roy hears cooing and Mullet Fingers excitedly points to a tiny **owl** studying a meatball. Roy understands now.

Mullet Fingers isn't messing with the site for fun: he's trying to save the small owls that live on the prospective building site. Note that the owls (which are only eight or nine inches tall) look particularly tiny next to the construction equipment. This makes them more sympathetic, and also highlights that they need people like Mullet Fingers, Beatrice, and Roy to speak up for them.



CHAPTER 11

Officer Delinko has been driving past the construction site at least twice per day. The only interesting thing he's seen was the dog trainer running around and shouting at the dogs this morning, but he believes Curly that it was a training exercise. Eager to see the dogs in action, Delinko decides to drive past on his way home. But when Delinko gets to the site, the dogs don't seem to be there. Delinko makes some noise, trying to rouse the dogs—but he only gets a response when he whistles, and it's a faint coo. A tiny **owl** flies up from the ground and lands on a **bulldozer**, making Delinko smile. Officer Delinko decides to stop tomorrow and ask Curly about the dogs, and he pulls a torn strip of green fabric off the top of the fence. It looks like it tore when someone climbed over.

Officer Delinko has no idea that he shouldn't necessarily trust Curly: Curly is trying to keep Mother Paula's out of the news, which means not reporting things to the police. Now that the novel has revealed why Mullet Fingers is trying to stop construction on the site, the symbolic fight between the owls and the earthmoving equipment comes more to the forefront. Delinko still hasn't put together that the owls will be displaced once the bulldozer gets moving, but the tiny owl sitting on the bulldozer nevertheless highlights how small and helpless the owls are next to big, powerful machines that will transform this lot into a suburban restaurant.



Beatrice shouts at Roy to run faster; she's riding the bike, Mullet Fingers is slumped over the handlebars, and Roy is running behind. Mullet Fingers collapsed and fell from the fence at the construction site, and it's clear that the infected dog bites are making him sicker. Still, Beatrice refuses to get Mullet Fingers medical attention. When Roy sees a police cruiser, he stops and waves at it. This causes Beatrice to drop the bike and race, carrying Mullet Fingers, into the nearby neighborhood. Roy decides to follow the only two people he can kind of consider friends, and he also worries that he could get in trouble for helping Mullet Fingers, since Mullet Fingers is a "fugitive from the school system." And how can it be a crime for Mullet Fingers to look out for the **owls**? When he catches up to Beatrice, she asks what they can do.

Because Beatrice doesn't believe she can trust adults, she's not willing to take Mullet Fingers to a doctor or hospital, let alone ask the police for help. Roy, on the other hand, not only has a dad who works in law enforcement—he also believes generally that adults are there to help kids like him. However, Beatrice forces Roy to choose his friends over seeking out adult help. In this way, Roy begins to join Beatrice in growing up and taking on more adult roles himself. Still, he justifies what seems like his choice to help by reminding himself that it's likely not a crime to advocate for helpless, innocent animals.



Curly is through with attack dogs. He knows the only way to protect the construction site is to spend nights there—but he's annoyed when his wife isn't upset that he'll be away for the weekend. So he sullenly packs his bag and heads to the site. There, he carefully walks to the trailer, worried about the moccasins, and turns on ESPN. He fingers his revolver, which he plans to use to shoot a snake, though he hasn't fired a gun since he got out of the Marines 31 years ago. During a commercial break, an ad for Mother Paula's Pancake House comes on. Kimberly Lou Dixon is made up to look like an old woman, but she's clearly pretty young. Will Curly get to meet her when she comes for the groundbreaking ceremony? Can he ask for an autograph?

Just then, the cable goes out. Curly hasn't spent a night without TV in years and he doesn't know how else to amuse himself. Going to rent a movie at the minimart is out of the question: he'd have to risk the snakes lurking around the construction site. Can a snake wiggle into the trailer? Curly once heard about a boa constrictor that appeared from a bathtub drain in New York City, so it seems possible. Anxiously, Curly gets up. He hears rustling in the bathroom, so he pulls out his gun and slams open the door. Unfortunately, he realizes the culprit is just a tiny mouse only after he shoots the toilet, destroying it.

Mr. Eberhardt is reading when Mrs. Eberhardt comes to tell him that Officer Delinko, the policeman who brought Roy home, is at the door. In the living room, Officer Delinko shares what he saw: a boy who looked like Roy waved at him and then ran away with some other kids. They left a bike laying in the street. Mrs. Eberhardt says it can't be Roy; he wouldn't run and besides, his bike has a flat tire. Officer Delinko says the bike was stolen from Trace Middle School this afternoon, so Mrs. Eberhardt gravely says Roy's not a thief. Officer Delinko says he's just doing his job and offers to show the Eberhardts the bike. Privately, he hopes Mr. Eberhardt can put in a good word for him someday when he's ready to be a detective—or maybe even join the FBI.

Before Mrs. Eberhardt can say it looks like Beatrice's bike, Officer Delinko asks if she and Mr. Eberhardt recognize the strip of fabric he found. They don't. The phone rings, so Mrs. Eberhardt goes inside to answer it. Eagerly, Officer Delinko asks Mr. Eberhardt if Roy said anything about writing a letter to the police chief. Roy didn't, and Mr. Eberhardt is fed up with how pushy Officer Delinko is. But before Officer Delinko can give his sergeant's name, Mrs. Eberhardt races out with the car keys. Roy is in the emergency room.

Things are continuing to get worse for Curly. He wants to be valued and appreciated, but his wife isn't helping in that regard, and Chuck Muckle isn't exactly the warm and fuzzy type who would make Curly feel good for surveilling the property himself. Because of this, it's another sign of how much Curly needs to keep his job that he's here—and willing to pull out a gun for the first time in decades to protect himself and the property.



Curly's experiences with the alligators, the water moccasins, and now the mouse suggest that he's pretty uncomfortable in the natural world. Everything that lives in nature—even cute and non-dangerous mice—is threatening. This is played for humor in this passage, but it also sets up a contrast between Curly and Mullet Fingers. Whereas Mullet Fingers is so comfortable with nature and animals that he can camp and keep snakes in a bag, Curly is brought to hysterics by a mouse.



Put simply, Officer Delinko is sucking up to Mr. Eberhardt to try to boost his career. The implication is that normally, Delinko wouldn't inform parents that a kid who maybe looks like their child was behaving oddly out in public; Delinko is doing this on the off chance that it'll help him advance. Readers, however, can deduce that Delinko did indeed see Roy, and the Eberhardts' reaction confirms that they've taught Roy to trust adults in general—and law enforcement in particular. But out on his own, Roy is making different choices than his parents might want him to.



It's telling that even Mr. Eberhardt finds Officer Delinko overbearing. The novel portrays Mr. Eberhardt as a good person who's also really good at his job, and he clearly finds Delinko lacking and focused on the wrong things. It then creates tension when Mrs. Eberhardt shares that Roy is in the emergency room. That she immediately is ready to go see him, though, is something the novel casts as a good thing. She's involved and cares about her son.



CHAPTER 12

As Roy and Beatrice sit in the waiting area at the Coconut Cove Medical Center emergency room, Beatrice says they're even now. Roy assures Beatrice that Mullet Fingers will be okay. Just then, a woman in scrubs walks over, introduces herself as Dr. Gonzalez, and asks what happened to Roy. Beatrice and Roy exchange an anxious glance; Mullet Fingers wouldn't let them give the hospital staff his name, so Roy gave his own name, address, and phone number. He'll definitely get in trouble, but it seemed like the best way to get Mullet Fingers treatment.

Beatrice tells Dr. Gonzalez that big dogs bit Mullet Fingers after soccer practice, and she brought him here right after. Dr. Gonzalez frowns—the bites are about a day old. Roy says that's correct; Mullet Fingers passed out for a night, came running home, and then he and Beatrice brought him to the hospital. Dr. Gonzalez still isn't convinced, especially when Roy says his name is Tex. Turning back to Beatrice, Dr. Gonzalez asks where her parents are. Beatrice says their parents work on a crab boat with no phone. When Dr. Gonzalez asks why nobody was worried when Mullet Fingers didn't come home for a night, Beatrice quietly says he runs away sometimes. Dr. Gonzalez backs off and says Mullet Fingers is doing better, but Beatrice and Roy can't see him yet—and they should work on their story.

Once Dr. Gonzalez leaves, Roy and Beatrice hurry outside to talk. They agree that once it gets out that Mullet Fingers isn't Roy, they'll have a problem—and if Lonna finds out Mullet Fingers is here, she'll ship him to a military school in Guam or something so he can't run away. Roy doesn't understand how parents can treat their kids this way. Suddenly, Beatrice skips away. She has to go make dinner for Leon like she always does, since he can't cook and Lonna is a bartender. She tells Roy to not let anyone operate on her brother, but she refuses to tell Roy Mullet Fingers's real name.

Roy goes back inside and asks to call his parents. He leaves a voicemail, telling them he'll be home once he and Beatrice clean up. Roy flips through some outdoor magazines and thinks about Montana until he hears sirens outside. He has no interest in seeing anything gory or depressing, so he decides to go find a vending machine. A nurse shoos him back to the ER after 15 minutes, but nothing seems amiss in the waiting room. There's just a police cruiser outside, so Roy returns to his magazine. But then he hears raised voices coming from the treatment area and recognizes Mr. Eberhardt and Mrs. Eberhardt's voices. He goes through the doors and shouts for his parents.

Dramatic irony is at play here; that is, readers know Roy is fine and Mullet Fingers has actually been hospitalized, but few other characters (namely Roy's parents) are aware of this. That Roy told hospital staff that Mullet Fingers was him also demonstrates Roy diverging from how he's been taught to engage with adults. His parents have raised him to be honest and truthful. But in this situation, Roy decides it's more important to get a vulnerable friend care than it is to tell the truth.



Dr. Gonzalez clearly doesn't believe Beatrice and Roy's story. However, she, like Roy, seems to believe that it's more important to get Mullet Fingers the care he needs than it is to know exactly what transpired to land him in the hospital. And interestingly, it's the only actually truthful thing Beatrice says (that Mullet Fingers runs away) that causes Dr. Gonzalez to back off. It's becoming increasingly apparent to Roy and to other adults that Mullet Fingers and Beatrice don't have a supportive, safe place to go home to, which makes it all the more important that Roy and Dr. Gonzalez do what they can to help step up where Leon and Lonna have fallen short.



The stakes are high for Mullet Fingers. He clearly needs medical treatment, but getting treatment puts him at risk of Lonna discovering him—which will make things even worse for him in the long run. In addition to the threat Lonna poses, the revelation that Beatrice has been cooking for her dad for years is another indicator that his absent parenting has forced Beatrice to grow up long before she's ready: she is functionally the adult at home.



Once again, Roy makes questionable choices (in this case, lying) for good reasons. He doesn't want his parents to worry, and he wants to make sure Mullet Fingers can continue receiving medical care. However, Roy also knows when to admit defeat and give up the ruse. With his parents yelling for him in the treatment area, Roy knows it's not going to fly to hide and lie about this later. This highlights that Roy trusts his parents—they might be disappointed in or upset with him, but they won't ship him off to a military school.



The narrative steps back to when Officer Delinko offered to give the Eberhardts a ride to the hospital—the right thing to do, but also a good way to score points with Mr. Eberhardt. At the ER, the Eberhardts tell the clerk who they are, but the clerk refuses to let them see Roy, even when Officer Delinko tries to step in and use his uniform to his advantage. After a moment of arguing, Mr. Eberhardt steers Mrs. Eberhardt into the patient area. Just then, Dr. Gonzalez stops the Eberhardts and asks if they're Roy's parents—they don't look like they work on a crab boat. Sighing, she leads them into the patient ward and says that if they can't find the dogs, Roy will need rabies vaccines. Officer Delinko follows behind, curious what color Roy's shirt is. But when Dr. Gonzalez pulls back the curtain, the bed is empty.

Dr. Gonzalez has no idea where her patient went. Officer Delinko steps between the doctor and Mr. Eberhardt, who looks angry enough to lash out. A few minutes later, Roy bursts through the door and into his parents' arms. Dr. Gonzalez asks if this is really Roy, and Mr. Eberhardt asks to see the dog bites. Officer Delinko excitedly keeps his radio ready in case he needs to call for backup. Roy says he wasn't bitten. He tells Dr. Gonzalez that he doesn't know the running boy's name or where he went. *It is the truth.*

CHAPTER 13

After dinner, Roy joins Mr. Eberhardt in the den. Roy is carrying a book, *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, which Mr. Eberhardt gave Roy a few years ago after an argument they had about whether they'd seen a juvenile bald eagle or an adult golden eagle. Roy tells his dad which page to turn to, and Mr. Eberhardt reads about the burrowing **owl**, *Athene cunicularia*. Leaving out Mullet Fingers's nickname and a few details (such as that the snakes were poisonous and their mouths were taped shut), Roy tells his dad everything. He concludes by saying that the running boy is just trying to save the owls. If the Mother Paula's people **bulldoze** the property, they'll bury all the owl dens.

Sadly, Mr. Eberhardt assures Roy that Mother Paula's certainly has all the permits. Roy is shocked that one can get a permit to bury **owls**, and he insists it's inhumane—how would the Eberhardts like it if someone **bulldozed** their house and told them to move on, that it was no big deal? The owls might have babies in their burrows that are too little to fly. Mr. Eberhardt suggests they take a walk. He says Roy is growing up fast, but Roy isn't convinced. Roy asks if his dad remembers the time they floated the Madison canyon and saw five great horned owls in one tree. Sighing, Mr. Eberhardt confirms that Roy truly doesn't know Mullet Fingers's name. Mr. Eberhardt says his main concern is the Leeps' family situation, but he's going to think about all of this. Roy should do the same.

Finally, it comes out that Dr. Gonzalez's patient wasn't actually Roy, and she gets proof that Roy and Beatrice were lying about Beatrice and Mullet Fingers's parents. That Mr. Eberhardt, a law enforcement officer himself, is so willing to shout and push his way into the treatment area offers some insight into why Roy decided it was okay to lie to get Mullet Fingers treatment. The Eberhardts, it seems, value meaningful support over blindly following the rules.



Roy continues to demonstrate the positive effects of having a strong and trusting relationship with his parents. Especially now that Mullet Fingers is gone (and so can't be helped), Roy instead focuses on telling the truth, trusting that his parents will believe him and understand why he lied to begin with.



Roy now understands fully why Mullet Fingers keeps vandalizing the construction site: the owls will lose their homes, and this, both boys believe, is unacceptable. So, by approaching his dad with information about the owls and explaining why he and Mullet Fingers have done what they've done, Roy hopes that his dad will understand that they hold the moral high ground. In other words, yes, Roy lied to his parents and Mullet Fingers has committed some petty crimes—but in this context, Roy suggests that's okay, since burying owl dens isn't.



Mr. Eberhardt introduces Roy to the uncomfortable truth that the law isn't always as moral or just as one might hope. But this only heightens Roy's ire and tells him that the law should change—it's totally inappropriate, Roy believes, to prioritize corporate profits over innocent owls and nature more broadly. As Mr. Eberhardt sees it, that Roy is thinking about these things is a sign that he's growing up, maturing, and beginning to decide what kind of an adult he wants to be. However, Mr. Eberhardt, as the actual adult in this situation, is far more concerned with the fact that the Leep kids don't have a safe, supportive parent at home.



When Roy crawls into bed a bit later, he can't sleep. He picks up a library book, *A Land Remembered*, which is about a family living in Florida in the 1850s. There was way more wildlife and fewer people in Florida back then—it would've been a good time to be an **owl**. Roy has dozed off when Mrs. Eberhardt enters his room to say goodnight a bit later. She tucks him in tightly and says that she loves Roy, but it's not okay to lie, even if it's to protect a friend. Roy argues that the doctors were asking nosy questions, all while Mullet Fingers was about to pass out from the fever. He'd lie again if he had to. Mrs. Eberhardt smiles and says that Roy will encounter situations where what's right and wrong won't always be clear. He should go with his best judgment.

Mrs. Eberhardt asks why Mullet Fingers wouldn't give his name and why he ran from the hospital (he escaped through the women's restroom window and left his green shirt dangling on Officer Delinko's patrol car). Roy says he was afraid someone would call his mom—she doesn't want him and keeps shipping him off to military schools or juvenile halls. Mrs. Eberhardt's expression is something between anger and sadness, and Roy feels awful for bringing it up. She kisses Roy and says that she and Mr. Eberhardt are proud of Roy. Roy asks if she heard about the **owls**, and then he asks what he should do. Mrs. Eberhardt is confused, so Roy brushes her off. She already answered his question, anyway.

CHAPTER 14

The next day, Saturday, Garrett calls just as Roy sits down for breakfast. Garrett invites Roy to skate at the outlet mall and asks him questions about Dana getting tied to the flagpole, but Roy can't answer in front of his parents. A bit later, Mr. Eberhardt drives Roy to pick up his new bike tire, which means Roy can then visit the Leep home on West Oriole Avenue. Roy hears voices arguing inside and hopes it's just the TV. Leon Leep himself answers the door, looking like he hasn't exercised since retiring from the NBA. He absentmindedly goes to fetch Beatrice, who appears looking stressed. She says she can't hang out and says she heard about what happened to Mullet Fingers at the hospital.

Just then, a cold voice asks who Beatrice is talking to. Lonna herself appears behind Beatrice, fully made up and smoking a cigarette. Roy says he and Beatrice are working on a science project together, but Lonna says Beatrice is cleaning the house today. Beatrice is clearly enraged—Roy wouldn't be surprised if she bites Lonna someday. As Roy pedals away, he considers that maybe Mullet Fingers is better off on his own. Lonna is awful, and Roy wonders what made her that way.

The Florida that A Land Remembered portrays is, as Roy suggests, no doubt better for animals. But the early days of Florida's development are also, in turn, the beginning of prioritizing human development over nature, something Roy is beginning to see as a problem. When Roy and his mom argue, he insists that adults should be more focused on helping people than on getting all their facts straight. To him, that's what it means to do the right thing. Unwittingly, his mom supports this view when she tells him to use his best judgment in unclear situations.



Roy seems to suspect that since his mom lost a very wanted pregnancy years ago, it's even more difficult than it might be otherwise for her to hear about a mother not wanting her child. Again, this reflects Roy's close and caring relationship with his parents. But though Roy is trying to care for his mom a bit here, he also wants her approval. This is why he asks what he should do about the owls. However, as Roy sees it, his mom has essentially already given him permission to do whatever he thinks is the morally right thing to do—even if it might not be strictly legal or honest.



Roy trusts his parents, but he still acknowledges that they would not be thrilled to hear about Beatrice's vigilante justice against Dana. Again, Roy continues to make his own choices when it comes to what he believes is right—and how much of that he shares with his parents. Visiting the Leep house highlights for Roy how good he has it at home. Beatrice seems uncomfortable and can't speak openly about her stepbrother, and it seems like the adults may be fighting. This may be the source of Beatrice's stress, though it's never confirmed this is indeed what Roy hears.



While Mrs. Eberhardt prioritizes Roy's education (and so was happy to support Beatrice and Roy in their fake science experiment), Lonna reads as entitled and cruel. She treats Beatrice more like a maid than as a child to care for and guide. All of this causes Roy to wonder if maybe it's better to have no parents than to have neglectful ones. Beatrice, as Mullet Fingers's stand-in parent, at least makes sure his needs are mostly met.



Roy rides to Dana's house and "another shaky example of motherhood" next. But Mr. Matherson, not Mrs. Matherson, opens the door. He's thin, shaky, and looks unhealthy. When Roy says he's a friend of Dana's, Mr. Matherson, clearly ashamed, tries to pay for homework he assumes Roy has done for Dana. Finally, he goes to fetch Dana, who's enraged to see Roy. Dana steps onto the porch and swings at Roy, but Roy steps aside, so Dana hits the house instead. Roy points out that bad things happen when Dana tries to hurt Roy, so maybe Dana should just stop. Dana just growls that he'll get Roy. This is not what Roy wanted to hear, so he sighs and walks away. He can't even enjoy the sight of Dana trying to get back inside his own house—Mr. Matherson locked the door.

Roy rides to the junkyard next to check on Mullet Fingers. Mullet Fingers crawls out of his sleeping bag in the ice cream truck and says he's feeling a bit better. Roy shares what he learned about legal permits and says there's nothing they can do for the **owls**. Grinning, Mullet Fingers says they have to think like "outlaw[s]," like Roy did when he helped Mullet Fingers get medical treatment. Roy shares too that the owls eat bugs, not hamburger, but Mullet Fingers impatiently says that the land is rightfully the owls', not the pancake house's. They discuss that Roy is from Montana, and Mullet Fingers muses that the mountains out there mean **bulldozers** can't do as much damage. Roy can't say that that's not entirely true.

Mullet Fingers says he's been watching people develop Florida's wild areas since he was a kid, and he's not going to stop fighting back. He had Beatrice write a letter to Mother Paula's about the **owls**. He offers Roy the letter from Chuck Muckle, which reads simply that Mother Paula's is committed to the environment and is complying with local laws and regulations. The boys step outside, and Mullet Fingers invites Roy to join him tonight. Roy lies that he has homework, and he warns that Mullet Fingers can't stop a company as huge as Mother Paula's. And Mullet Fingers will end up in jail sooner or later. Mullet Fingers says he'll just run away, and he doesn't miss living at home. He might go back to school someday, but for now, he's happy. Then, he says he has something cool to show Roy and runs off.

While Mr. Matherson is framed as something of a joke, it's worth noting that he also contributes to Dana's bad behavior. Mr. Matherson seems totally unwilling to take a stand and insist to his wife or son that their behavior isn't okay—and if Dana bullies his dad, this has taught him that he can bully others to get what he wants. Roy approaches Dana as he often does (coolly, with logic), and Dana demonstrates once again that he's not a logical, rational person. He wants what he wants, and in this case, that's to hurt Roy for seemingly no reason.



At the beginning of this passage, Roy seems to have taken his dad's suggestion to heart: if Mother Paula's has the permits, it's then legally fine for the company to bulldoze the owl burrows. Mullet Fingers, however, encourages Roy to think about the owls and what humans might owe them. They deserve to live where they've been living, Mullet Fingers suggests, because the owls have been in Florida for way longer than people have. However, Mullet Fingers also reads as somewhat naive when he comments that Montana is less at risk of development than flat Florida is. Roy, having been there, knows that's not the case—humans can, and have, developed all sorts of terrain.



As Mullet Fingers sees it, it's his duty to stand up and advocate for the natural world and the animals that inhabit it, since the animals and wild areas can't advocate for themselves. The letter from Chuck Muckle also makes it clear to him that big companies with something to gain by developing natural areas aren't trustworthy: if they were committed to the environment, Mullet Fingers's thinking seems to go, they wouldn't be preparing to destroy owl burrows. And Mullet Fingers also makes it clear that he's not afraid of running afoul of the law if it means he can protect Florida's wilderness.



Back in the 1970s, a tropical storm came ashore near Coconut Cove. The 10-foot storm surge swept a crab boat called the *Molly Bell* up a creek, where she's been ever since. Now, her exposed pilothouse is the perfect spot for two boys to sit. Roy is entranced by the beautiful wilderness around him, and he's not scared when Mullet Fingers says he saw a nine-foot gator here. Roy even muses that he might've found this spot himself, had he not been busy moping about Montana. When Roy asks, Mullet Fingers says he and Lonna just don't get along, and he never met his dad.

Just then, "they" come, and Mullet Fingers tells Roy to grab his ankles while he leans out over the creek on his stomach. He lunges and shows Roy his catch: a small, silvery mullet. Roy is impressed and Mullet Fingers returns the fish to the water. Later, as the boys return to shore, Roy asks what Mullet Fingers is going to do tonight. Mullet Fingers just tells Roy to come find out.

CHAPTER 15

In his bedroom, Roy stares at his cowboy poster and wishes he was as brave as a bull rider. He's not though. It's too risky to go to the Mother Paula's construction site, and Roy doesn't want to do anything illegal. Still, he can't stop thinking about how distraught the **owl** parents will be when the **bulldozers** bury their babies in the dens. Deciding that something being legal doesn't make it right, Roy gets up and tells Mrs. Eberhardt he's going for another bike ride. He rides to Dana's house and slips into the backyard. When he finds Dana's window, Roy gets Dana's attention, salutes, turns around, and pulls his pants down. Even upside-down through his legs, it's still clear to Roy that Dana has never been mooned like this. Roy pulls his pants up and walks to the front of the house.

Dana appears moments later, and Roy begins to jog away. He wants Dana to chase him, but unfortunately, Dana is very out of shape. Dana looks ready to pass out before Roy has reached his destination, so Roy pretends to tire and allows Dana to tackle him (Dana is so exhausted he can't effectively throttle and punch Roy). Still, Roy acts afraid and apologizes for mooning Dana. Then, Roy says he knows where a case of cigarettes is—and he'll show Dana if Dana promises not to beat him up. When Roy says they're Gladiator Golds, Dana lights up and swears on his father's grave not to hurt Roy. Roy says the cigarettes are in the construction trailer on the lot at East Oriole and Woodbury, and he and some friends stole them on the Seminole reservation. Dana shoves Roy back into the flower bed and races off.

This is a transformative moment for Roy. Atop the Molly Bell, admiring the plants and animals around him, he has to admit that Florida has a lot going for it—and he can, perhaps, be just as happy here as he was in Montana. The natural world, in this sense, helps Roy feel more at home. Mullet Fingers's insistence that he and Lonna don't get along is certainly an understatement, and by saying this, Mullet Fingers also implies he doesn't expect anything from her. He's given up on ever getting support from her.



Notably, Mullet Fingers doesn't catch the mullet to eat or to use as a baitfish. He catches it because he can, and then he lets it go. By catching the fish and letting it go, he demonstrates his close relationship to the natural world and shows that he respects it. Even a tiny fish like a mullet, his actions suggest, is worthy of wonder and dignity.



It is Roy's own close relationship with his parents, perhaps, that makes him so sympathetic to the owl parents' plight (that their babies could be killed during construction). This helps Roy decide to take action. He also takes his parents' advice to heart when he notes explicitly that something being legal doesn't make it right. He suggests that it's inappropriate to kill wild animals for financial gain and so suburbanites can have yet another chain restaurant in town. It's not yet clear what Roy's plan is, but mooning Dana like this suggests Roy is going to try to manipulate the bully.



Roy knows what Dana's weakness is (cigarettes), so he's able to craft a story that will cause Dana to look like the Mother Paula's vandal by getting Dana onto the site and convincing him to poke around and disturb things. This, Roy seems to hope, will then give Mullet Fingers a distraction and will allow him to carry out whatever he has planned tonight without much risk of encountering the police or Curly. Notably, what Roy is doing is questionably legal and moral—framing someone, even someone as reprehensible as Dana, isn't necessarily legal or kind. But Roy has decided to prioritize the owls and Mullet Fingers for now—and the bigger injustice of Mother Paula's destroying owl burrows.



Curly survives his Friday night and replaces the toilet seat on Saturday. He even picks up a movie at Blockbuster in case the cable goes out again. He's very annoyed, though, when his wife informs him that she and her visiting mother will need his truck. So, alone Saturday night at the site with no vehicle, Curly checks the property. He figures tonight will test how effective his presence is, since the property will look uninhabited without his truck there. Finding no cottonmouth moccasins, Curly baits the rattraps and arranges them around the trailer before going inside to watch *The Last House on Witch Boulevard III*, Kimberly Lou Dixon's first film. It's awful, so Curly turns on a golf tournament and falls asleep.

Curly wakes in the dark to a loud snap coming from outside. Someone is hitting the trailer and cursing outside. Steeling himself, Curly busts out the door and pins a big, lumpy kid (Dana) to the ground. The kid, who has rattraps attached to each sneaker toe, introduces himself as Roy Eberhardt and begs Curly to not call the police. Curly taunts the boy for his previous crimes, but the boy maintains he's never been on the property before. When Curly reaches down to pull the kid up, the boy pulls Curly to the ground, throws dirt into Curly's face, and tries to run away with the rattraps rattling on his toes. He trips in an **owl** burrow before continuing on.

Officer Delinko is glad to have Saturday off after his disastrous Friday night at the emergency room. He figures that Roy knows more about the vandalism at Mother Paula's than he's letting on, but he's also confident that Mr. Eberhardt, with his background in interrogation, will get to the bottom of it. After a day spent watching baseball, Delinko decides to pick up a frozen pizza for dinner, which will let him drive past the Mother Paula's site. Hopefully he can catch the vandals and get off desk duty—and save his reputation at work. But near the site, Delinko sees a hulking teenager (Dana) moving oddly down the road due to rattraps attached to his toes.

Delinko turns on his lights, gets out, and asks the boy (Dana) if they can talk. The boy refuses and says he wants a lawyer, but he's unable to evade Delinko due to the traps on his feet. Moments after Officer Delinko puts the boy in the car and begins to drive, he notices Curly running behind him. Curly praises Delinko: Delinko caught the vandal, whose name is Roy Eberhardt. Delinko says he knows Roy, and this isn't him. Still, he invites Curly to get in so they can go to the station and press charges. Privately, Delinko is ecstatic and looking forward to interrogation—this will be his first chance to try it out in the field. He asks the boy for his name, but Dana just asks for a cigarette.

The brick-and-mortar video rental store Blockbuster was wildly popular and a major cultural establishment in 2002, when Hoot was published. Curly's entire evening is played for comedic effect, but again, his discomfort with the natural world is evident: he purchases huge rattraps to catch tiny mice and keeps a close eye out for venomous snakes, which readers know aren't on the property anymore. That Dixon's first film was so terrible suggests that her claims to fame aren't as meaningful as Chuck Muckle might like to think.



Readers, of course, know that Dana is lying about being Roy—though he is telling the truth, most likely, about having never been on the property before. That Dana is willing and capable of taking on Curly, a grown adult, also highlights his size and his capacity for violence. Meanwhile, Dana tripping in the owl burrow before running away from the scene is yet another reminder that the owls are alive and well on the construction site. Even if they themselves are shy and less visible, their homes are impossible to miss.



Officer Delinko misjudges Roy's relationship with his dad. Sure, Mr. Eberhardt might be skilled at interrogation, but he also trusts his son and has a loving, open relationship with Roy—he's not going to employ the same interrogation tactics on his own child that he might on an adult criminal. And Delinko is still extremely focused on his career and proving himself, which means he's consequently not at all focused on the broader implications of the Mother Paula's construction (including the owl burrows' destruction).



Now that Curly is off the lot and he and Delinko believe they've caught the vandal, the real vandal—Mullet Fingers—is free to do whatever he likes. Roy's plan worked out, and he's been able to help out a friend and the owls. Delinko's youth, inexperience, and naivete shines through when he notes he's looking forward to his first real experience with interrogation. He is almost certainly inflating his confidence and skill level, which doesn't bode well for Dana or for Delinko getting to the bottom of the mystery.



CHAPTER 16

While Roy is eating breakfast on Sunday morning, Mr. Eberhardt tells him someone is at the door with a skateboard. Relieved that it's Garrett and not someone here to get him in trouble, Roy begs to go out for an hour. He shushes Garrett until they're well away from the house and then pretends to be surprised when Garrett says that Dana got arrested last night for trying to break into a trailer. Dana said he was Roy (nobody believed him), and according to Garrett's mom, Dana has a record and will go to jail this time. Roy feels a bit bad, but he also thinks getting Dana thrown in jail is a public service. Roy also feels good skating down the street, knowing nobody is following him.

Curly wakes up on Sunday morning in his own bed, since the Mother Paula's vandal is in custody now. After Officer Delinko drove Curly home last night, Curly regaled his wife and mother-in-law with an exaggerated tale of his heroics. He plans to tell Chuck Muckle the same story tomorrow. While Curly watches a ball game on TV, a Mother Paula's commercial comes on. Seeing Kimberly Lou Dixon reminds Curly that he doesn't remember if his movie is due back at Blockbuster today or tomorrow. To avoid the late fees, he decides to return it today—and on his way to the construction site, Curly realizes he left his gun at the site last night. Losing a gun, especially a loaded one, is serious.

The gun isn't in any of the **owl** burrows, so Curly worriedly checks the trailer. It's not there, and it's not anywhere else on the property. Did the vandal snatch it from Curly and hide it in a bush or something? As Curly's search leads him out to the earthmoving equipment, Curly notices a bare human footprint, followed by another. He follows the tracks to a **bulldozer** and notices that the bulldozer—as well as all the other earthmoving machines—is missing its seat. The operators can't use them if they can't sit down. Did the kid from last night have an accomplice? Chuck Muckle will delight in firing him if Curly can't fix this. Curly can't find the seats anywhere, but he has to pee. Inside one of the portable toilets, Curly checks for alligators in the tank. He finds his gun instead.

Roy is fully aware that he did something morally questionable in framing Dana and getting him arrested. However, Roy ultimately feels good in his choice: he not only helped out Mullet Fingers and the owls, but he also saved himself and countless others from Dana's bullying. It's also worth noting that it's likely that Garrett getting this inside intel from his mom isn't ethical; school privacy laws often prohibit adults from sharing this kind of information, especially with kids. And yet, because Dana himself is so reprehensible, it's again framed as acceptable to speak about Dana and get information about him in this manner.



Curly begins this passage on top of the world, as he believes all his problems disappeared with Dana's arrest. Readers, of course, know that Dana isn't the real vandal, so this (combined with the missing gun) makes it clear that Curly will have to face reality soon. Notice that as Curly contemplates returning to the site to look for his gun, he no longer expresses fear about wild animals or mice. His perceived success is, perhaps, enough to boost his confidence when it comes to the otherwise terrifying natural world.



As Curly searches the property and the owl burrows specifically, it seems as though Curly continues to see the natural world as his enemy. The owls and their burrows aren't future victims of real estate developers; rather, they're possibly out to make Curly's life miserable. On the other hand, discovering the earthmovers are missing their seats symbolically represents that Mother Paula's corporate greed isn't infallible. Yes, the earthmoving equipment can easily and quickly transform the lot into a restaurant—but the machines need a comfortable spot for operators to sit in order to make that happen.



Roy desperately wants to visit Mullet Fingers, but Mrs. Eberhardt insists on a family outing once Roy gets back from skating. The family decides to take an airboat trip into the Everglades. The tour guide points out snakes, raccoons, turtles, bald eagles, otters, and alligators. Roy is struck by how beautiful and abundant the Florida wilderness is—it's just as wild as Montana. That night, Roy feels more connected to Mullet Fingers and understands why he's so against the pancake house. This is about *all* the animals who are at risk of being wiped out. Roy also feels closer to his parents, who, he realizes, are his best friends.

When Mr. Eberhardt and Mrs. Eberhardt come to tell Roy goodnight, Mr. Eberhardt shares that Officer Delinko left a voicemail while they were gone: they arrested Dana at the construction site, and Dana said he was Roy. Roy admits that Garrett already told him, and his mouth gets dry when his dad says it seemed like Delinko thought Roy knows something. He's not ready to tell his parents the whole truth, and thankfully, Mrs. Eberhardt dismisses that notion as ridiculous. They discuss that Dana would never help Mullet Fingers; he's too selfish. Then, as his parents leave the room, Roy asks his dad where he could check up on Mother Paula's building permits. Mr. Eberhardt suggests calling the building department at City Hall.

Roy thinks he's dreaming when he hears someone calling his name. But the person calls louder—and they're under his bed. Beatrice announces herself, climbs out, and admits she's been hiding here all afternoon. Roy loses his temper when Beatrice says it's easy to break in through a sliding door, but he feels terrible when Beatrice admits that things got "hairy" at home. She says that Lonna and Leon had a huge fight and threw things at each other. Roy says Beatrice can stay here for the night, as long as his parents don't find out. After tossing Beatrice bedding and turning out the light, Roy asks about Mullet Fingers and points out that eventually, he's going to get caught. He suggests that if they can't stop Mullet Fingers, they should join him.

This trip to the Everglades is transformative for Roy. It impresses upon him that he can be just as happy here in Florida's wilderness as he was in Montana, for one. But it also makes Roy realize how essential it is that he stand up for wild animals and areas, like Mullet Fingers does. Otherwise, corporations like Mother Paula's—which aren't as interested in protecting the environment—will continue to develop wild areas, thereby displacing and endangering the plants and animals that live there. Finally, this passage also helps explain Roy's views on friendship. He certainly values his friendships with Mullet Fingers and Beatrice, but because he considers his parents such close friends, Roy didn't feel the need to try too hard to make friends his own age when he first arrived in Florida.



Because Roy's parents trust their son, they don't automatically assume that Delinko is right—which certainly works in Roy's favor. It means that rather than having to admit to his parents that he's the reason Dana is in juvie right now, Roy can instead ask his parents for help. This highlights that Roy sees his parents as allies, rather than adversaries (as, for instance, Beatrice and Mullet see their parents).



Roy is upset at first because it seems like Beatrice broke into his house for fun—he's law-abiding and fails to see the humor in breaking and entering. But Roy's perspective changes immediately when he realizes that Beatrice just came looking for a safe place to sleep. Her parents, she implies, aren't safe or trustworthy; even if she doesn't fear getting caught or hurt in the crossfire, she still doesn't want to be around that kind of violence. Roy's friendship, in this sense, provides Beatrice a safe harbor and helps to make her life a bit more bearable.



CHAPTER 17

Bracing himself, Curly picks up the phone. Chuck Muckle is on the line, asking why he can't hear **bulldozers** in the background—it's Monday morning, after all. Begging to not be fired outright, Curly shares his story of Saturday night's events. When Muckle asks, Curly says he didn't report the earthmover seat thefts to the police so it wouldn't end up in the paper. This pleases Muckle—but Muckle is angry that the replacement seats won't arrive until Wednesday. Still, he shares that Wednesday is the last day that Kimberly Lou Dixon can attend the groundbreaking ceremony, so once that's over Curly can start clearing the site. All Curly has to do in the next two days is lock down the construction site.

Curly asks what happens to the **owls**. Muckle reminds him that there are no owls; it's not illegal to destroy empty nests. (Clearly, Curly thinks, nobody told the owls they don't exist.) And if an owl does happen to show up, Curly can tell people it's a chicken or something. Then, Muckle says he'll be accompanying Kimberly Lou Dixon to the groundbreaking ceremony—hopefully he and Curly will have nothing to discuss.

Beatrice is already gone when Roy wakes up. During breakfast, Mr. Eberhardt reads the newspaper article about Dana's arrest; Mrs. Eberhardt is incensed that Dana's name isn't given, since he's under 18. Kids at school are eager to talk about Dana's arrest and pester Roy, but Roy is careful not to gloat or say much. The police have no reason to believe anything Dana says, but Roy doesn't want to get in trouble in case word of the fake cigarettes gets out. After homeroom, Garrett finds Roy and shares that the police caught Dana because Dana couldn't run, due to having ratttraps stuck to his feet. The traps broke three of his toes. Roy doesn't believe it. When he doesn't see Beatrice at lunch, Roy approaches the other soccer girls. One says Beatrice is at the dentist because she fell and broke a tooth. This seems unlikely and concerns Roy.

Once again, Curly is on thin ice with his boss, who is wholly unwilling to sympathize with Curly's plight. Muckle prioritizes finances and public image over anything else, and so he threatens Curly to keep Curly in line. Still, the fact that the seat theft is holding even someone as powerful as Chuck Muckle back highlights that corporate greed and development aren't all-powerful. Even Muckle must rely on the bulldozers and their operators to achieve his goals, which means he's vulnerable to Mullet Fingers's shenanigans.



Notably, this is the first time Curly explicitly acknowledges that owls (and not just their burrows) live on the construction site. He doesn't argue with Muckle, likely because he needs to keep his job and so must keep Muckle happy. But bringing the owls up at all suggests that Curly is developing some amount of sympathy for the animals and would ideally like to know that they're going to come out of this okay.



Again, Roy must continue to police his behavior since he knows he did something morally and legally questionable in framing Dana. Essentially, though he believes he did the right thing for a variety of reasons, he also knows he could get in trouble for his actions, and he'd rather not have that happen. Since Beatrice was in Roy's room until the early hours of the morning, and because Roy knows Beatrice is an athlete and is therefore coordinated, it doesn't quite add up that she just fell badly enough to break a tooth. Especially since Roy knows that her home situation isn't very safe and supportive, he seems to suspect foul play.



At the police station, Officer Delinko and the sergeant enter the captain's office. The captain praises Delinko and asks what Dana has said, but Dana hasn't said much. During the interrogation, Dana was stubborn and confusing, and he changed his story after getting a lawyer. The men also discuss that Dana is a thief, but he doesn't seem like the sort to put gators in a toilet. Still, the captain says he's going to tell people that the Mother Paula's vandal is in custody. Officer Delinko brings up the green shirt he has, which is too small for Dana. However, the captain says they need a warm body and now they have one—and if "certain people" don't make sure no more crimes happen on the Mother Paula's property, they'll be on parking duty from here on out. They just have to make it to Wednesday.

Then, the captain says he has good news: Officer Delinko can resume field work, and the sergeant wrote a letter praising Delinko's work in catching Dana. And because Delinko has experience with the case, he'll be working 12-hour night shifts to surveil the property. If he falls asleep, he'll be fired. Delinko and his sergeant leave the captain's office, and the sergeant says that Delinko does, unfortunately, have to work the nights alone.

Following this, Officer Delinko stops at a souvenir shop and then pulls in at the Juvenile Detention Center to see Dana. Hopefully Dana will admit to at least one of the crimes. Dana accepts a stick of gum from Delinko and says he hasn't been thinking about what he did; that's why he has a lawyer. Delinko offers to speak to the judge if Dana can help him out, and he asks if Dana painted the windows of his squad car. Dana denies it rudely and asks if Delinko has cigarettes in his shopping bag. Delinko says he actually brought Dana a friend and drops something in Dana's lap. Dana shrieks and leaps away. Once he's gone, Delinko studies the rubber alligator. Anyone afraid of a rubber alligator isn't capable of putting real ones in a toilet, so the perpetrator is still out there.

Roy uses his family's computer to research the burrowing **owls**. Finally, he finds what he needs, prints two pages, and then bikes to the Coconut Cove City Hall. Inside, he approaches the building and zoning desk and asks for the Mother Paula's Pancake House file. The clerk, amused, asks Roy to give the property's legal description and then asks Roy if this is for a school project. Roy decides it'd be fine to lie, so he says yes. The clerk brings out an armful of files, but the file with construction permits is checked out. With fake kindness, the clerk suggests Roy choose a different topic for his project, but Roy promises to return tomorrow.

Through this conversation, readers learn how rampant corruption is in the Coconut Cove police department. Everyone in this meeting seems to know, on some level, that Dana isn't the real vandal. And yet, they're so concerned with looking competent to the Mother Paula's corporation that they're all willing to try to charge and imprison Dana, who's essentially innocent (even if he's guilty of various other crimes). And threatening the sergeant and Delinko with parking duty is a threat to end their careers if they don't cooperate, which discourages them from doing the morally right thing (searching for the real vandal).



Threats of being fired for any mistake aside, getting back into the field is exactly what Delinko wants—now, he has the opportunity to prove himself. However, at this point Delinko doesn't seem to question yet whether he should prove himself (that is, whether he should go along with his superiors) or whether he should try to track down the real Mother Paula's vandal.



Here, readers learn that Delinko is actually far more moral than he's let on thus far. In many ways, he seems to agree with Roy: Dana committed a crime and isn't a nice person, but he's not the one responsible for causing mayhem at the Mother Paula's site. Also interesting here is the way that Delinko attempts to befriend Dana a bit in order to get more out of him. While there are many reasons why Dana is hesitant to trust a police officer, the fact remains that he wholly rejects Delinko's overtures, suggesting that friendship isn't something he considers valid or worthwhile.



It's not entirely clear why the clerk is being so unhelpful here, but it is suspicious—is the clerk trying to hide something? Either way, that the permitting file is missing suggests that something is afoot, and Roy picks up on this. This is in part because Roy's parents have taught him to view adults like the clerk as there to help, so when faced with a shockingly unhelpful adult who's being unhelpful for seemingly no reason, Roy recognizes that this isn't normal.



Next, Roy purchases live crickets at a bait shop. After waiting for Mullet Fingers in the junkyard for a few minutes, he bikes to East Oriole and Woodbury. Keeping an eye out for Mullet Fingers and for “clever surprises,” Roy accidentally startles an **owl**. The owl flits to a **bulldozer**—which is missing its seat. Roy guides the crickets out of his box and into the fence, ignoring a honking horn. A truck pulls up before Roy can flee on his bike, and a bald man (Curly) grabs Roy and threatens to send him to jail. When Roy says he was just feeding the owls, Curly’s face turns white. Curly says there are no owls here, just wild chickens. Roy retorts that he saw an owl and he knows why Curly is afraid. Curly finally lets Roy go. Roy bikes home triumphantly, imagining he’s biking up a mountain in Montana.

Some of Roy’s internet research seemingly included looking up what the burrowing owls eat—crickets rather than meatballs. Readers are missing some important information here (such as exactly why Roy thinks he knows what’s scaring Curly), but all signs point to it being illegal to develop land where owls are currently nesting. Roy then becomes a liability to Curly and the Mother Paula’s corporation, as he seems to be the only one willing and able to do the research and check that the company is following all the rules. It seems possible that Roy will be able to save the owls by exposing the pancake house’s corruption.



CHAPTER 18

Around midnight, Curly regales Officer Delinko with his tale about catching Roy earlier (though he doesn’t give Roy’s name). Both men are sure the real vandal is still on the loose for various reasons, none of which they share with the other. When Officer Delinko asks where the attack dogs went, Curly says they went back to Berlin and says he’s going to bed. He warns Delinko not to fall asleep tonight. Blushing, Delinko begins to walk the property. He brought five thermoses of coffee and amuses himself by daydreaming about becoming a detective. As he dreams about his unmarked detective’s car and a shoulder holster, Delinko trips and somersaults—he stepped in another **owl** burrow.

It’s worth noting that Curly and Delinko remaining at the site overnight does acknowledge that plenty of people believe that the Mother Paula’s vandal is still out there. Still, Delinko in particular remains in a moral gray area: he’s going along with keeping Dana in custody while also continuing to search for the real perpetrator. And his focus remains, as ever, on moving up in the ranks. Symbolically, it suggests the owls might get in the way of that dream when Delinko trips in the owl burrow while daydreaming about it.



Officer Delinko’s embarrassed muttering gets an unexpected response: a “Heh.” Delinko waves his flashlight around as the sound persists. Finally, he points his flashlight down and in the **owl** burrow is a baby owl. It opens its beak expectantly. The bird is so perfect and fascinating, Delinko laughs, dims his flashlight, and tell the owl he won’t hurt it. Overhead, Delinko notices the owl parents circling and making anxious noises. He backs away and watches them disappear into the burrow—and he backs into a **bulldozer**. Delinko doesn’t notice the bulldozer is missing its seat. Instead, he looks from the bulldozer to the owl burrow, realizing for the first time what will happen to the owls if he does his job right.

Just like Roy earlier in the novel, Delinko finally understands that developing the site into a pancake house means that the owl burrows will be destroyed—and this baby owl, perhaps, will die in the process. While Delinko has seemed appreciative of nature before, the baby owl is also framed as unusually cute and engaging. It’s the fact that the owl is so small, adorable, and clearly in need of protection that causes Delinko to realize that he has a responsibility to protect it—and that perhaps, doing his job “right” means letting the vandalism continue.



Mr. Eberhardt was working late Monday night, so Roy didn't get to tell him about the missing Mother Paula's building permits. On Tuesday morning, Roy is shocked when he sits down for breakfast and sees the newspaper ad announcing the groundbreaking ceremony the following day at noon. Dejected, Roy abandons his cereal. Mr. Eberhardt offers Roy his newspaper—it's current events day in Mr. Ryan's class—and Mrs. Eberhardt offers to drive Roy to school. Roy refuses, but he asks to borrow her camera for a school project. Since he's early, he then jogs all the way to Beatrice's house. Beatrice claps a hand over Roy's mouth when she opens the door to his knocking and leads him to the bus stop.

Sure enough, Beatrice didn't break a tooth in a fall—she broke it biting a ring off Lonna's toe. The ring contained a topaz stone that Beatrice's mother left, and Lonna stole it from Leon. Roy is shocked, but Beatrice asks what's going on that has Roy so upset. She shakes her head when Roy shows her the paper and isn't sure if Mullet Fingers knows about the groundbreaking ceremony yet. She explains that things got really bad on Sunday: Mullet Fingers was chatting with Leon and waiting for Beatrice to get him clean clothes when Lonna showed up and threw a tantrum. Mullet Fingers ran away, Lonna and Leon got in a huge fight (Leon wants Mullet Fingers to come home, but Lonna said Mullet Fingers is "a bad seed"), and things are still tense. Beatrice says she'll keep sleeping at home, though; it makes Leon feel better.

Beatrice chats with her soccer teammates at the bus stop, but she joins Roy on the bus. They discuss what to do to help Mullet Fingers, and Roy says he knows how to plan this so they don't end up in juvie. He shows her Mrs. Eberhardt's camera and tells Beatrice his plan.

Miss Hennepin summons Roy to the office during homeroom to ask about what happened at the hospital with Mullet Fingers on Friday. In a flat tone, Roy shares he doesn't know the running boy's real name, but he's not a student at Trace Middle. Clearly annoyed, Miss Hennepin says it's illegal for kids to not go to school, and the police who search for truants are very good at their jobs. This makes Roy anxious, but he stays silent. Miss Hennepin refuses to believe that Roy kindly let the boy use his name to get treatment for nasty dog bites, but she lets Roy go anyway.

Though Roy seemed hopeful yesterday, learning about the groundbreaking ceremony tells him that he is, potentially, out of luck. Still, Roy remains committed to his cause and is even willing to lie to his parents again to hopefully save the owls—it's almost certainly a lie that he needs the camera for school. Once more, Roy compromises on what he's been taught is right and wrong in order to accomplish what he knows is right (that is, saving the owls).



It's framed as a bit of a tragedy that Beatrice so easily minimizes Lonna's inappropriate behavior. This shows Roy how unfortunately common it is for Lonna to be rude to Beatrice, and how common it is for Beatrice to have to actually fight back against her stepmother. It's even more tragic, then, as Beatrice explains how the fight over the weekend came to pass. Leon reads as well-meaning but impotent, which is certainly better than Lonna but still leaves Beatrice functionally alone. In many ways, his behavior makes Beatrice the only real adult in the house—especially since she implies that Leon essentially counts on her protection from his wife.



Though Roy isn't above doing things that are morally and legally questionable (such as framing Dana), his main goal remains staying out of jail and on the right side of the law.



Miss Hennepin seems to view most, if not all, kids as mean and selfish. But interestingly, she also seems to recognize that Roy isn't like that, at least not entirely. So while she doesn't believe he did a purely altruistic thing in getting Mullet Fingers help at the hospital, she does try to use how much he cares about Mullet Fingers staying away from law enforcement to intimidate Roy.



During lunch, Roy borrows Garrett's bike and rides to the junkyard. Mullet Fingers reads the newspaper announcement calmly and refuses to let Roy and Beatrice help. He doesn't believe Roy when Roy pulls out Mrs. Eberhardt's camera and says they can stop construction altogether if they can just get one picture of an **owl**. Skeptical, Mullet Fingers shoves Roy out of the ice cream truck and says he doesn't need help. But when Roy turns around, Mullet Fingers is still holding the camera. Roy tells Mullet Fingers to keep it, trying hard not to cry.

Though there are several things in the newspaper that would make great subjects for current events, when it's Roy's turn to speak to Mr. Ryan's class, he tells them that Coconut Cove is getting a Mother Paula's Pancake House. He says that he was as excited as anyone else—until a friend took him to the building site and showed him a tiny burrowing **owl**. Gently, Mr. Ryan says this doesn't sound like current events, but Roy says it is: they're going to start **bulldozing** tomorrow after a big party. The adult owls might survive, or they might stay in their burrows and die with their babies. Roy says it's not legal: the owls are protected and it's illegal to disturb burrows without special permits. The file is missing from city hall, and the foreman has lied to Roy that there aren't any owls on the property.

Roy says he's going to the groundbreaking tomorrow at lunch. Mr. Ryan notes that students can't leave school, so Roy says he'll get a note from his parents. Mr. Ryan smiles and says that's great. In closing, Roy says that they read in class about ordinary people who fought for what they believed in. The **owls** are tiny and everyone likes pancakes, but what's happening is wrong.

CHAPTER 19

It's just after dusk at the construction site, and Officer Delinko admits to Curly that he's worried about the **owls**. Curly maintains that there are no owls—and he suggests Delinko stop thinking about it. That's how he manages. He shares that the pancake company knows, but there's nothing they can do and it's not their problem anyway. For the next few hours, Delinko patrols the property and checks the burrows for owls. He sees none; hopefully they've all left. After midnight, Curly calls for Delinko and says he heard someone climb the fence. Delinko finds nothing and no one on the property, but he does see what looks like camera flashes. He figures it's just heat lightning.

Whether Mullet Fingers will go along with Roy's plan isn't entirely clear at this point. However, note that he is trying to be noble and help keep his stepsister and friend out of trouble; this is why he says, at least, that he won't let Roy help. Roy's plan presumably centers on proving that the owls indeed exist at the construction site—implying that it is illegal to develop land where owls are nesting.



Initially, Mr. Ryan seems to operate on the assumption that "current events" don't happen close to home. But as Roy explains what's going on with the owls and the pancake house, he makes the case that current events are happening everywhere—and that it's important to care about what's going on in one's community. He also very clearly lays out why it's important to care about the owls, both in a legal sense and a moral sense. It's illegal to disturb the burrows, but he also insists that it's immoral to kill baby owls just so Coconut Cove suburbanites have yet another chain restaurant.



Again, Roy makes the case that current events do indeed happen close to home: as he notes, "ordinary people" fight for what they believe is right all the time. With this, he insists that peaceful protest—which in the U.S. is a right guaranteed in the constitution—is both an effective and necessary way to create change and fight for what's right.



Curly won't say it in so many words, but both he and Mother Paula's know that there are owls on the property and that they're doing something illegal by pushing the construction project forward. When Curly insists there's nothing he and Delinko can do, it casts him as Roy's exact opposite: Roy remains hopeful, while Curly has given up (and perhaps is simply prioritizing his paycheck over the owls). It's unclear at this point if Delinko is purposefully not finding whoever climbed the fence and writing off the camera flashes as heat lightning—if Delinko is doing these things on purpose, it suggests that Curly is wrong, and it is possible for Delinko to do something to stop the construction project. In this case, that seems to be letting Mullet Fingers onto the property to get photos of the owls.



At breakfast the next morning, Roy asks Mrs. Eberhardt if he can leave school and attend the Mother Paula's groundbreaking at lunch. To his surprise, she refuses and says they can ask Mr. Eberhardt—Roy figures he's not going. But Mr. Eberhardt says yes, so long as Roy behaves. He drives his son and Roy's bike to school, warning Roy to be safe and smart. When Roy meets up with Beatrice, she also got a note. She offers Roy Mrs. Eberhardt's camera, which Mullet Fingers dropped off late last night. He said he got the pictures, but the camera was too complicated for Beatrice to check. Roy is ecstatic—this might actually work.

Roy clearly expected his mom to be easily swayed and his dad to be the opposite. However, Mr. Eberhardt shows Roy through his support for Roy's protest that he wants his son to learn how to legally, effectively, and safely protest. This means following the rules (like getting a note to leave school). Notably, Mr. Eberhardt allows Roy a lot of independence in this passage; Roy clearly plans to bike to the protest rather than have a parent drive him, for instance. Thanks to his parents' support, Roy feels comfortable doing this—and in guiding Beatrice, it seems, to do the same.



At 10:45, a limousine pulls up at East Oriole and Woodbury. A tall, well-dressed man with silver hair and sunglasses gets out and snaps his fingers at Officer Delinko, who doesn't notice. Delinko is just ready to go home; he's been here for 14 hours, since he stayed while Curly went home to shower. He has no interest in being here for the ceremony, but when the man finally speaks to Delinko, Delinko walks over. The man introduces himself as Chuck E. Muckle, a vice president of something at Mother Paula's, and says he needs assistance. Delinko offers to call for another unit, but Muckle says Kimberly Lou Dixon is in the limo. He explains to Delinko exactly who Miss Dixon is and says she urgently needs a bathroom. Officer Delinko gestures toward Curly's trailer.

Delinko appears physically and emotionally drained. Whether he purposefully wrote things off last night or not, he now seems to agree with Curly that he can't do anything to help the owls this late in the game. Curly, for his part, seems totally happy to be complicit (and keep his job), given that he's gone home to freshen up for the ceremony. Muckle's first appearance in the flesh gives the impression that he thinks of himself as all-powerful, and he clearly likes to lord that power over others. He shows Delinko next to no respect and seems not to care that Delinko spent all night surveilling Muckle's own property.



Kimberly Lou Dixon gets out of the limo. Officer Delinko is struck by how young and beautiful she is—but then she opens her mouth to announce she's "gotta tinkle," and her voice is sandpapery. When Curly opens the door of his trailer, he's dumbstruck. Dixon brushes past him as Officer Delinko explains what's going on. The dreamy look on Curly's face disappears as Chuck Muckle appears in the doorway. Muckle refuses to shake Curly's hand and confirms that everything is ready for the event. Curly says he and Delinko have been watching the property day and night since Sunday, though he also reveals that Delinko is the officer who fell asleep. Delinko apologizes, annoyed, and Curly says that Delinko is the one who helped him catch the vandal the other night.

Muckle continues to lord his power over people whom he considers inferior. Even though Curly and Delinko have been working hard to lock down the construction site (something that benefits Muckle more than it really helps Curly or Delinko), Muckle continues to write off their sacrifices and even refuses to show Curly any respect or acknowledgement, as by shaking his hand. This further establishes Muckle as a person who cares about profit over anything (or anyone) else—including the owls.



Before Officer Delinko can share what actually happened when he caught Dana, Kimberly Lou Dixon hurtles out of the bathroom, shouting about all the roaches. Curly says they're crickets; he's not sure where they came from. He introduces himself to Miss Dixon and says he's seen all her movies and is excited to see her next one. She pats him on the head—she's only been in two movies—and says she's working on her Oscar speech for the next one. Glancing at her watch, she asks one of the men to fetch her suitcase so she can get into her Mother Paula getup.

The crickets, presumably, came from Roy the other night. While the narrative plays this moment mostly for the humor, that the crickets are causing mayhem indicates that Roy does have the power to at least annoy adults who otherwise seem extremely powerful. And as with Curly, Dixon's scared reaction to the crickets suggests that she's not going to be sympathetic to the owls' plight, as she's frightened of the natural world.



CHAPTER 20

A smaller limo brings Coconut Cove's mayor, the head of the chamber of commerce, and Councilman Bruce Grandy to the site, while news vans start arriving soon after. Roy and Beatrice arrive just before noon, Mrs. Eberhardt's camera in Roy's backpack. To their surprise, half of Mr. Ryan's history class and a bunch of parents are already there. And moments later, a Trace Middle School Athletic Department van pulls up with Beatrice's soccer teammates, all of whom have posters. There's no sign of Mullet Fingers or of the **owls**. The owls are probably too scared with all the commotion.

At 12:15, Officer Delinko, Curly, Chuck Muckle, and Kimberly Lou Dixon as Mother Paula come out of the construction trailer. Chuck Muckle clearly thinks he's very cool, and he introduces important people in city government to the crowd. He says he's delighted to announce the 469th Mother Paula's location, and he insists Mother Paula will be a good friend and neighbor to everyone in Coconut Cove. At this, Roy mutters that that might be true—unless you're an **owl**. Muckle attempts to make a joke and when no one laughs, he asks Mother Paula to join him.

Chuck Muckle, Kimberly Lou Dixon, and the local representatives each accept a gold-painted shovel and take a scoop of sand. Once the cameras are done flashing, Muckle tosses his shovel down and says that Mother Paula has some things to say. Taking the microphone, Miss Dixon says that she'll be back in the spring for the grand opening, but Roy interrupts. In a shout, he says she *won't* be back for the opening. He waves at Mother Paula and says that if she hurts an **owl**, he'll never eat her pancakes again. Chuck Muckle dives for the megaphone, but Dixon elbows him aside and asks Roy to explain. Roy points to all the holes and says they're owl burrows.

By now, kids are chanting, and Beatrice's teammates are displaying signs that read "Mother Paula doesn't give a hoot about **owls**" and "Bird killers go home!" As Kimberly Lou Dixon says she doesn't want to hurt owls, Chuck Muckle snatches the megaphone and tells Roy to get his facts straight: there aren't owls here. Roy says he has proof and pulls out the camera. Muckle's face turns gray. Roy scrolls through the photos Mullet Fingers took, his heart sinking. Most of them are of fingers or a bare foot. Finally, Roy gets to one that's clearly an owl, though it's barely identifiable as such. He offers the camera to Muckle, who insists it's a lump of mud. Several people look at the photo, but Roy can tell that nobody believes him.

That so many local officials are attending the groundbreaking, along with the news crews, points out how hard Muckle has worked to make this into a major event. However, readers know that Roy, his classmates, and the parents in attendance are likely here to protest rather than celebrate a new pancake house in town. Muckle, in other words, is in for a surprise. While it makes sense that the owls themselves aren't out and about right now, their absence also suggests there could be some problems—the burrows, at the moment, likely look uninhabited to uninformed eyes.



Roy, of course, is right: Mother Paula's isn't going to be a good friend to Coconut Cove's wild, non-human residents like the owls. And this is because the pancake company prioritizes profits over doing what's right and moral. When nobody laughs at Muckle's jokes, it suggests that there are perhaps more people in the crowd who agree with Roy than even Roy realizes. He has possibly gotten more people excited about the owls simply by speaking up to Mr. Ryan's class yesterday.



Dixon, it seems, genuinely has no idea that there are burrowing owls on the construction site—and Muckle's behavior suggests he'd like to keep it that way. He seems to suspect that deceiving Dixon is the only way to keep her in line and willing to represent the Mother Paula's corporation. However, note that she does elbow Muckle aside and seem to genuinely want to hear what Roy has to say. She and Roy's friends, it seems, are the only ones willing to stand up to Muckle and seek out the truth.



Muckle's suddenly gray face is telling: if he didn't already know there are owls on the site, he at least knows that proof of owls means he can't build here. That Roy is able to cause this kind of reaction in Muckle highlights how much power he has, even as a kid. All it takes, the novel suggests, is knowing what the law is and how to make a legal but loud fuss about those who aren't complying to effect change. Unfortunately for Roy, the photos themselves aren't especially useful—but still, this may pique enough interest that better photographers might swoop in to save the day.



Chuck Muckle thanks the crowd for coming and for being patient. He promises to be back in the spring for breakfast. But a voice says this isn't over. Roy, Beatrice, and the crowd look to the voice, which is coming from a head sticking out of the ground. It's Mullet Fingers, whose body is squeezed into an owl burrow and who has a string in his mouth. The string is tied to a big tin bucket nearby. Smiling at the adults, Mullet Fingers says if they're going to bury the birds, they'll have to bury him too. Kimberly Lou Dixon says again she doesn't want to hurt birds as Muckle commands Officer Delinko to arrest Mullet Fingers. Officer Delinko mildly notes that this is a public event; he can't arrest Mullet Fingers without arresting everyone else, too.

Enraged, Chuck Muckle says he'll speak to the captain about Officer Delinko. Turning to Curly, he asks the foreman to dig Mullet Fingers up. Mullet Fingers says that's not a good idea and asks Roy to peek in the bucket. Though Roy realizes the snakes in the bucket are rubber, he says the cottonmouth moccasins in the bucket look angry. When Curly continues to refuse to move Mullet Fingers, Muckle fires him. Delinko refuses to shoot the snakes and instead approaches Mullet Fingers. Mullet Fingers responds with "no comment" as Delinko asks if Mullet Fingers painted his car, ran from the hospital, and left the shirt on his cruiser. When the officer asks to look in the bucket, Mullet Fingers says it's his funeral. Roy hisses to Beatrice that the snakes aren't real—but Officer Delinko tells Muckle to negotiate with Mullet Fingers. The snakes, he says, are real.

Even angrier now, Chuck Muckle says he doesn't negotiate with kids. He picks up his shovel, races forward, and begins hacking at the bucket's contents. He doesn't stop until the rubber snakes are in pieces and the reporters have gotten lots of humiliating pictures of him. Curly marvels that the snakes are fake as Muckle points his shovel at Mullet Fingers. Roy leaps between Muckle and Mullet Fingers. As Muckle threatens to make Curly get the backhoe, Beatrice, Garrett and his skating friends, the soccer team, and every other kid in attendance joins him and links arms to protect Mullet Fingers. A cameraman announces that the protest is being broadcast live, while photographers get pictures of Muckle's distraught face. As adults drift away, Beatrice leads the kids in singing "This Land Is Your Land."

Mullet Fingers takes Roy's protest to another level by squeezing himself into an owl hole and refusing to move. He draws on a rich history of sit-ins (as, for instance, during the Civil Rights movement) and other forms of peaceful yet physical protest as he does this. Officer Delinko turns into an unlikely ally as he refuses to arrest Mullet Fingers. Delinko, for his part, now cares about the owls more than he cares about helping the Mother Paula's corporation get ahead. And as an officer, he too knows how to use the law to his advantage and give Mullet Fingers and Roy a boost.



Perhaps emboldened by realizing how many people support the owls, Delinko and even Curly continue to position themselves as allies to the cause. Muckle's intimidation and bullying is no longer working for him—offering hope that the pro-owl contingency will prevail. Since Delinko has been annoyed with Mullet Fingers for some time and seems to realize he's finally found the real vandal, it's significant that he plays along with the fake snakes here. This speaks to how much Delinko supports the cause, and it suggests that he's decided it's more important to fight for the owls than it is to arrest Mullet Fingers for petty crimes (which Mullet Fingers carried out for a good cause).



Muckle creates some awful publicity for himself and for the company by losing his temper and threatening to hurt Mullet Fingers—this behavior cuts into the Mother Paula's corporation's family-friendly image. It also may buy Roy and Mullet Fingers more time to prove that the company is doing something illegal by trying to build on active burrows. And importantly, Roy and his friends don't really have to do much to elicit this kind of a reaction. As Delinko noted earlier, none of them are doing anything illegal—so Muckle looks unhinged and untrustworthy, and his company's illegal attempts to develop are exposed.



Shockingly, Kimberly Lou Dixon asks to join and squeezes in between Roy and Garrett. The protest goes on for another hour. More news crews arrive, as do more police officers—who refuse Chuck Muckle’s demand that they cuff a bunch of middle school kids. Things only get strange when Lonna Leep shows up after spotting Mullet Fingers on the news. She’s dressed like she’s at a party and tells reporters that she’s so proud of her brave son. Beatrice tells the circle of kids to not let Lonna through to Mullet Fingers, and the standoff only ends when Garrett makes a loud fake fart noise. Just then, a small **owl** dives into the middle of the circle, landing on Mullet Fingers’s head. Mullet Fingers assures the owl it’s safe.

As a celebrity, Dixon can add some pizzazz and name recognition to Roy and his classmates’ protest. Lonna’s attempt to make it seem like everything is fine between her and Mullet Fingers is clearly a bid for attention; her son is only useful to her as long as he can help her achieve fame and fortune. The owl’s appearance, meanwhile, makes it impossible to ignore that there are indeed burrowing owls on the construction site. It also shows the protesting kids exactly what they’re fighting for, which may help keep the momentum going.



CHAPTER 21

The next morning, Roy and Mrs. Eberhardt clip photos and articles out of the newspaper and discover Mullet Fingers’s real name: Napoleon Bridger. Roy says Mullet Fingers is back with Leon and Lonna for now, at least. At the protest, the uninformed police officers let Lonna close to her son, and a picture of her hugging him made the front page. Mrs. Eberhardt suggests that Lonna and Mullet Fingers’s relationship might improve, but Roy says she’s just using her son to get on TV. Before Roy leaves for school, Mrs. Eberhardt says, Mr. Eberhardt wants to see him. She assures Roy he’s not in trouble; he and Beatrice didn’t break laws or hurt anyone yesterday. They just stood up for what’s right and Mr. Eberhardt respects that.

Roy seems to find his mom’s hope for Mullet Fingers and Lonna’s relationship understandable but totally unrealistic. He fully realizes that not all kids have such supportive parents like he does, and he’s seen firsthand that the Leep parents are particularly unsupportive and even dangerous. However, Mrs. Eberhardt does show readers again how she and her husband have prepared Roy to be independent. They’ve taught him to be moral and to know that he can ask for help—which allows Roy to confidently make his own choices, such as to fight for the owls.



Roy asks if Mother Paula’s is still going to build the pancake house. Mrs. Eberhardt doesn’t know, but she shares that Chuck Muckle strangled a reporter after Roy went back to school. She says she and Mr. Eberhardt had to disconnect the phone already this morning to escape the reporters, but Roy shouldn’t feel bad—she’s making a scrapbook to show Roy’s kids and grandkids. Privately, Roy thinks he’d rather show them the **owls**. Just then, Mr. Eberhardt asks Roy to get the door. The woman on the steps introduces herself as Kelly Colfax, a reporter. Noticing the bruises on her neck, Roy figures she’s the one Chuck Muckle tried to choke. Roy doesn’t want to be rude, but he doesn’t want to talk, either. He finally says that he just wanted to stand up for the owls.

As Roy sees it, his mom is prioritizing the wrong thing. The protest itself is beside the point, though hopefully it’ll make a difference and stop the construction project. But the real goal, to Roy, is saving the owls and their habitat—both because the owls deserve to live, and because this will allow future generations of Floridians to admire and get excited about them, too. That Muckle choked this reporter draws a connection between the reporter and Roy, whom Dana choked earlier. It helps establish her as a trustworthy person, even if Roy doesn’t exactly want to chat.



Mr. Eberhardt appears behind Roy and asks for a word with his son. Closing the front door, Mr. Eberhardt tells Roy he doesn't have to say anything to the reporters—but he should give Kelly Colfax this. He offers Roy a folder, which Roy deduces is the file from City Hall that he couldn't check out earlier this week. Mr. Eberhardt explains that he checked it out, copied every page, and took them to environmental lawyers. The Mother Paula's corporation *didn't* have the appropriate permit. Roy asks why his dad wants this file to go to the reporter instead of the Justice Department. Mr. Eberhardt tells Roy that there's a very important file missing from the stack.

Note how Mr. Eberhardt handles giving Roy advice. He makes it clear that Roy is the one who gets to choose to talk to Kelly or not—he's not going to step in and force her to go away, even if Roy is uncomfortable. The implication is that while he sees Roy as capable, Roy can always ask for help if he needs it. Then, the revelation that Mr. Eberhardt has been working behind the scenes to help the owls helps Roy feel even more supported. It also explains why Mr. Eberhardt was so keen for Roy to go to the groundbreaking yesterday: he knew his son was right.



Roy opens the door again with a smile and hands Kelly Colfax the file. He explains that the Environmental Impact Statement is missing—which means either that Mother Paula's didn't file one, or they lost it on purpose. She hugs the folder and thanks Roy, but Roy tells her to thank Mr. Eberhardt. Clearly, he cares about the **owls** too.

In turning the files over to the media, Mr. Eberhardt shows that he knows how powerful public opinion can be. It's one thing for the Justice Department to step in and prosecute, but it's another thing for newspapers and the evening news to call out the Mother Paula's corporation. A robust media, Mr. Eberhardt implies, is another important factor in keeping greedy corporations in line.



EPILOGUE

The Mother Paula's story turns into a huge scandal over the next few weeks. It comes out that the company *did* complete the Environmental Impact Statement, and it documented three pairs of nesting **owls**. This means the company couldn't build without serious legal issues and a public relations scandal. Later, the report turns up in Councilman Bruce Grandy's golf bag, along with \$4,500. The councilman denies that the money was a bribe and then hires an expensive lawyer.

Ultimately, the Mother Paula's corporation's corruption comes to light: when it turned out they couldn't legally build in Coconut Cove, they bribed a local government official to hide the evidence and proceeded anyway. The company, as well as Councilman Grandy, were willing to put profits over what the novel suggests is right: doing what's right for the environment and its animals.



Kimberly Lou Dixon cancels her contract with Mother Paula's and publicizes her lifetime Audubon Society membership. Mrs. Eberhardt tracks the actress's meteoric rise following this—Miss Dixon is even booked to do a movie with Adam Sandler. Meanwhile, Mother Paula's stock value tanks. Chuck Muckle is demoted and is forced to take an anger management class, but he later quits his job to become a cruise director. Eventually, Mother Paula's cancels the Coconut Cove location plans.

Officially incorporated in 1905, the Audubon Society is a nonprofit that advocates specifically for birds. This helps explain why Dixon was so eager to join the protest: as a member, she's given money to an organization that would no doubt support Roy and his protest. As her star rises, the Mother Paula's corporation suffers, suggesting that at least in this context, doing the morally right thing will in fact pay off.



Now, everyone cares about the **owls**. NBC and CBS send crews to Trace Middle School to interview students and faculty—Roy is amused to hear from Garrett that Miss Hennepin told the crews that she encouraged kids to protest. One evening, Mrs. Eberhardt fetches Roy to come watch the news just as the Mother Paula’s president announces plans to preserve the Coconut Cove property as an owl sanctuary and make a donation to the Nature Conservancy. He says his company is committed to the environment and he regrets his employees’ “careless actions,” but Roy says he’s just lying to make himself look good. Mr. Eberhardt agrees, and Roy points out that he doesn’t even deserve all this credit. Mullet Fingers does.

After the protest, Mullet Fingers lasted two days at home. Lonna spent that time trying to get reporters to pay attention to her, so Beatrice helped her brother escape while Lonna and Leon were fighting. Unfortunately, a neighbor who saw Mullet Fingers climb out the window reported a burglary to police, so they caught and arrested him—Lonna told the police he’d stolen her jewelry. Mullet Fingers lasted 17 hours in juvenile detention before he broke out with none other than Dana Matherson’s help. Roy knows that Mullet Fingers only invited Dana to join him in their escape because Dana clearly isn’t fit—he’s a great decoy. Mullet Fingers was able to slip away and the police didn’t much care. Now, Roy knows he won’t see the boy again unless Mullet Fingers wants to make contact.

Back in the present, Roy assures Mrs. Eberhardt that Mullet Fingers will be okay, and Mr. Eberhardt suggests they go for a drive. They drive to the corner of East Oriole and Woodbury, where they join Officer Delinko and Curly to watch for **owls**. Delinko has recently been recognized for helping recapture Dana, while Curly has been driving his wife and mother-in-law around. The bird watchers stand in silence and gaze at the empty lot. Crickets appear as the sun sets and before long, owls emerge from the burrows. Even Curly admits that they’re cute.

On a Saturday after the Mother Paula’s scandal has died down, Roy attends one of Beatrice’s soccer games. He doesn’t miss Montana so much anymore, though he does miss real seasons. The heat reminds him of a different afternoon, so Roy slips away and rides his bike to the *Molly Bell*. He takes off his sneakers and swims out to the top of the pilot house, where he soon sees an osprey and then tarpon in the water. On his belly, Roy watches the water seem to boil—the mullet are coming. Roy attempts to snatch a fish out of the water, and he even feels one in his hand. But the fish squeezes free. Roy is convinced it’s impossible to catch one.

Over the course of the novel, Roy has become increasingly adept at recognizing when adults are being hypocritical. So, he realizes Miss Hennepin is just trying to make the school look good and righteous, and the Mother Paula’s president is trying to smooth over the public perception that the company doesn’t care about the environment. Still, Roy seems aware that at least in this context, what’s more important is the outcome: the owls are safe, and Roy and his classmates aren’t in trouble at school.



Once again, without supportive adults at home, Beatrice is forced to step up into an adult role and help Mullet Fingers herself. Sadly, though, this passage highlights how much power adults tend to have over children, even when those adults are wrong or cruel: Lonna can get her own son imprisoned on false charges because no one is going to take Beatrice or Mullet Fingers’s word over an adult’s. It’s thus extremely satisfying that Mullet Fingers was able to use and frame Dana in much the same way Roy did earlier and escape with his help.



When even Officer Delinko and Curly are at the owl sanctuary and admit that the owls are cute, the novel ends by highlighting how preserving natural areas can benefit people—even those, like Curly and Delinko, who once stood to gain from the construction project. The owls are adorable, and they delight those lucky enough to catch a glimpse of them. They’re not entertainment, per se, but the novel nevertheless suggests their presence is entertaining and has a positive effect on people’s lives.



Roy is feeling more and more at home in Florida. He has friends now, as evidenced by his coming to Beatrice’s soccer game. He’s also becoming increasingly appreciative of Florida’s wildlife offerings. Again, the novel links Roy feeling at home to how he feels about nature wherever he happens to be. Attempting to catch the mullet, like Mullet Fingers, suggests that Roy now genuinely wants to integrate into his new home and have a closer relationship with Florida’s wild animals and spaces.



From the mangroves, Roy hears what sounds like a laugh and he calls for Mullet Fingers. No one answers, so Roy returns to shore. He dresses, but he can only find one shoe. The other, he discovers, is in the shallows and is tied to a root. Inside is a mullet. Roy gently lets the mullet go and listens intently, but Mullet Fingers is gone. It is possible to catch mullet. Roy will just have to come try again, like a “real Florida boy.”

In the novel's final passage, Roy truly dedicates himself to becoming a “real Florida boy.” Again, he connects this transformation to getting more comfortable with Florida's wilderness—being able to catch a mullet with his bare hands, he implies, will mean he belongs here. The natural world, in this sense, will continue to delight and intrigue Roy—and offer him new ways to feel like he belongs, wherever his family moves next.





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