

Medicine Walk



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD WAGAMESE

Richard Wagamese was a Canadian Ojibway author. Wagamese's childhood was troubled: when he was two years old, he and his three siblings were left at home while their parents went to a nearby town to drink. After running out of food, the children wandered to a railroad station where a policeman found them. Wagamese then spent his childhood in a series of Ontario foster homes before being adopted by a non-native family in St. Catharines. The family abused him and didn't allow him to contact his birth family. At 16, he left home in hopes of reconnecting with his native culture. While living on the streets, he abused drugs and alcohol and spent time in jail. At the same time, he took refuge in public libraries, both for shelter and for his growing love of reading and learning. He reunited with his First Nations family when he was 23, and he finally began to experience more of his native culture. Wagamese's first writing job was for the First Nations newspaper *New Breed*. He won numerous awards for his journalism. He wrote his first novel, *Keeper 'n Me*, in 1994. He went on to write five other novels, a volume of poetry, and nonfiction works, including two memoirs. Married and divorced three times, Wagamese had two sons and was estranged from one of them. At the time of his death at 61, he was engaged to be married again. Wagamese was the recipient of many honors for his literary contributions, including the Burt Award for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Ojibway (also spelled Ojibwe and sometimes anglicized as Chippewa) are the second-largest First Nations grouping in Canada, after the Cree. They are part of a larger grouping of indigenous people known as the Anishinaabeg. Though the United States has the largest Ojibway population, Ojibway people can be found across Canada, from Quebec to British Columbia. In the 17th century, many Ojibwe people were congregated around the Great Lakes in Ontario, but they began to disperse northward and westward. The people survived by hunting large game, gathering (especially wild rice and maple syrup), and fishing. Ojibway spiritual beliefs were (and are) strongly focused on the spirits which are understood to fill the natural world. From the 18th century onward, the European fur trade disrupted traditional Ojibway life in various ways, with traditional hunting activities marginalized as more people survived by hunting for fur to trade. Canadian residential schools also contributed to the loss of Ojibway cultural knowledge (a subject Wagamese addresses in [Indian](#)

[Horse](#)). Today, Canada has a population of at least 160,000 Ojibway in about 200 bands.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Anishinaabe writer Waubgeshig Rice, author of the 2018 dystopian novel [Moon of the Crusted Snow](#), received personal encouragement from Wagamese early in his writing career. Another recent novel tracing themes of fatherhood, cultural identity, and storytelling is Paulette Giles's [News of the World](#) (2016). Wagamese's best-known novel is [Indian Horse](#) (2012), the story of a First Nations boy who becomes a talented hockey player after surviving Canada's residential school system. His last—and unfinished—novel was [Starlight](#) (2018), a sequel to [Medicine Walk](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Medicine Walk*
- **Where Written:** Canada
- **When Published:** 2014
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** British Columbia, Canada
- **Climax:** Eldon Starlight's death and burial
- **Antagonist:** Eldon Starlight
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

New Name. After reuniting with his biological family in his early 20s, Wagamese told his story to an Ojibway elder who gave him the name *Mushkotay Beezheekee Anakwat*, which means Buffalo Cloud. The elder told Wagamese that his calling was to tell stories.

New Medium. In 2017, Wagamese's novel [Indian Horse](#) was adapted into film. The movie version of [Indian Horse](#) premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival before its theatrical release the following year. Clint Eastwood was an executive producer.



PLOT SUMMARY

Sixteen-year-old Franklin Starlight—referred to as “the kid”—saddles his old mare for a trip over the mountains to the mill town of Parson's Gap, British Columbia. His father Eldon has asked him to come, but he doesn't know why. His guardian,

the old man, warns him that his father will be very sick, perhaps dying, and reminds him that Eldon is dishonest.

When the kid reaches Parson's Gap, he finds his father in a broken-down rooming house. Eldon takes the kid out for dinner and reveals that he wants the kid to take him into the backcountry to bury him there. (His liver is failing after years of hard drinking.) He also wants to tell the kid about his past, because it's all he has to give. The kid isn't sure at first, since his father has drifted in and out of his life and feels like a stranger to him. It was the old man (his guardian) who'd taught him how to survive school, to track and hunt, and to love the land. However, he agrees to the plan. Soon the men and the mare are headed into the mountains with a small pack of supplies.

On their first night in the wilderness, Eldon is impressed with Frank's skill in setting up camp and fishing. He begins talking about himself, telling Frank that his parents, Frank's grandparents, were half white and half Ojibway. They spent all their time traveling from job to job and didn't have time to learn wilderness survival. He tells Frank they're out here in the woods because he "owes" his son.

Frank thinks back to his earliest memory of Eldon, when he was almost six. Eldon had stayed at the farm briefly, leaving some money in a jar for the kid. The old man had explained that Eldon is someone he used to know very well, and that he drinks because things have gotten so broken inside him that they're hard to fix. About a year later, Eldon returned and told the kid that he was his father, then disappeared again.

On the second day of their journey, Frank helps Eldon up a steep trail to a cliff that's covered with sacred Indian paintings. He's always loved coming here to sit and think about what the pictures mean and what they might reveal about who he is. Eldon says he was always too busy trying to survive to think about "Indian stuff." That night, they take shelter in a cabin with a half-Indian woman named Becka Charlie. Though Eldon finds Becka to be nosy and critical, he softens when she guesses why he's traveling West in order to die and be buried in the "warrior way"—it's an effort to die with honor. Becka's words prompt Eldon to tell Frank the story of his childhood.

After Eldon's father died in the Second World War, he began traveling and working wherever he could in order to provide for his mother. Eldon became best friends with Jimmy Weaseltail, who became like a member of the family. One summer, the friends became accomplished logrollers in British Columbia, working under a foreman named Jenks. Before long, Jenks became intrigued by Eldon's mother and started having meals with the family; then he and Eldon's mother began sleeping together. Within a month, Eldon saw evidence that Jenks was abusing her. When he and Jimmy caught Jenks in the act, Jimmy attacked Jenks, nearly killing him. Eldon's mother defended Jenks and told the boys to run. Eldon never saw his mother again.

Frank calls his father a coward for never going back; it has cheated him out of a grandmother and deepened his sense of not knowing who he is. As Eldon sleeps, however, Becka suggests that Eldon was brave to tell what most would rather forget, and that our stories are all we are.

The next day, when the kid and his father continue their journey, they cross paths with a juvenile grizzly. Frank succeeds in confronting the bear. Later he tells Eldon that out here in the wilderness, you just do what you have to in order to survive. Soothed by the herbal medicine Becka gave them, Eldon tells Frank to pour out his remaining whisky.

The kid recalls traveling to Parson's Gap when he was nine to see his father. The old man accompanied him. They found Eldon in a crumbling rooming house, dancing drunkenly with a woman. Before he and the old man left in anger, Frank told his father that he didn't know anything about having a father, except for what Eldon showed him through his actions.

The following year, for his tenth birthday, the kid visited Eldon by himself. At first, things looked promising; Eldon was living in a tidy boarding house and even planned a birthday outing for his son. After a blissful afternoon of fly-fishing, however, Frank discovered that his father had been sneaking whiskey the whole time, breaking his promise. Frank (an experienced tractor driver) was forced to drive his drunken father home in the pickup. A couple years later, Eldon promised to visit for Christmas. When he failed to show up, Frank was furious with himself—after all he'd witnessed, he should have known better than to hope.

The following day, Eldon's condition worsens. By evening, he and the kid arrive at a ridge Eldon had hoped to reach. The valley is filled with a beautiful turquoise river and ringed with snowcapped mountains. Eldon visited this place once before, and it's the only place where he ever felt as though he fit. That's why he's chosen to die here. He begins telling Frank a story he needs to hear—of how he once killed a man.

In 1951, Eldon and Jimmy enlisted in the Royal Canadian Regiment to fight in Korea. More loyal to Jimmy than to the war effort, Eldon committed himself to becoming the best soldier he could be. Sitting in a trench outside Busan, Eldon swore to Jimmy to make sure that if he got killed, he'd receive a warrior's burial. Soon after, they were sent on a reconnaissance mission, and Jimmy got fatally wounded. Knowing his screams would give away their position, Jimmy signaled to Eldon to kill him. Eldon stabbed his friend to death, and his body was never recovered, so Eldon was unable to keep his promise to bury Jimmy. He's never admitted this story to anyone before.

The next morning, Eldon is worse, but he's determined to talk to the kid about one more thing: Frank's mother. After the war, Eldon was in bad shape, drinking to forget his memories and working odd jobs in Parson's Gap to afford his binges. One day, he was drinking at his favorite dive, Charlie's, when he noticed a

graceful, long-haired woman dancing to the jukebox. An older man, who introduced himself as Bunky, sat down with Eldon and admired the woman, Angie, too. When Angie's dancing partner, Dingo, bullied a weaker drunk, Bunky stood up to him. Soon Angie joined their table, and Eldon fell in love with her. However, she was attracted to Bunky.

A week later, Bunky drove into Parson's Gap and hired Eldon to put up 10 acres of fencing on his farm; Eldon stayed on the farm for a couple of weeks. Angie was living there now, too. Each day, Angie brought him lunch and told him about her life, and in the evenings, Angie told Bunky and Eldon stories she made up on the spot. Eldon grew increasingly attracted to Angie, and she hinted that she felt the same, but he resisted opening up to her. He could see how much Bunky loved Angie, and he felt guilty about his own feelings—all the more since he'd stopped drinking.

On Eldon's last day on the job, Angie visited him in the pasture, and he finally opened up to her a little. They ended up making love in the field. That night, Eldon, guilt-ridden, tried to avoid everyone, but Angie climbed to his loft, and they made love passionately. Bunky discovered them and was furious. But after Eldon and Angie admitted their love for one another, Bunky wept brokenly. He told Eldon that if he and Angie were going to build a life together, he *must* treat her right, or Bunky would come and find him. He gave them the keys to his truck and some cash and told them to be gone before he returned.

Eldon tells Frank that for the longest time, he kept his promise and didn't drink. For the first time, he even felt he could settle down contentedly. But the following fall, Angie found out she was pregnant with Frank. Eldon's fears of inadequacy awakened the old darkness in him; he believed he was destined to destroy everyone he loved. He began drinking in secret to cope with his fear and shame. One night, Eldon drove home drunk from a tavern and discovered Angie in an agonizing breech labor. He got her to the hospital, but she died as the baby was delivered. The doctor said if he'd gotten home in time, she might have lived.

Eldon believed that his loving Angie had killed her, and he feared he would hate Frank because of this. In the only deed he was ever proud of, Eldon brought Frank to Bunky (who, he confirms, is the old man) when Frank was a newborn. Though Bunky was devastated by the news of Angie's death and blamed Eldon, he loved Frank instantly and quickly decided to raise him for Angie's sake. After telling Frank this, Eldon is spent. He overlooks the valley one last time, moaning "I'm sorry." That night he dies in his sleep.

The next morning, Frank buries his father in the traditional warrior way. When he gets back to the farm, he sees himself in the old man's working rhythms and smoothly rejoins the comfortable home routine. After telling Bunky Eldon's whole story, Frank also tells Bunky that Bunky has always been a father to him. That night, he overlooks Bunky's land and

imagines he sees a traveling band of Indians waving warmly to him, making him feel connected to an ancestral line he's never known. Then he goes back to the cabin where the old man is waiting for him.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The kid (Franklin Starlight) – Franklin, or Frank, is the sixteen-year-old protagonist who is usually referred to as “the kid.” He lives with the old man (Bunky), his lifelong guardian, on a rural farm in British Columbia, Canada. The kid is big for his age and doesn't talk much. Ever since he was a child, he's had a laconic, grown-up style of speaking, and he is ill at ease in crowds or towns. Disinclined to book-learning, Frank loves hard work and the outdoors, especially horses. From the time Frank was little, the old man taught him how to survive on the land and to respect nature. Frank knows little about his biological father, Eldon Starlight, who only showed up intermittently in his life and was usually drunk. Frank eventually gives up hope that his father won't disappoint him. When Eldon is dying of alcoholic liver failure, he asks Frank to travel into the backcountry with him and bury him on a mountain ridge. Though Frank is skeptical about his father's sudden desire for connection, he agrees. Over the course of their journey together, Frank learns about Eldon's troubled childhood, his traumatic Korean War service, and his love for Frank's mother, Angie, whom Eldon ultimately failed due to drinking (and whom Frank never got to meet). Though Eldon's stories often grieve and anger Frank, he steadfastly cares for his declining father, even showing him tenderness at times. After Eldon dies and Frank buries him on the mountain, he returns home to the farm and feels strongly that he sees himself in Bunky, who has always been his father after all.

Eldon Starlight (father) – Eldon is Frank's biological father. His friends in Parson's Gap nickname him “Twinkles” (as in “Twinkle, twinkle, little star”). Throughout Frank's life, Eldon has only showed up occasionally—usually drunk—and he seems like a stranger to his son. Most of his visits to the farm were short, and he'd disappear after leaving money in a jar for Frank. Eldon's parents were half Ojibway and half white (Scottish). Unable to get hired anywhere, they traveled the country, taking whatever work they could find. After his father died in the Second World War, Eldon took on the burden of providing for his mother. He became a hard worker and developed a talent for fixing things. On one of his jobs, he became best friends with Jimmy Weaseltail. After Jimmy and Eldon fought Jenks for abusing Eldon's mother, Eldon ran away from his mother for good and never found the courage to see her again. He enlisted in the Korean War with Jimmy and, after Jimmy got fatally wounded on patrol, stabbed his friend to death to spare him further torment. After that, Eldon began drinking heavily to

cope with the guilt. He settled in the mill town of Parson's Gap and began doing day labor in order to afford binges. Though he gained a reputation for being hardworking, drinking made him erratic and unreliable. Eventually, at his favorite bar, he befriended Bunky, who had fallen in love with Angie Pratt. When Bunky hired Eldon to put up fencing on his farm, Eldon quickly fell for Angie, too, and they began having an affair. When Bunky discovered this, he sent them both away, and for a while, Eldon and Angie lived contentedly in a lakeside cabin they'd fixed up. But after Angie got pregnant with Frank, Eldon became terrified of failing and started drinking heavily again. After Angie died in childbirth, Eldon asked Bunky to raise infant Frank. He calls this decision his only proud achievement. Eldon tells Frank about his own past and the circumstances of Frank's birth in the days before he dies, expressing sorrow for his failures. He believes telling Frank his stories is the only worthwhile thing he has to offer, and after years of neglect, he owes this to him. Eldon is buried on a mountain ridge in the backcountry, a place he'd visited once before, which was the only place he'd ever felt at peace.

The old man (Bunky) – The old man is the kid's guardian. He is not Indian, but as the kid grows up, he does his best to teach Frank to love nature and to feel some connection to native ways. He lives on a rural British Columbia farm and is happiest while working hard on the land. The old man is patient, quiet, generous, and tender-hearted, though he doesn't often show it. He can also be fierce and forceful when he has to be (especially when Eldon fails to come through for Frank). Despite his mistrust of Eldon, the old man repeatedly encourages the kid to maintain a relationship with him and sometimes travels with him to Parson's Gap for visits. At the same time, Bunky tries to caution the kid about Eldon's unreliability and comforts him when Eldon fails him. Before Frank was born, Bunky and Eldon met at Charlie's bar, where they both admired Angie for the first time. Bunky fell in love with Angie, who began living on his farm, and believed they could build a home together—Angie brought Bunky to life in a special way. After Bunky discovered Angie's and Eldon's secret affair, he was heartbroken and sent the couple away, but he gave them one of his trucks and some cash to get them started. When he learns of Angie's death in childbirth, Bunky is crushed, but he quickly grows to love newborn Frank and agrees to raise him for Angie's sake. After burying Eldon, Frank tells Bunky he's always been a father to him, and Bunky says that's what he'd always hoped to be.

Angie Pratt – Angie is Frank's mother who died when he was born. She is a beautiful, tall, graceful woman whom Eldon and Bunky both fall in love with at Charlie's bar after they see her dancing with Dingo. She is imaginative, gentle, forthright, and, as Eldon describes her to Frank, a "wonder." Angie is half Cree and grew up west of Winnipeg. She lost both parents at a young age and began supporting herself by running kitchens on work sites. When Eldon starts working on Bunky's farm, Angie brings

him lunch and tells him about her life. In the evenings in front of the fire, she tells Eldon and Bunky stories that she makes up on the spot—Bunky calls her a "tale spinner." Angie tries to get Eldon to open up to her about his life, hinting that she sees goodness in him and finds him attractive. Eventually, she succeeds, but after Bunky catches her and Eldon having sex, they're forced to leave the farm to start a new life together. At first they live happily in a lakeside cabin they fix up together, but after Angie gets pregnant, Eldon descends into drinking again. After a difficult breech labor, Angie dies giving birth to Frank.

Becka Charlie – Becka Charlie lives in the old trapper's cabin where Frank and Eldon take shelter on the second night of their journey. She is a sturdy woman with Native facial features, though she's fair-skinned and blue-eyed: she has Chilcotin and Scottish heritage and was raised knowing both of her parents' ancestral ways. She moved into the cabin to care for her father, who died from the effects of alcoholism. Frank appreciates Becka's straight-talking attitude, though Eldon gets defensive when she criticizes his drinking. Becka perceives that there's courage and generosity in Eldon's determination to tell Frank his stories. She tells Frank that our stories are all we are, and she sends the men on their way with some supplies, including herbal medicine that soothes Eldon in his final days.

Jimmy Weaseltail – Jimmy is Eldon Starlight's childhood best friend. He and Eldon took jobs together and worked seamlessly side-by-side, driving one another to accomplish more. Jimmy is fond of Eldon's mother and becomes like part of the family, listening to Eldon's mother's storytelling each night. When Jenks starts abusing Eldon's mother, Jimmy attacks Jenks, stunning and nearly killing him. Then he and Eldon run away. Later, he and Eldon enlist in the Canadian army to fight in the Korean War, becoming skilled reconnaissance scouts. On a nighttime mission, Jimmy gets severely wounded and signals to Eldon to kill him so they won't be captured. Eldon never lives down the guilt.

Eldon's mother – After Eldon's father died in the Second World War, Eldon's mother was devastated. Eldon began working hard to support her, and she would read classic literature to him and his best friend, Jimmy Weaseltail, in the evenings. After Eldon starts working for logger Jenks in British Columbia, Eldon's mother falls for Jenks, and he starts living with them. He soon becomes abusive toward her, but after Eldon and Jimmy attack Jenks in retaliation, Eldon's mother defends Jenks and urges the boys to run away. She never sees her son again.

Jenks – Jenks is Eldon's and Jimmy's foreman when they work as loggers in British Columbia. Partway through their employment, Jenks becomes intrigued by Eldon's mother and starts dating her. After he starts living in Eldon's house, he becomes a harsher boss. It soon becomes clear that he's abusing Eldon's mother, too. One night Eldon and Jimmy catch Jenks beating up Eldon's mother and attack him. After Jimmy

badly injures Jenks, Eldon's mother tells the boys to run away. It's unclear whether or not Jenks survives.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Deirdre – Dierdre is a woman whom Eldon Starlight is sleeping with when the kid comes to visit, shortly before Eldon's death.

Jenna – Jenna is Eldon's landlady around the time Frank turns 10. She is warmly maternal toward Frank. While realistic about Eldon's weaknesses, she also seems to see Eldon's potential as a father, sending them off with a birthday picnic and the loan of her truck.

Everett Eames – Everett is a desperate alcoholic who's bullied by the other men at Charlie's bar. Bunky steps in to defend him, gaining Angie's admiration.

Dingo – Dingo is a burly lumberjack who dances with Angie at Charlie's bar. He bullies Everett Eames, and Bunky stands up to him.

him—that is, drinking and breaking things. “You're supposed to try to get to know me like a father knows a son,” Frank says. When Eldon protests that he's Frank's dad no matter what, Frank protests, “Wouldn't know what it's supposed to mean 'cept what you show.” In other words, Frank argues that biology alone can't sustain a father-son bond. There must be something more.

When Frank compares Eldon to his peers' fathers, Eldon comes up short, and as a result, Frank's confused about what fatherhood is: “The definition of [‘father’] was left to his observation. The men he saw around the school [bore] a strength and resiliency he could see in the way they walked and held themselves. He never saw them drunk.” When Frank tries to understand the meaning of fatherhood based on his observations, all he can see is that he lacks something which other kids take for granted. Therefore Frank doesn't know what to make of fatherhood.

Though Frank doesn't think of Bunky as quite the same as a father, Bunky essentially *is* Frank's father throughout his childhood. At age seven, Frank learns that Eldon is his biological dad, Bunky assures him that he still holds important fatherly roles in Frank's life. The old man tells him, “I'm raisin' you. Teachin' you. There's a diff'rence [...] But I love you. That's a straight fact.” Bunky can't take Eldon's place completely, but he also provides critical things that Eldon isn't giving consistently, like guidance and care.

Bunky also gives Frank one of the most important things in his life—love of the land. Frank reflects that “It was the old man who [...] had given him the land from the time he could remember [...] and the kid had sensed the import of those teachings and learned to listen and mimic well.” Bunky teaches Frank to love, respect, and survive in the wilderness, and Frank “mimics” Bunky as he absorbs these teachings, like a boy copying his dad.

Though Bunky knows he can't teach Frank much about his biological heritage, he takes the responsibility to teach Frank how to be a moral person. “I can't teach you nothing about bein' who you are, Frank. All's I can do is show you to be a good person. A good man,” he says. Bunky is aware that there's a gap in Frank's life he can't fill, yet he acts as a father to Frank in every way he can—loving him, teaching him, and ultimately helping him become the best man he can be.

After his journey through the backcountry with Eldon, Frank realizes that fatherhood is about care, and that by this measure, Bunky has been his real father all along. When Frank gets home from burying Eldon, he immediately sees himself in Bunky in a way that he didn't see himself in Eldon: “He had the old man to thank for the feeling of bending his back to a chore or a task and the sense of rightness that came from it. Watching him now, the kid saw how much of the steadfast old man was a part of him and he [...] retrieved his tool belt and put it on.” Frank recognizes the old man's influence in him and naturally resumes



THEMES

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FATHERS AND SONS

Medicine Walk is the story of 16-year-old Franklin Starlight's journey to get to know his dying father.

All his life, Frank (usually called “the kid” in the novel) has been raised by “the old man,” Bunky, who teaches him farming, love of the land, and how to be a good person. The kid only visits his biological father, Eldon Starlight, a handful of times, typically finding him drunk and unable to meet his commitments. Because of this complicated upbringing, the kid comes to associate the idea of fatherhood with disappointment and neglect. During his father's final days, Frank recalls his memories of Eldon's failures and hears Eldon's account of his past before Eldon dies, including the circumstances of Eldon's surrender of Frank to Bunky. Through Frank's contrasting experiences with Eldon and Bunky, the novel suggests that though biological fatherhood is important and necessary to come to terms with, fatherhood is ultimately about care—meaning that Bunky is Frank's father in a way Eldon never was.

Because Eldon isn't consistently present and sets a poor example, Frank is confused about what fatherhood really is. As a child, Frank rarely sees Eldon, and when he does, Eldon is usually drunk. When Frank is nine, he tells a drunken Eldon that he doesn't know what a father is except for what Eldon shows

the rhythm of life they've always shared, demonstrating what's most important to him.

Later, after telling Bunky Eldon's whole story, Frank tells Bunky he doesn't blame him for withholding the truth about his past. In fact, he says, "You were my father all these years." Even though Bunky isn't biologically connected to Frank and can never fill that absence in Frank's past, he's shaped Frank in the most significant, enduring ways. By caring for him and teaching him, Bunky has been Frank's real father his whole life.

Frank's recognition of Bunky's fatherhood isn't a rejection of Eldon, though. As Frank traveled with Eldon, hearing Eldon's story and revisiting his own memories of Eldon's failed fatherhood, he accepts Eldon's failures, putting his lifelong hopes to rest even as he lovingly buries Eldon. Eldon will always be part of him, even though his care of Frank mostly fell short, and his most fatherly act was to give him up to Bunky's care.



NATURE AND THE LAND

In the novel, the land of backwoods British Columbia is practically a character itself. Besides the old man, the land is the kid's closest companion and the place where he is most himself. He describes the open land as "real," a place where a person is free from artificial structures like school and can learn to truly "see"—whether by tracking an animal for hours through the forest or simply learning the rhythms of the seasons. When Eldon is dying, he and the kid (Frank) travel through the backcountry so that Frank can bury him on a particular mountain ridge Eldon loves. Against this backdrop, the kid hears stories of his father's painful past and finally learns more about his own background. The ridge—the only place where Eldon ever felt at peace—gives Eldon enough strength to open up to Frank and unburden himself of guilt he's carried for decades. In this way, the novel associates nature with personal peace, suggesting that a person's harmony with the land promotes a more stable sense of self.

Nature is a place of comfort and stability for both Frank and the old man. Instead of in school or in play, Frank finds "his joy in horses and the untrammelled open of the high country [...] if he was taciturn he was content in it, hearing symphonies in wind across a ridge and arias in the screech of hawks and eagles[.]" Frank finds peace and contentment in nature's beauty rather than in conversation or in conventional childhood activities. No matter what struggles Frank endures in school, the old man teaches him to value what's "real"—that is, nature: "by the time they were down the other side the land became what the old man called 'real.' To the kid, real meant quiet, open, and free [...] losing schools and rules and distractions and being able to focus and learn and see." Frank doesn't find school's artificial structures to be very meaningful, but being in nature helps him connect to what's most important, hereby restoring a sense of peace with himself.

For most of his life, Eldon never connected with nature in the same way, and he suffers because of this. Eldon doesn't share Frank's connection to nature because he grew up struggling to survive. For him, spending time in the woods meant scavenging wood to sell, and his family was too busy seeking work to spend time hunting or living off the land. Because of this, he spent his life moving from place to place and never establishing roots. Working as a logging scout at 15, Eldon had his first and only experience of connection to nature and peace with himself. When he and Frank revisit that particular mountain ridge, Eldon tells Frank that he "Stayed here two days just sitting on the edge of that cliff looking at it all. That's all. Just looking. I don't recall even thinking anything except how good it felt to be there [...] This here's the only place I felt like I belonged, like I fit[.]" Eldon's experience on the ridge, simply enjoying nature's beauty, gave him a feeling of peace with himself he's been unable to recapture since. That inability to "fit" elsewhere implicitly contributes to Eldon's tormenting sense of failure, which leads him to drink.

Eldon's journey toward his burial parallels a growing peace with himself. Eldon chooses to return to the overlook because it's the only place he's ever experienced peace with the "Great Mystery" of who he is. Before telling Frank about the most significant parts of his past, he reflects, "Jimmy used to say we're a Great Mystery. [...] Said the things they done, those old-time Indians, was all about learnin' to live with that mystery. [...] Just bein' with it. I guess I wish I'da learned the secret to doing that." Eldon admits that he's never succeeded in living with the "Mystery" of his life. But being in this place makes him feel secure enough to tell Frank the stories he needs to hear and thereby to lay down the burdens he's carried all his life.

After telling Frank about his mother, Angie, Eldon seems to let go of the pain of his past. Once Frank hears the story, Eldon stands on the edge of the cliff overlooking the valley, weakly lifts his hands, and whispers, "I'm sorry." Even though he can't undo his past, Eldon's visit to the ridge allows him to unburden himself enough to die in relative peace.

After burying his father on the ridge, Frank journeys home and reconnects with the land that's made him who he is. This time, when he overlooks Bunky's farm, he imagines he sees a band of Indians riding joyfully through the woods. Finding unity with both his father's heritage and his childhood home within the beauty of nature, Frank feels a deeper peace with himself than before.



IDENTITY AND HERITAGE

Franklin Starlight grows up knowing he is half Indian. But his guardian, the old man, isn't Indian, and he only has irregular contact with his biological father, which means that he doesn't know much about his heritage. In his early life, the kid's primary connection to being indigenous comes through feeling somewhat alienated and

rejected by his non-native classmates. Even his Ojibway surname, “Starlight,” holds no special meaning for him, and the old man can only teach him vague ideas about native ways. When Eldon is dying, he admits to the kid that he was always too busy trying to survive to learn much about his culture, and he can only tell him bits and pieces about his own and Franklin’s mother’s past. Between the old man’s efforts, Eldon’s deathbed stories, and an unexpected encounter with a native woman named Becka, both Frank and Eldon arrive at a fuller, if still incomplete, sense of their cultural identity. The novel suggests that one’s ethnic and cultural heritage is important to understand, though it’s not always possible for such heritage to be passed down in a comprehensive, traditional way—sometimes it comes to a person through indirect and unexpected connections.

Frank grows up unconnected to his biological heritage, but the old man does his best to provide him with a sense of it. When Frank makes his first kill, the old man marks Frank’s cheeks with the deer’s blood to symbolize his connection to the animal. Frank knows that the old man does this “Because I’m Indian.” The old man adds, “Cuz I’m not [...] I can’t teach you nothing about bein’ who you are, Frank. All’s I can do is show you to be a good person.” The old man knows there’s only so much he can do to convey a sense of Frank’s Native heritage. He teaches Frank the bits he knows—like encouraging Frank to respect the animal whose life he’s just taken—in hopes that, even if it’s inadequate culturally, it’ll add up to Frank being a good man someday.

The old man also takes Frank to visit some sacred painted rocks, figuring that though he doesn’t know their meaning, they’ll teach Frank something about who he is. Frank later tells his father, “I spent three days here once when I was thirteen. Sorta thought if I spent enough time studying them drawings I could figure out what they were supposed to tell me.” Though he still isn’t sure what the pictures are telling him, he feels pulled to remember them in case everyone else forgets. His understanding of his heritage is piecemeal and beyond his reach in some ways, yet maintaining an awareness of it—however inadequate—seems to be worth doing in its own right.

Unlike Frank, Eldon grows up mostly surrounded by his Ojibway family, but fails to connect with his heritage. When he visits the painted rocks with Frank, Eldon says that thinking about “Indian stuff” never seemed to contribute to survival, so he didn’t bother. “Most of the time I was just tryin’ to survive,” he tells Frank. “Stories never seemed likely to keep a guy goin’.” Eldon never saw much inherent value in understanding his heritage. Ironically, he learns about it from his son rather than the reverse.

Frank learns about the origin of his name indirectly, too. Eldon tells him that his childhood friend Jimmy taught him his surname’s connection to old Ojibway legends of the **Star**

People. “I never even knew where my name came from,” he admits to Frank. “Never thought to ask. When I told [Jimmy] that he got right upset [...] He said that a man oughta know why he’s called what he is.” In their focus on survival, Frank’s family has forgotten significant parts of their heritage. While the wider community can help supply what’s missing, that lack of knowledge can never be made up completely.

Becka, who was raised with Indian ways, models a more well-rounded way of connecting to one’s heritage. When Eldon and Frank spend the night with Becka, Eldon criticizes Becka’s offering of food to the spirits of her ancestors, calling it “witchcraft” and “a waste of good food.” Becka’s practices are unfamiliar and pointless to Eldon, while for Becka, they’re woven into the practices of daily life.

Because of her background, Becka understands better than Frank what Eldon is trying to do by seeking to die in the “warrior way.” She tells Frank, “He don’t savvy spirit talk. So I know he ain’t been schooled in traditional ways. [...] So now he figures that goin’ out in some kinda honourable fashion is gonna fetch him some peace way yonder.” Though Becka seems dubious that Eldon will find the peace he seeks, she recognizes that he’s now trying to connect with an aspect of himself that’s important, even if he’s coming around to it late in life.

Though neither Frank nor Eldon has the benefit of a life spent immersed in traditional ancestral ways, they both embrace aspects of this identity to the extent that they can. Eldon is unaware and skeptical of aspects of Indian culture, but his choice to be buried as a warrior reflects the fact that some connection to heritage is worth seeking, even at the last possible opportunity in life. Frank’s cultural heritage has been almost entirely indirect, but reconnecting with his father—even though Eldon doesn’t know much about Ojibway culture either—seems to help him arrive at a sense of himself that’s more whole. At the end of the book, Frank envisions his Ojibway ancestors traveling across Bunky’s land, suggesting that he feels more connected to his Indian identity than he did at the beginning of the book.



MEMORY AND STORY

Medicine Walk takes place on multiple timelines. The primary one is the kid’s journey through the wilderness with his dying father, Eldon. Alongside this journey, the kid (Frank) recalls episodes from his childhood relationship with his father, and, most significantly, the father tells stories of his life. The father’s stories are all Eldon has to pass down to the kid before he dies, and they’re all the kid has of his mother, Angie, who died when he was born. As the kid considers the memories his father has shared with him, he finds it difficult to make a coherent story out of the dissonant pieces. When he gets home after Eldon’s death, he tells the old man his father’s stories as he resumes the rhythms of their life together. Through the kid’s process of hearing his father’s stories and

tentatively incorporating them into his life, the novel suggests that no one's stories are theirs alone, and that people's self-understanding depends on the stories others tell.

Storytelling is essential to being a whole person. Eldon spends his life avoiding stories because they remind him of the pain in his past, but this not only costs him emotionally, it prevents him from opening up to other people. At one point, he describes stories as his "wound"—a symbol of "the sudden holes life can sometimes fall into." As a child, he'd loved the stories his mother would tell him by firelight. But her stories also attract a lover who abuses her and pushes Eldon out of his mother's life forever. After this, Eldon believes that stories only bring pain, and he begins holding his own stories inside, unspoken.

Only in his final days does Eldon tell Frank his own stories. When Frank complains that Eldon's storytelling is a poor substitute for being around, Becka suggests that stories capture who a person really is—thus Eldon's offering Frank part of himself. She tells Frank, "What he done was brave [...] It's all we are in the end. Our stories." In other words, telling a story is a much more courageous act than letting the truth stay buried—and by telling Frank his stories, Eldon is trying to make sure that Frank's life is more whole than Eldon's was.

Certain stories shouldn't be told by just anyone. Bunky refuses to tell Frank what it's Eldon's responsibility to tell him. When Eldon first tells Frank he's his father, Frank asks Bunky how this can be true. Bunky replies, "Gonna have to ask him, Frank. It ain't mine for the tellin'. Certain things when they're true gotta come right from them that knows them as true." Even though withholding the truth of Frank's parentage puts Frank at a disadvantage, Bunky believes it's more important that truth come directly—from the person most responsible to tell it, in this case Eldon. Simply telling Frank the facts himself wouldn't actually give Frank the full story he needs his father to tell in his own words. Similarly, Bunky wants Eldon to give Frank the story of his mother, Angie. Frank tells Becka, "I asked once. But I was told it was a father's job to do, tellin' me about her [...] I'd look at women in town sometimes [...] wonderin' if she was one of them [...] an' I never knew." Even though Bunky's reticence pained Frank, it offered Eldon the opportunity to give Frank something Bunky couldn't. Bunky seems to have understood that hearing the story from Eldon would bring greater healing and wholeness, in the end, than if he'd told Frank himself.

Angie begins to change Eldon's view of stories, though he resists it, and he takes a long time to act on it. She notices that Eldon seems stuck inside himself and suggests that hearing a story "takes you back to [...] a story you been carrying a long time." In other words, stories can unburden a person, connecting them to others in healing ways. Before he dies, Eldon tells Frank that all he has left to give him is the story of Angie. He says he wishes he could get back "Every single wasted, drunken [year]. But I can't get 'em back. [...] all's I got left is the story of her now." Eldon's openness suggests that he's

finally accepted Angie's view of the power of stories. He understands that telling Angie's story is a way of giving her to Frank, and also giving Frank what he's able to give of himself.

At the end of the novel, Frank tells Bunky the full story of Eldon's life, since Eldon is no longer around to tell it for himself. This suggests that Frank has learned Becka's lesson—that people are their stories, in the end—and has accepted that stories are a necessary part of healing. Having found greater wholeness from hearing Eldon's stories, he now offers the same chance to Bunky, bringing things full circle.



LOVE, LOSS, AND GRIEF

All of the novel's main characters are burdened with heavy losses that they respond to in various ways. Among Eldon Starlight's many losses, he is estranged from his mother, his best friend was killed in the Korean War, and the love of his life, Angie, dies in childbirth because of Eldon's own negligence. He copes with the grief of these losses by drinking. In contrast, the old man (Bunky) copes with losing Angie (whom he also loved) by choosing to raise her son, Franklin, since Eldon is unfit to do so himself. For his part, Franklin must carry *all* of these losses, including the death of his father at the end of the story. It remains to be seen how Franklin will cope with his multiplying losses, though it's hinted that Bunky's example will prevail. Through the close connection between love and grief, the novel suggests that genuine love often leads to deep loss, and that people either cope with grief by resisting it and turning inward ways in that embitter them and perpetuate their pain (like Eldon), or by accepting it, which ultimately opens them to greater love for others (like the old man).

Eldon copes with grief by resisting his emotions, being pulled into a self-defeating cycle of guilt, shame, and alcoholism. Eldon's drinking began after he left his mother with her abusive boyfriend. "Love an' shame never mix," he tells Frank. "One's always gonna be runnin' roughshod over the other. Lovin' her. Feelin' guilt an' shame then gettin' angry as hell at myself." Conflict between love and shame pulled Eldon relentlessly inward, and instead of seeking reconciliation, he got stuck in a pattern of drinking to stifle his guilt. After Eldon killed his friend Jimmy during the Korean War, his drinking grew worse: "He sought a place that carried no reminders, believing that a place existed that was barren of memory and recollection." Eldon has learned to deal with the guilt of painful memories by pushing them deeper inside—learning too late that this place of "no reminders" doesn't really exist; it can only be faked through drinking.

After Angie got pregnant, Eldon's fear of destroying those he loved drove him to drink even more. He explains to Frank, "The dark [...] always sucked me back into drinkin'. I woke up to the belief that I'd always lose or destroy them things or people that meant the most to me cuz I always done that." By this point in

his life, Eldon has internalized the belief that he is a destructive person and that there's no way of fixing it outwardly; he copes in ways that end up perpetuating grief in his own and others' lives.

Instead of avoiding and resisting grief, Bunky copes with it more outwardly—by spending time in nature, and especially by channeling his grief into care for others. When Frank comes home from burying his father, Bunky remarks that “sometimes when things get taken away from you it feels like there's a hole at your centre where you can feel the wind blow through.” To cope with that grief, he tells Frank, “I always went to where the wind blows [...] Don't know as I ever got an answer but it always felt better bein' out there.” In other words, there might not be understandable answers to grief, but instead of resisting or hiding from it, Bunky allows his grief to lead him into the comforts of nature. His losses might not be fixable, but there's something bigger than himself that offers enduring stability instead of spiraling internal pain.

After the devastating loss of Angie, Bunky copes by adopting Frank. When Eldon first brings Frank to Bunky's farm, “he said he'd raise ya cuz he owed [Angie]. I didn't get it an' I asked him and all he done was keep on lookin' down at you for the longest time. [...] Then he said that she brung him to life.” Instead of wallowing inwardly in his grief, Bunky copes with it by giving Frank life much as Angie “[brought] him to life.”

At the end of the novel, the lingering question is how Frank will respond to the heavy griefs he's encountered—will he follow more in Eldon's footsteps or in Bunky's? The ending hints that Frank will follow what Bunky has instilled in him, going “where the wind blows.” Overlooking the farm, Frank feels that he is “hung there above that peaceful space where the wind ruled,” in a dream world where he can imagine meeting his ancestors—leaning on realities outside himself—and thereby finding a semblance of peace.

Eldon's most precious childhood memory. Later, he falls in love with Angie, in part because her storytelling reminds him of his mother. Though Angie encourages Eldon to open up about his own stories, suggesting it will free him and make him lighter, he resists, having come to believe that stories only open old wounds. During his final days, though, Eldon finally tells his stories to Frank, believing they're all he has to give. After this, shortly before he dies, Eldon says, “The stars are in us.” Though Frank can't feel this himself, he agrees that being a “Starlight” makes sense for him, and the novel hints that Frank will carry on his family's storytelling.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Milkweed Editions edition of *Medicine Walk* published in 2015.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ The old man had taught him the value of work early and he was content to labour, finding his satisfaction in farm work and his joy in horses and the untrammelled open of the high country. He'd left school as soon as he was legal. He had no mind for books and out here where he spent the bulk of his free time there was no need for elevated ideas or theories or talk and if he was taciturn he was content in it, hearing symphonies in wind across a ridge and arias in the screech of hawks and eagles, the huff of grizzlies and the pierce of a wolf call against the unblinking eye of the moon. He was Indian.

Related Characters: The old man (Bunky), The kid (Franklin Starlight)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Frank's close connection with the land—something the old man has instilled in him. Frank isn't naturally inclined to academic learning, but he perceives things in his natural surroundings that others can't. This closeness with nature sets the tone for Frank's whole life. He feels most at peace with himself when he hears “symphonies in wind” or “the huff of grizzlies.” He owes this sensitivity to the old man, who teaches him how to labor in the outdoors, how to read nature's signs, and how to respect his environment from the time he's a young boy. The statement “He was Indian” associates Frank's love of the land with his heritage, suggesting that even though the old man brought it out of him, there's also something innate about Frank's sensitivity to nature. The old man isn't Indian



SYMBOLS

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



STARS

Stars symbolize wisdom and storytelling, especially the power of storytelling to convey the truth and connect people. According to Eldon Starlight's friend Jimmy, the name “Starlight” was originally given to those who were taught by the Star People a long time ago. In Ojibway legend, the Star People descended from the stars and taught the wisest people, the Starlights, to become teachers and storytellers themselves. This positions the entire starlight family as storytellers, meant to connect people by telling the truth. Eldon's mother loved to tell stories by the fireside, which is

himself, yet by helping Frank cultivate a love for the land, he fosters a part of Frank that might otherwise have gone undeveloped (something that did, in fact, happen to his father Eldon).

Chapter 4 Quotes

“I want you to take me out into that territory you come through. The one you hunted all your life. There's a ridge back forty mile. Sits above a narrow valley with a high range behind it, facing east [...] Because I need you to bury me there.”

The kid sat with the coffee cup half raised to his mouth and he felt the urge to laugh and stand up and walk out and head back to the old farm. But his father looked at him earnestly and he could see pain in his eyes and something leaner, sorrow maybe, regret, or some ragged woe tattered by years.

Related Characters: Eldon Starlight (father) (speaker), The kid (Franklin Starlight)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Frank's father summons him to Parson's Gap, after showing only an occasional interest in Frank over the years. He finally admits that he's dying of liver failure after many years of heavy drinking, and he wants Frank to travel with him into the backcountry. The journey will surely kill Eldon, and he wants Frank to bury him in the wilderness. Frank's first impulse is to turn away and not to take Eldon seriously—his father has never followed through on anything, so Frank doesn't believe he's serious now. But in this passage, Frank sees something different in Eldon's eyes that stops him from walking away. Eldon's look of “sorrow” and “tattered woe” makes Frank realize that there are parts of his father's history that might be worth his time to hear. Nothing can make up for the years Eldon has neglected Frank, but Frank has a final opportunity to understand his father better, and perhaps to come to a better understanding of himself.

Chapter 5 Quotes

“Truth was, he wanted nothing else because that life was all he'd known and there was a comfort in the idea of farming. He knew the rhythms of it, could feel the arrival of the next thing long before it arrived, and he knew the feel of time around those eighty acres like he knew hunger, thirst, and the feel of coming weather on his skin. Memory for the kid kicked in with the smell of the barn and the old man teaching him to milk and plow and seed and pluck a chicken. His father had drifted in and out of that life randomly[.]”

Related Characters: Eldon Starlight (father), The old man (Bunky), The kid (Franklin Starlight)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

After Eldon asks Frank to journey with him into the backcountry, Frank considers whether he really wants Eldon in his life. Opening up to Eldon's presence in his life, however brief, isn't automatically worth it to Frank because he's content with the life he has—a life the old man has given him. The old man raised Frank to be a farmer, and Frank understands the rhythms of the farming life on a deep, instinctive level. In addition, his father doesn't have a place in that life—he's drifted in and out of it over the course of Frank's life, but he doesn't have a stable place there. Since Frank's earliest memories of life—indeed, of having a father figure—revolve around the old man, Eldon's attempt to be a father at the end of his life seems to feel like an intrusion to Frank. That's why he's tempted to reject Eldon's request and avoid complicating his life when there's no clear advantage to doing so.

“It was the old man who had taught him to set snares, lay a nightline for fish, and read game sign. The old man had given him the land from the time he could remember and showed him how to approach it, honour it, he said, and the kid had sensed the import of those teachings and learned to listen and mimic well. When he was nine he'd gone out alone for the first time. Four days. He'd come back with smoked fish and a small deer and the old man had clapped him on the back and showed him how to dress venison and tan the hide. When he thought of the word *father* he could only ever imagine the old man.”

Related Characters: Eldon Starlight (father), The old man (Bunky), The kid (Franklin Starlight)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

The night before embarking on their journey together, Frank reflects on the differences between his father (Eldon) and the old man who raised him. The old man gave Frank the most important thing in his life: the land. Knowing and surviving on the land is a central part of how Frank understands himself. It's also something that Eldon couldn't give him—because he wasn't raised to value it in the same way—and can't fully share with Frank now. When Frank returned from his first hunting trip, the old man's proud reaction was an archetypally "fatherly" one. By that measure, Eldon can never be a father to Frank in the same way the old man is. Though the biological connection between Eldon and Frank is important, it's not the totality of fatherhood. The novel suggests that care, teaching, and above all, personal presence are even bigger parts—and it's too late for Eldon to give those things to Frank as the old man has.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ “Least ways, you got this place and we get out to where it's real as much as can, don't we?”

"Yeah," the kid said. "That's what saves my bacon."

[...]

They'd take horses and cross the field and plod up the ridge and by the time they were down the other side the land became what the old man called "real." To the kid, real meant quiet, open, and free before he learned to call it predictable and knowable. To him, it meant losing schools and rules and distractions and being able to focus and learn and see. To say he loved it was a word beyond him then but he came to know the feeling.

Related Characters: The kid (Franklin Starlight), The old man (Bunky) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the old man's efforts to cultivate a love of nature in Frank. Frank had always struggled in school—though he was intelligent, the lessons and social

structure just didn't seem relevant to his life on the farm. So the old man took Frank "out to where it's real"—into the wilderness—as much as possible. For Frank, "real" is a place where he can be himself in a way that he can't in school. He can focus on nature's predictable rhythms instead of struggling to fit into an environment like school that doesn't make sense to him. Nature is his real school, a place where he can learn how to live off the land, in harmony with other creatures as he can't be with his classmates. The old man teaches the kid to cherish this kind of "reality," and he also understands that it comes naturally to the kid and tries to encourage that part of him. It provides a stable foundation for Frank for the rest of his life.

☞ When the slash was made the old man drew a smear of blood with two fingers and turned the kid's face to him with the other hand. He made a pair of lines with the blood on each of his cheeks and another on his chin and a wavy line across his forehead. His face was calm and serious. "Them's your marks," he said.

The kid nodded solemnly. "Because I'm Indian," he said.

"Cuz I'm not," the old man said. "I can't teach you nothing about bein' who you are, Frank. All's I can do is show you to be a good person. A good man. You learn to be a good man, you'll be a good Injun too. Least ways, that's how I figure it works."

Related Characters: The kid (Franklin Starlight), The old man (Bunky) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

After Frank kills a deer for the first time, the old man introduces him to a ritual. He marks Frank with the animal's blood to emphasize the kid's connection with the creature he's killed, whose life will now help sustain theirs. Frank knows the old man does this "because [he's] Indian," but the old man adds that it's because he's not—the first time this fact is revealed. Up to this point, based on the old man's paternal love for Frank and his efforts to teach Frank about the land, the reader could assume that the old man is Frank's biological father, or at least shares his racial identity. In reality, the old man (Bunky) isn't related to Frank but is doing the best he can to instill some sense of Frank's heritage, knowing that's important. But the blood-marking ritual is about more than "being Indian." To Bunky, emphasizing Frank's connection with the deer is simply part

of being a moral person, too—recognizing one’s indebtedness and responsibility. By focusing on this part of Frank’s upbringing, Bunky presumably hopes that a mature Frank will be well positioned to explore his heritage for himself.

Chapter 7 Quotes

“All’s I’m tryin’ to say is that we never had the time for learnin’ about how to get by out here. None of us did. White man things was what we needed to learn if we was gonna eat regular. Indian stuff just kinda got left behind on accounta we were busy gettin’ by in that world.”

“So I don’t get what we’re doin’ out here then.”

[...]

“I owe,” he said,

“Yeah, I heard that before.”

“I’m tired, Frank.”

[...]

“That’s the first time you ever called me by my name.”

Related Characters: The kid (Franklin Starlight), Eldon Starlight (father) (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Early in Frank’s and Eldon’s backcountry journey, the subject of “Indian stuff” comes up. Eldon, impressed with Frank’s survival skills, admits that he didn’t have the opportunity to develop such skills himself. Indeed, he had to develop a different set of survival skills—getting by in a majority white culture. Because he was traveling from job to job and gaining proficiency in various kinds of manual labor, Eldon didn’t have time to spend time in nature, track animals, or hunt like Frank did. Frank somewhat misses the fact that his father had to develop his own survival skills; all he can see is his father’s early absence in his life, and the fact that Eldon has repeatedly failed him as a dad, the one who *should* have taught him about being Indian. Despite his skepticism, he’s surprised by Eldon’s use of his first name, which makes him take his father’s feeling of obligation a little more seriously. Eldon is clearly trying to make up for his absence in Frank’s past, and part of that is spending time on Frank’s turf, the wilderness.

Chapter 9 Quotes

“Then he strode off and returned in a short time with mushrooms and greens and berries that he crushed up and fashioned into a paste. He gathered a clump of it on a stick of alder and held it out to his father.

[...]

“Sometimes I’ll put some pine resin in with it if I got a pot and a fire. Makes a good soup. Lots of good stuff in there.”

“Old man?”

“Yeah. At first he brung me out all the time when I was small. Showed me plants and how to gather them. Everything a guy would need is here if you want it and know how to look for it, he said. You gotta spend time gatherin’ what you need. What you need to keep you strong. He called it a medicine walk.”

Related Characters: The kid (Franklin Starlight), Eldon Starlight (father) (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

During Frank’s and Eldon’s journey, Frank gathers all their provisions from the woods, like the paste he concocts from gathered greens, berries, and mushrooms. It’s another of the survival strategies the old man (Bunky) taught him. This was part of Bunky’s effort to teach Frank to live in harmony with nature. By saying that the woods contain everything a person needs, Bunky seems to have had a double meaning in mind—that if a person is attentive, a walk through the woods can provide all the wisdom they really need. This is the idea of a “medicine walk”—a journey in search of healing and strengthening elements in nature. Whether a person is looking for nutritional or spiritual “medicine,” such a walk takes time and patience. In his conversation with Eldon, Frank focuses on the physical idea of a medicine walk. But as the novel’s title suggests, his entire journey with his father is a medicine walk, whether Frank yet realizes it or not. By the time the “walk” is over, Frank will have collected many things he needs to keep him strong—namely stories that help him understand who he is. If it weren’t for the journey with Eldon, Frank presumably would never have found these “medicines.”

“Near as I can figure they’re stories. I reckon some are about travelling. That’s how they feel to me. Others are about what someone seen in their life. The old man doesn’t think anyone ever figured them out.”

“Ain’t a powerful lotta good if ya can’t figure ‘em out.”

The kid shrugged. “I sorta think you gotta let a mystery be a mystery for it to give you anything. You ever learn any Indian stuff?”

His father lowered his gaze. [...] “Nah,” he said finally. “Most of the time I was just tryin’ to survive. Belly fulla beans beats a head fulla thinkin’. Stories never seemed likely to keep a guy goin’. Savvy?”

“I guess,” the kid said. “Me, I always wanted to know more about where I come from.”

Related Characters: The kid (Franklin Starlight), Eldon Starlight (father) (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Along the way, Frank and Eldon visit some ancient cliff paintings that Frank has studied before. The old man brought Frank here to help him connect with his heritage, and he’s spent a lot of time considering the drawings and what they might tell him about himself. Eldon suggests that the mysterious paintings don’t seem very meaningful and denies knowing much about Native heritage. However, it’s possible that Eldon is reminded of people who *did* teach him “Indian stuff”—like Jimmy Weaseltail and Angie—whose stories Eldon isn’t ready to tell Frank just yet. His reticence about “stories” in general isn’t entirely honest, either. Eldon once loved stories, but has come to dread the vulnerability they require of their those who tell them.

The pictures, which seem to Frank to be about people’s journeys and stories, seem to symbolize the men’s journey as well. Frank’s comment about “[letting] a mystery be a mystery” can also be read as applying to their journey, which ultimately gives Frank a deeper understanding of who he is, even though he can’t fully understand everything his father tells him.

Chapter 12 Quotes

“What he done was brave. You know that, huh?”

“Done what?”

“Tellin’ you. That took some grit.”

“I don’t think it’d take much grit to tell what ya already know.”

“Maybe. But it sat in his gut a long time. Most’ll just give stuff like that over to time. Figure enough of it passes things’ll change. Try to forget it. Like forgettin’s a cure unto itself. It ain’t. You never forget stuff that cuts that deep.”

Related Characters: The kid (Franklin Starlight), Becca Charlie (speaker), Eldon Starlight (father)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Eldon has just told Frank about his childhood best friend, Jimmy Weaseltail, and how he and Jimmy fought off Jenks for abusing Eldon’s mother and then ran away for good. Frank’s takeaway from this story is that it confirms what he already knows—his father is a coward—and he feels cheated out of ever knowing his grandmother. However, they are spending the night with a half-Indian woman named Becca Charlie, who suggests that Frank isn’t giving his father enough credit. Most people, she tells Frank, would never talk about the things that weighed on them—they’d just bury the truth in hopes of forgetting. But not only is forgetting impossible, it doesn’t really fix anything. By speaking out, Eldon lets the truth be known instead of suppressing it. In Becca’s view, that’s a brave, generous act that doesn’t just help Eldon before he dies, but also gives Frank a chance to learn from his father’s mistakes. Eldon can’t change the past—like giving Frank a chance to know his grandmother—but by sharing his story, he at least gives Frank the opportunity to understand his own story more fully.

His father moaned and the kid regarded him. “He don’t seem much of a warrior to me.” He sipped at the tea.



“Who’s to say how much of anythin’ we are?” Becca said.

“Seems to me the truth of us is where it can’t be seen. Comes to dyin’, I guess we all got a right to what we believe.”

“I can’t know what he believes. He talks a lot, but I still got no sense of him. So far it’s all been stories.”

She only nodded. “It’s all we are in the end. Our stories.” She stood and put a hand on his shoulder and gave it a pat.

Related Characters: The kid (Franklin Starlight), Becca Charlie (speaker), Eldon Starlight (father)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

As he talks with Becca a couple of days into his journey with Eldon, Frank expresses his skepticism about his father's motivations. Eldon wants to die in the wilderness and be buried in the traditional warrior posture, but this seems unsuitable to Frank, who can't picture his father as a warrior. In response, Becca argues that you can't just look at a person and understand the whole truth about them. She hints that Frank is guilty of such short-sightedness. Because Becca's father also died from the effects of alcoholism, she seems to instinctively understand a troubled person's desperation to end life with honor. That's what Eldon is trying to achieve by seeking a warrior's burial and telling Frank his stories. When she says that our stories are "all we are," she suggests that Eldon's stories are his way of giving himself to Frank. He can't go back and make up for years of absence and neglect, but he can give Frank his memories, ensuring that Frank's own story will be a little bit more complete.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝☝ He thought about what Becca had said and worked at finding some pattern to the shards and pieces of history he'd been allowed to carry now. They jangled and knocked around inside him. It felt like jamming the wrong piece into a picture puzzle. Like frustration alone could make it fit the pattern. He cast a look back over his shoulder at his father, who seemed to be asleep, but he'd mumble when the horse's step over a rock or a root made him lurch in the saddle. When the kid looked back at the thin trail they followed he felt worn and makeshift as the trail itself.

Related Characters: Becca Charlie, Eldon Starlight (father), The kid (Franklin Starlight)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier, Frank observed that for a mystery to "give" a person anything, sometimes it has to be allowed to remain a mystery. Though Frank seems content with mystery in other

parts of his life (like the sacred Indian paintings), in his father he finds it unsettling and difficult to embrace mystery and incongruity. Frank is still trying to "read" his father as if he's an animal's sign in the forest—that is, relatively straightforward to interpret. In reality, the bits and pieces of a person's past—their stories—can't be forced into a coherent whole. It takes time and patience to allow the picture to fill out and take a clearer shape. This is especially true given the large gaps in Frank's and Eldon's history as father and son. When Frank looks at the trail and feels "worn and makeshift," it reflects his sense that he's making up this journey with his father as he goes, and that the gaps in their history are a true loss—even memories can't completely make up for the past.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ "You're supposed to try to get to know me like a father knows a son," he said quietly.

"Jesus. I know that. Think I didn't want that? Think I'da asked you here if I didn't wanna get to that?"

"You lied. All you wanna do is drink and dance and break stuff."



"Wanted to see ya, was the point of it all."

"Well, you seen me."

"I'm your dad."

The kid shook his head. "Ain't got one. Never had one. Wouldn't know what it's supposed to mean 'cept what you show."

Related Characters: The kid (Franklin Starlight), Eldon Starlight (father) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis



When Frank is nine years old, he visits Eldon in Parson's Gap for the first time. On the way, Frank and the old man talked about how fathers and sons get to know each other—something Frank has never experienced with his own biological father, Eldon. But when they reach Eldon's place, they find him drunk, crashing around the room with his girlfriend. Eldon claims he just wasn't prepared for Frank to show up when he did. But when Frank sees his father's behavior, he decides that Eldon's expressed desire to see him was a lie. Since he's never had much of a relationship with his biological father, Frank says that he can only understand what fatherhood means through Eldon's

actions. Frank's words highlight the theme that fatherhood is something that must be demonstrated, not simply asserted as a matter of right (as Eldon tries to do when he declares, "I'm your dad"). In Eldon's self-indulgent, freewheeling life, Frank doesn't see an effort to get to know him "like a father knows a son."

His father slammed the door closed. The smell of whisky was high in the air. The kid rolled down his window and backed the truck into the grass and then pulled out into the rut of the road. He took it slow, but the truck still bucked along. [...] When they got to the gravel road the kid turned back the way they came and his father settled into his seat. "Happy birthday," he slurred.

The kid let out a breath long and slow and focused on the road. His father passed out halfway back to town.

Related Characters: Eldon Starlight (father) (speaker), The kid (Franklin Starlight)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

On Frank's tenth birthday, Eldon makes a big deal about spending time with him and even plans a celebratory outing for the two of them. By all appearances, Eldon seems to be making up for the previous year's failure to bond with Frank. At first, everything goes well, as the two enjoy an idyllic afternoon fishing together. But when Frank realizes that his father has been sneaking whisky all day, he calls an abrupt halt to the trip, even driving them back to Parson's Gap though he's only driven a tractor before. The incident shows just how unreliable Eldon is and how badly he's failing Frank as a father. Instead of basking in his father's affection and making a happy memory together, ten-year-old Frank has to take an adult responsibility for his father's well-being and drive them. What starts out as the father-son activity he's always dreamed of becomes a tragic role-reversal that shows how broken their relationship is.


Chapter 15 Quotes

"Come here when it got too noisy in my head," he said. "When the old man got too old for the ride he let me make the trip alone and I got to prefer that. Never was afraid. Never seemed to be a place for fear. When ya come to know a thing ya come to know its feel. I know this place by feel nowadays."

"You're a good man," his father croaked suddenly. "The old man done good turnin' ya loose out here. He know how good ya are out here?"

"He knows."

Related Characters: Eldon Starlight (father), The kid (Franklin Starlight) (speaker), The old man (Bunky)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

During the last portion of their journey through the backcountry, just before they reach the ridge where Eldon is to be buried, Frank tells his father about some of his solitary hunting adventures in the wilderness. He tells Eldon about his fearlessness in the forest, an example of Frank's sense of being most himself when he's in nature. This prompts Eldon's praise of Frank, the most profound compliment he's ever given him—that he's a good man. What makes this compliment so striking is that it's also an acknowledgment of Bunky as Eldon's father. He praises Bunky for his work raising Frank to love and survive on the land, which he could never have done himself. He also sees that Frank is someone who, thanks to his upbringing, knows who he is and where he belongs—something Eldon has never attained in his own life. In that respect, Bunky is Frank's real father, meaning that Eldon's most fatherly act was to give up Frank to Bunky.

"Jimmy used to say we're a Great Mystery. Everything. Said the things they done, those old-time Indians, was all about learnin' to live with that mystery. Not solving it, not comin' to grips with it, not even tryin' to guess it out. Just bein' with it. I guess I wish I'da learned the secret to doing that. [...] I never belonged nowhere, Frank. Never belonged nowhere or to nobody," he said.

Related Characters: Eldon Starlight (father) (speaker), Jimmy Weaseltail, The kid (Franklin Starlight)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 149



Explanation and Analysis

When Eldon and Frank reach the ridge where Eldon will die and be buried, Eldon tells Frank his most painful and important stories. These words serve as a kind of preface to those stories. Growing up, Jimmy Weaseltail was Eldon's closest friend and the person in his life who knew the most about his Indian heritage. He recalls Jimmy teaching him the heart of Indian spiritual beliefs—the idea that everything is part of the Great Mystery, and each person's task is learning to coexist with that mystery. Coexisting in this way means that a person hasn't necessarily understood the mystery of existence; they've simply learned to accept it. Eldon identifies his own problem—that he never learned how to live with mystery. He always felt unsettled and disconnected. Frank's life has been very different—even though he's always had questions about his identity, he's belonged to someone (the old man) and had a place he can go (the wilderness). In contrast, Eldon's inability to accept mystery in his life has led him to cope by drinking excessively, which has damaged what ties he does have.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☹☹ He took the knife and held it under his ribcage and Jimmy stopped, his body going perfectly still as he stared at him over the rim of his hand. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again there was peace there and he nodded at him. The knife went in almost on its own and he twisted it like he was trained to do and leaned forward cheek to cheek with Jimmy and heard his last breath ease out of him.

Related Characters: Jimmy Weaseltail, Eldon Starlight (father)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Eldon tells Frank one of his most painful memories, which occurred during the Korean War and involved his best friend, Jimmy. Moments earlier, Jimmy and Eldon had each cut a gash in their palm and marked the other's face with their own blood, symbolizing that they are carrying each other into battle. Jimmy also made Eldon promise that if Jimmy died, Eldon would make sure he got buried in the Indian warrior way (sitting up and facing East). During their scouting assignment, however, Jimmy gets fatally injured, and Eldon drags him to safety, trying to muffle his friend's

screams so they won't be found by the enemy. In the end, he stabs Jimmy to end his suffering and prevent their capture. Even though Jimmy seems to have known he was about to die and consented to Eldon's act, Eldon carries the guilt for the rest of his life. Though he doesn't directly say so, Eldon seems to feel especially guilty about the fact that he failed in his promise to bury Jimmy (whose body isn't recovered from the battlefield). In a sense, he keeps part of his promise—he not only carried Jimmy into battle, but carried him for the rest of his life, fighting a private battle of guilt he couldn't end. Telling Frank (the first time Eldon has told anyone) represents a very small step toward peace.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☹☹ Time was a thing he carried. It took him a long time after Korea to realize that. [...] It rankled him, the unease, the slow creep of terror, like being hunted, tracked by some prowling beast invisible to the eye, recognized only by the sense of looming danger at his back. Then, always, time's dank shadow would fall over him again and sweep him into its chill. [...] He spiraled downward and the measure of his days was the depth of the shadow itself. He wandered. He sought a place that carried no reminders, believing that a place existed that was barren of memory and recollection. But he bore time like sodden baggage.

Related Characters: Eldon Starlight (father)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

After serving in the Korean War, Eldon is constantly haunted by guilt. To cope with Jimmy's death, he starts drinking to obliterate the traumatic memories; this starts a downward spiral into more failures, more drinking, and mounting shame. Eldon thought that if he could somehow outrun his past to "a place [...] barren of memory," he could finally escape the shame, but he finds it only grows heavier and more difficult to put down ("like sodden baggage"). The novel's overall argument, however, is that memories can't be ignored; they have to be faced, and the most effective way of confronting one's memories is to share them by telling one's own story. When Eldon finally does this, he's near death, and it's too late to bring him much peace in his own life. Yet the act of storytelling isn't fruitless. As Becca Charlie suggested earlier, it's a courageous act and a generous one—even though it can only bring Eldon a little peace in the time he has left, it offers Frank a chance to

know his father better. That means he'll understand his own history better going forward, and hopefully bear fewer burdens than Eldon did.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☝☝ "I never told no stories."

"You should. When you share stories you change things."

"Says you," he said.

"If you told me one of your stories, you'd get lighter."

"Don't know as I have any worth the tellin'."

She smiled at him and touched his leg. "You could let go of something maybe you carried for a long time. I could know more of you. Get bigger with the knowing of you."

Related Characters: Angie Pratt, Eldon Starlight (father) (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis



When Eldon meets Angie, he quickly falls in love with her. But knowing that she and Bunky care for one another, he resists opening up to her. Unfortunately, Angie instinctively touches what Eldon has earlier described as his "wound"—that is, stories. Angie freely tells stories of her own creation as well as of her personal past. She tries to coax Eldon into sharing his own, suggesting that stories have an inherent power to change a person's life, especially by lightening long-held burdens. But the novel underscores that telling stories doesn't just benefit the teller; because storytelling is a self-giving act, it enriches stories' listeners as well. This is what Angie is referring to when she suggests that she could "Get bigger with the knowing of [Eldon]." As much as Eldon resists Angie's words, her wisdom remains in his mind and arguably persuades Eldon to one day tell Frank what he could never bring himself to tell Angie or anyone else.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝☝ "I recall standin' on the porch early one morning with a mug of coffee, looking out across the lake, an' I felt like for the first time I could stand this life. I could settle. [...] She brung that alive in me, Frank.

"It got me to wonderin'. Got me wonderin' if time could make goin' back to other things possible too. Goin' back to other people, other places. My mother and such. Never ever thought them kinda thoughts before. Found myself wonderin' if returnin' was somethin' a man could do, if ya could walk back over your trail and maybe reclaim things. They were odd thoughts but she hadda way of getting them into my head."

Related Characters: Eldon Starlight (father) (speaker), Angie Pratt

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

Before Eldon dies, he tells Frank the story of Frank's mother, Angie. After a lifetime of loss and lack of commitment, Eldon believed he might be able to commit himself to Angie for the first time. After they couple fell in love and fixed up their own place, Eldon felt able to "stand this life"—to live with the Great Mystery, as his friend Jimmy might have said. Angie not only makes Eldon feel settled and accepted for the first time in his life; she also makes him feel secure enough to reconsider his past choices. Part of this is because when he's with Angie, Eldon doesn't feel the need to hide from his past by drinking, and he therefore has the clarity of mind to picture hopeful future possibilities instead of more failures. This is an example of how, as Angie always told Eldon, stories can "change things." By sharing her own stories with Eldon, Angie makes Eldon feel strong enough to face his own, which in turn equips him to imagine his story having a better ending than he'd previously imagined.

“You were scared ya couldn’t be what ya had to be,” the kid said.

“More’n that,” his father said. “Scared I couldn’t be what I never was. I never told her about Jimmy, about my mother, even though she told me I could tell her anythin’. I was ashameda myself, Frank. Bone deep shamed. I was scared if I started in on tellin’ about myself I’d break down an’ I wanted to be strong for her. I really did. But layin’ there knowin’ how weak I really was brung on the dark in me. The dark that always sucked me back into drinkin’. I woke up to the belief that I’d always lose or destroy them things or people that meant the most to me cuz I always done that.”

Related Characters: The kid (Franklin Starlight), Eldon Starlight (father) (speaker), Angie Pratt

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

Despite their initial happiness, Eldon’s and Angie’s life took a turn for the worse after Angie got pregnant with Frank. Frank’s fragile hope spiraled into fear as he imagined himself failing as a father. Even more, impending fatherhood forces him to consider his past. As far as Eldon is concerned, his past is only a liability that threatens to “break” him. It’s not, as Angie would likely have seen it, a resource that might change things for the better if only he were willing to face it openly. If Eldon had opened up to Angie, their life might have taken a different course. As it was, however, Eldon coped with resurgent memories by drinking instead, which pulled him farther away from Angie instead of closer. Eldon felt responsible for destroying the people he loved; however, his experience with Angie shows that pulling away from others in fear, instead of opening up in love, is dangerous. According to the novel, withholding one’s stories is destructive for relationships, and concealing one’s grief internally only makes it heavier, both for the individual and those around them.

Chapter 23 Quotes

“I knew what he meant, Frank. I got made better too. But not better enough on accounta when she needed me most I wasn’t there an’ she died cuz of that. I looked at the two of you on that rocker an’ all’s I could do was walk away. All’s I could do was walk away because I guess I come to know right there that some holes get filled when people die. Dirt fills ’em. But other holes, well, ya walk around with them holes in ya forever and there weren’t nothin’ in the world to say about that. Nothin’”

Related Characters: Eldon Starlight (father) (speaker), Angie Pratt, The kid (Franklin Starlight), The old man (Bunky)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

After Angie dies, Eldon takes Frank to Bunky—Eldon knows that he isn’t capable of raising the baby and that Frank deserves to be cared for by somebody who is. Though Bunky is crushed by the news of Angie’s needless death, he softens when he meets with Eldon and agrees to raise Frank as his son, because he owes Angie for opening up his world. Eldon feels similarly about her—but he admits to Frank that it wasn’t enough; he still made choices that kept him from being the man she needed him to be in the end (namely, resuming his excessive drinking). By giving up Frank to Bunky, Eldon acknowledges his inadequacy and selflessly gives Frank a chance to have a better life. He also accepts a grief (“holes in ya forever”) that is never likely to be resolved; he has to live with the pain of his failings and the knowledge that he can’t fix them. The novel suggests that this is really his greatest achievement as a father: giving Frank the chance to be raised by a worthier dad.

Chapter 24 Quotes

When the kid dropped off to sleep himself he didn’t know. He dreamed there was a man and a woman seated on a blanket. They were talking and their heads were bent close together, but he couldn’t see their faces or hear what they were saying. Then he was on the porch of a house he didn’t recognize. The sun was going down. The sky was alive with colour and he could see it bending and receding above the fields. A woman was there. She stood in the middle of the field, looking at him. She waved with both arms and he waved back at her but it was his father she was waving at.

Related Characters: Angie Pratt, Eldon Starlight (father), The kid (Franklin Starlight)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis


This quote describes Eldon’s death. In the moments before Eldon takes his last breath, Frank dreams vividly of his parents. It’s implied that Frank’s dream reflects what Eldon

experiences as he dies. The first scene, of Eldon and Angie talking, suggests the early days of their relationship. Then, Frank presumably stands on the porch of the cabin his parents shared before he was born. Sundown suggests that Eldon is dying, and Angie's exuberant greeting—directed to Eldon but not yet to Frank—suggests that it's time for Eldon to rejoin the woman he loves, but that Frank, who still has more life ahead of him, will have to wait for his turn. The dream implies that Eldon will find some measure of peace—or, at the very least, Frank is willing for his father to find that peace and will ultimately forgive him. The dream concludes with Eldon running across the field to embrace Angie. At that, Frank feels Eldon slip away.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☞ Watching him now, the kid saw how much of the steadfast old man was a part of him and he slipped into the tack room and retrieved his tool belt and put it on. When the old man's back was turned he walked over and hefted the next board in his hands and stood there, holding it at the ready. When the old man turned there was only a momentary hesitation, a surprised flick of the eyes and the hint of a grin at the corners of his mouth. Then he took one end of the board and they walked it into place together and nailed it.

Related Characters: The kid (Franklin Starlight), The old man (Bunky)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

After Frank buries his father, he goes home to Bunky's farm. The first thing he sees upon getting home is Bunky going about normal farm work. Even though Frank isn't biologically related to Bunky, he immediately sees a resemblance to the old man which he never saw between himself and his biological father, Eldon. The biggest thing Frank inherited from Bunky is his steadfast love of work—a big part of what made Frank the man he is. Frank signals his recognition of this by slipping quietly back into his accustomed rhythm of helping Bunky. This quiet, easy assumption of a familiar role speaks volumes about Frank's and Bunky's father-son relationship—a tacit acknowledgment of their enduring bond. Without actually saying anything about it, Frank demonstrates his loyalty and love through his actions, much as he'd done by journeying through the backcountry with Eldon, caring for him in his

last days, and burying him.

☞ “Sometimes when things get taken away from you it feels like there's a hole at your centre where you can feel the wind blow through, that's sure [...] Me, I always went to where the wind blows.” The old man put a hand on the kid's shoulder and turned him to face him square on. “Don't know as I ever got an answer but it always felt better bein' out there.”

The kid nodded. They looked at each other. The horse neighed softly in the barn and the old man pulled the kid to him and clasped his arms around him and rocked side to side. The kid could smell the oil and grease and tobacco on him and it was every smell he recalled growing up with and he closed his eyes and pulled it all into him.

Related Characters: The kid (Franklin Starlight), The old man (Bunky)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

After Frank gets home, he finally tells Bunky the full story of Eldon's history. After recounting all the losses he's suffered and the grief he'll always carry, Bunky tells Frank that there's not an easy solution to feeling this way—there are gaping holes that will always remain with a person. But as Bunky has always taught Frank, nature also provides familiar, comforting rhythms that can help anchor a person even as they carry their grief. In a way, Bunky's comments echo the ideas of Eldon's best friend Jimmy—that it's the Indian way to accept and live with the Great Mystery, not necessarily to solve it. Grief is a big part of life's mystery that can't be neatly resolved, but that a person can learn to cope with in positive ways.

Bunky's warm embrace, and the childhood memories it evokes, also confirm that Bunky is really Frank's father in a way that Eldon couldn't be. He can't bear Frank's grief for him, but he will be alongside him just as he's always been.

●● He closed his eyes for a moment and when he looked down into the valley again he thought he could see the ghostly shapes of people riding horses through the trees. [...] He watched them ride into the swale and ease the horses to the water while the dogs and children ran in the rough grass. The men and women on horseback dismounted and their shouts came to him laden with hope and good humour. He raised a hand to the idea of his father and mother and a line of people he had never known, then mounted the horse and rode back through the glimmer to the farm where the old man waited, a deck of cards on the scarred and battered table.

Related Characters: Angie Pratt, Eldon Starlight (father), The kid (Franklin Starlight)

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

After his father told him about his mother, Frank grieved that his family could only ever feel like ghosts to him. Now he realizes that even if that's true, that doesn't mean they're not with him. After returning home, Frank overlooks Bunky's land and imagines that he sees the ghosts of his ancestors riding across that land and warmly greeting him. This image shows that Frank's journey with Eldon was an important step in helping him reconnect with his Native heritage. At the same time, that doesn't mean he disavows his deep connection to Bunky and Bunky's land. If anything, it grows deeper as he recognizes that this place belongs to the Indian part of him, too. Now that he's traveled the land with Eldon, his ancestors' stories will inhabit this familiar land in a way that they didn't before, helping Frank remember his father and cope with his grief. In that respect, he's able to reclaim Bunky's home as his home more than ever before.



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

The kid ties his old mare to the fence and goes into the barn to get the saddle. The old man is milking the cow. After the kid breathes in the familiar smell of the tack room, the old man gives him a handful of bills so he can get himself a meal. He looks at the kid seriously and tells him, “He’s gonna be sick.” The kid points out that he’s seen this before, but the old man says this time is different.

The old man cautions that “He lies when he’s sick,” so maybe the kid should stay here and be happy with what he’s got. The kid says that he always lies and, anyway, it’s his father. He wonders, though, if his father is dying. The old man isn’t sure, but from his point of view, he’s been dying for a long time. The kid saddles his horse and sets off.

It’s late fall. The kid rides easily. He is big, serious-looking, and doesn’t talk much. He is comfortable being alone. The old man taught him to value work, and he enjoys it, especially horses. He left school early because he’s not inclined to books or ideas. The outdoors is what he loves, and he’s at home there, never lonely. Today he takes his time. The ride to the mill town at Parson’s Gap is familiar, but the kid isn’t sure why his father called him there.

CHAPTER 2

The town sits in a river valley. The kid doesn’t like coming here. The local kids make fun of him and sometimes even throw stones at him. People here aren’t used to seeing horses on the roadways and sometimes honk or stare. When the kid reaches the main part of town, he turns the horse down a side street where the houses are slightly dilapidated. He boards the horse at a little five-acre farm. The people there know the old man.

The novel begins with a scene of comfortable, familiar domestic life. Though the relationship between the kid and the man isn’t clear, the kid appears to be at home here. However, the peaceful setting is disrupted by a sense of looming conflict, as an unknown “he” is unprecedently ill.



The old man, who is revealed not to be the kid’s father, is concerned about what’s awaiting the kid. The kid’s relationship with his father, who’s been unwell for a long time, apparently has a troubled history. The kid is determined to handle the situation.



The kid is at home in the wilderness. He’s not a typical kid—he enjoys exertion, solitude, and nature instead of socializing with his peers. Though he seems to have visited his father before, this visit is unique, and unanswered questions surround it.



It’s implied that the kid’s ordeal in coming to town has to do, at least partly, with the fact that he’s Indian. And his backcountry lifestyle doesn’t fit in this environment. The dissonance between the kid and the town anticipates the discord between him and his father.



After tending his horse, the kid walks out into the chill purple evening. In the seedier part of town, he passes dank bars and moves toward a row of rooming houses along the riverbank. He crosses paths with a drunk woman on the sidewalk and asks her if she knows Eldon Starlight. She asks for a smoke, and she winks at him as she lights it. Then she laughs and wonders what he wants with the “old lech,” whom she calls “Twinkles.” She tells him where the man can be found, but not without offering him a good time instead. He declines. She says, “Suit yourself [...] Indian.”

The kid’s father doesn’t live in the nicest part of town, suggesting his circumstances are poor. The kid’s encounter with the drunken woman also shows what kind of company Eldon keeps—people who like to drink and are out for a “good time.” The way she calls the kid “Indian,” like an epithet, shows how the kid gets reduced to, and mocked, for his racial identity.



CHAPTER 3

The kid arrives at a three-story house with broken windows and assorted trash blown about the yard. The door is locked. Three men are sitting on the porch. The kid introduces himself as Franklin Starlight and asks for Eldon. The men laugh when he declines a drink—a polite non-drinker can’t be Eldon’s son. One of them warns the kid that Eldon “ain’t right.”

Eldon obviously can’t afford to live somewhere decent. The condition of the rooming house suggests that his life is broken down, too. The men’s teasing shows that Eldon has a reputation for drinking and rudeness. Their joke reveals a truth: that the kid has been raised to be different from his father.



After the kid is let inside, he takes in the drab, faded exterior, the cooking smells, and the hissing cat. He climbs the stairs past apartments; a toothless man yells something garbled and shakes his fist at the kid. When he reaches his father’s room, he listens at the door, hearing voices and the sound of bedsprings. He knocks, and after a moment of silence, he hears, “Well, come in, dammit.”

The rooming house is a last resort for people who don’t have anywhere else to go. When the kid reaches his father’s room, he receives a dubious welcome, if it can even be called that.



When the kid comes in, he finds a room containing only a dresser, chair, and bed. His father lies in the bed with a woman pressed against him. Empty bottles, clothes, and fast-food containers are everywhere. Tools are hung and piled everywhere, too, as well as bicycle parts and jars filled with cigarette butts. The kid says, “I’m Franklin,” and the man’s only response is, “Got big, didn’t ya?” Loose skin hangs off his father’s lined face, his hair is grayed, and his teeth are stained. His bones stick out. But his eyes are bright and intent.

Eldon’s existence is in disarray. He doesn’t have much to his name, he’s sick, and he doesn’t recognize the kid immediately. Even without knowing Eldon’s background, it’s clear from his circumstances that he’s failed as a father.



The kid explains that the old man told him to come. He sits on a chair and declines both a drink and a smoke. Coughing, his father sits up and introduces Deirdre as “a whore.” She slaps him playfully in response, and when she takes a drink from a bottle, the kid blushes to see her breasts. Finally the kid asks what his father has to say, and his father says he doesn’t have an agenda. When his father observes that the kid doesn’t like him much, the kid says he doesn’t know him well; “dad” is just a word to him.

The kid’s reunion with his father is extremely awkward and embarrassing. Everything—Deirdre’s presence, the struggle to make conversation—suggests that this isn’t a normal father-son relationship. Indeed, the kid doesn’t feel he really knows his father.



The kid's father says he needs to talk to him. The woman gets dressed and leaves, briefly looking as if she intends to say something. His father puts on tattered work boots and a denim jacket. The kid shakes his head sadly at the sight of the room, then follows him out to the street.

Despite his initial denial, the kid's father does have an agenda of some kind. So far, the kid appears to be the bigger adult in the situation. He recognizes that his father's situation is pitiful.



CHAPTER 4

The kid and his father go to a dive called Charlie's. His father leads him to a deck out back, on pilings over the river. They sit at a table by the railing. The kid smokes and waits for his father to speak. A waiter brings a bottle to their table and tells "Twinkles" he owes money, so the kid pulls out cash to pay off his father's tab. The waiter returns with coffee, and the kid grows angrier as he drinks. Finally he asks why his father is called "Twinkles." His father explains it's a stupid play on "Starlight." He asks if his father is dying, but he deflects the question.

Judging by his nickname, the kid's father is known around town. Here at the bar, he has a reputation for being broke. Everything about the situation reminds the kid of his father's failures, and he still doesn't know why he's been asked to come. Significantly, though, he's still shown up, and he shows he's willing to help Eldon out in spite of his anger.



As the kid digs into a tortilla, his father drinks and watches him without expression. Finally he starts talking about the river. When he was younger, he used to float logs down it. Now he lumberjacks sometimes, though they use trucks nowadays, and it takes the heart out of the work. The kid presses him to say what's really on his mind—winter is coming, and he has work to do back home.

The kid's father gropes for a way to talk to him. The kid knows Eldon didn't really ask him here to chat about his past in the logging industry. If his father doesn't have a point, he'd rather Eldon didn't waste his time.



Finally his father says he wants the kid to go into the backcountry with him, the territory the kid has hunted all his life. When the kid asks why, his father says, "Because I need you to bury me there." The kid almost laughs. But he sees sorrow and regret in his father's eyes. He denies that his father could survive the journey. He doesn't believe that his father has suddenly taken an interest in him—he never did before.

Eldon finally gets to the point, and it's almost ludicrous to the kid. Eldon's sorry record as a father doesn't lend much credibility to his request.



His father goes on to say that he needs his son to bury him sitting up, facing east, "in the warrior way." The kid says his father isn't a warrior. His father finishes his drink and says he used to be one. He needs to tell his son about that; it's all he has to give. The kid says that will never be enough. Finally his father leaves, and the kid sits and smokes a few minutes before following. He doesn't see his father on the street, and he finally heads back to the barn and goes to sleep beside the mare.

Later, Eldon will explain the Native custom of being buried sitting up so that the spirits of dead warriors could be ready to follow the sun into the afterlife. The kid finds the request incompatible with what he knows of Eldon. While Eldon feels obligated to tell the kid more about himself while he still can, the kid feels this can't make up for a relationship that has never existed. He doesn't think stories of the past are an adequate gift.



CHAPTER 5

The kid wakes up in the early morning and goes outside to smoke, seeing coyotes in the moonlight. He watches them scampering in the fog and stopping to stare at him. As the coyotes start nipping and leaping playfully again, the kid can't help smiling. After they disappear into the trees, the kid sits on the fence and watches the town and thinks of his father. He thinks that letting his father die in such a bleak setting seems terrible.

He knows that if he went home, nothing would change for him. He would farm, something he knows and finds comforting. The old man taught him to farm, and his father merely drifted in and out of his life there, drunk. He always left some money in a jam jar.

When the kid was seven, he learned that his name was Starlight. He remembers repeating both their names to himself and finding the syllables meaningless. His father never stopped feeling like a stranger, and the old man seldom spoke of him. The old man focused on “[giving] him the land,” and the kid had learned well. He started venturing out by himself when he was nine, coming home after four days with fish and deer. The old man had been proud. When the kid thinks of “father,” he thinks of the old man.

CHAPTER 6

The kid's first memory is the gun. He was three or four years old and thought it looked like a magical object hanging above the stone fireplace, no doubt filled with stories. Every once in a while, the old man would take the gun down from the mantel and let him touch it. Before he'd allow the kid to hold the gun, the old man would quiz him about the model, the kind of ammunition it uses, and what it shoots (“anything bigger than a bobcat”). The old man, who called him “Frank,” would always be smiling as he asked the questions. After that, he'd let the kid hold the gun.

By the time the kid was five, he could break down, reassemble, and clean the gun by himself. He knew how to oil and polish it just right. The old man taught him that if a man is going to shoot, he needs to know what he's shooting with. And any tool is only as good as the care it's given. He always tousled the kid's hair when he gave advice. But whenever he took the gun down to go hunting, he also let the kid see that he was checking over the kid's handiwork.

For the kid, nature's beauties provide a stabilizing influence. After enjoying the sight of the playful coyotes, the kid feels able to consider his father's request more clearly. Even though he doesn't fully trust or sympathize with Eldon, the kid doesn't want him to die in the squalor he witnessed the day before.



The kid has a choice to deny his father's request and forget this ever happened—his father has never done much for him. The old man, in contrast, has passed down everything that's significant and familiar to the kid.



The kid thinks back on his life. For years, he didn't even know his last name—that's how absent his father was. The old man apparently didn't see it as his responsibility to emphasize the kid's parentage. Instead, he gave the kid what he knew: teaching him the love and survive on the land. This gift has made a deep impression on the kid, and he thinks of the old man as his father as a result.



The kid has always been drawn to the stories found in the world around him. Every object—even a gun—has stories to tell. The old man initiated him into these with both fatherly affection and seriousness. He wants to share with Frank something that's valuable to him, and he also wants Frank to be safe.



Under the old man's teaching, the kid developed a maturity beyond his years. The old man let Frank know that handling a gun has high stakes, while also communicating that he puts a lot of trust in Frank.



The kid learned to shoot at seven and soon became proficient with a .22 rifle. The old man made sure he could hit cans accurately from many positions, since that might save his life someday. He also taught the kid how to calculate drift—how a bullet drops over distance and how its impact decreases—so that he knew how to hit what he was shooting at no matter the circumstance. He impressed on the kid that it's not right to let anything suffer. The kid repeats "Gotta drop it" to himself like a mantra.

The kid never liked school. The other kids were noisy and the teacher talked too fast and never repeated himself like the old man did. The kid already knew letters and numbers, weights and measures, how to manage farm chores, and write letters to his father. But none of the lessons at school seemed relevant to farm life, so he soon stopped paying much attention. The only Indian at school, he didn't make friends easily, especially with the town kids who seemed to only live for play. The kid was used to being spoken to like an adult.

The teachers sent home letters calling the kid "aloof and cold," but the old man tossed these into the fire. He made sure nobody was mistreating the kid at school, but other than that, he just told Frank to do his best. He said the kid would learn more important things on the land, but for the time being, he just had to learn to withstand certain things. They got out "to where it's real" as much as they could.

Once the kid mastered both the .22 and the carbine, the old man allowed him to start hunting. They rode horses over the ridge into land that the old man called "real"—quiet and open. In time, the kid learned to call it "predictable and knowable." It was free of school's artificial structures. The kid learned to love this land in a deep way he couldn't articulate.

Before the kid was allowed to hunt, he had to learn to track. The old man explained that he had to learn how an animal thinks. Hunting is really about hunting an animal's sign, not the animal itself. It was painful—he had to learn to walk in a stealthy half-crouch. He spent many evenings practicing how to walk without making noise, learning how to understand the direction of the wind, and learning to be patient and to blend into the landscape, keeping still for hours.

The old man taught him that tracks are a story. He spent hours learning how to interpret them—not just looking, but touching and smelling them—to learn how an animal moved. From a single coyote print hidden under the leaves, he learned to tell that a female was hurrying back to her den with food for her kits.

The old man prepares the kid carefully for a life of self-sufficiency on the land. This involves teaching the kid not to shoot things just for fun, but only when he's sure he can hit his target. This promotes a sense of respect for the land and of living harmoniously as part of nature.



The kid finds school useless for the life the old man is teaching him. At home, he's basically being prepared for manhood already, being entrusted with adult responsibilities. This makes him an oddball among the more conventional kids. In addition, his Indian heritage makes him stand out.



The kids' teachers didn't know what to make of him, but the old man brushed this aside. To him, school is something to be endured, and it shouldn't be allowed to get in the way of the more "real" things he wants to teach the kid.



At school, the kid can't really be himself. In nature, on the other hand, he finds reality—here, he can be fully himself without trying to fulfill others' expectations.



The old man taught the kid to become part of the natural environment as much as possible. To do this, he had to be able to understand something of an animal's story by reading its signs. This also had the advantage of teaching the kid patience.



Stories fill Frank's life. For him, stories aren't just something found in books; they're literally embedded in the world around him, connecting him to the rhythms of the natural world.



By the time he shot his first deer at age nine, the kid understood deer well enough to guess their movements even when signs were dim. After he dropped the first deer instantly with a clean shot, he suddenly cried, which the old man let him do. Then the old man handed him a knife and told him to cut the deer's throat. After that, the old man marked the kid's face with the deer's blood, which the kid understood was "Because I'm Indian." The old man added, "Because I'm not." He went on to say that he couldn't teach Frank anything about who he is—he can just show him how to be a good man. If he does that, then he figures Frank will be a good Indian, too.

He told the kid to give thanks to the buck for helping sustain their lives—just speaking honestly from what he feels. Then he walked off. The kid looked down at the buck for a while, then knelt down and rested his hand on its still-warm body. Beginning to cry again, he said "Thank you" and "I'm sorry," promising to remember the buck always. When he stood up, he felt better.

When the kid turned 11, the gun became his. By that time, he had successfully hunted moose, elk, and black bear. The old man taught him that hunting depends on a person's ability to enter the rhythm of the land and follow it. By this time, Hunting has become a ceremony to the kid, framed by prayer on both ends. The old man wasn't really comfortable speaking of "God," but he trusted that something was making sense out of the world and felt there was no harm in giving thanks for that. The kid liked that way of looking at it.

CHAPTER 7

The kid consents to his dad's plan, but before they go, he has to know "what the deal is." His father is half-dressed and smoking, sitting in bed beside Deirdre. He finally admits that his liver is failing from drinking. He can feel that he's dying. The kid looks at Deirdre, and she says she's okay with the plan, too—everybody has a right to die the way they choose. The kid doesn't know what to say. Finally he leaves, slamming the door, and he goes out for fresh air. Wishing the old man were here to give him advice, he sits on the stairs until his heart stops pounding. Then he reluctantly goes back into the room.

The man lists some things he'll need for the trip and Deirdre gives the kid a handful of cash to cover it. His father asks for a few bottles for the trip, too—it won't make much difference anymore. As the kid is getting ready to leave for the errands, he notices his father and Deirdre watching him. His father says that Deirdre thinks the kid resembles him. As the kid turns to go, he sees Deirdre cradling the man's head. A single tear falls down her face.

The old man is tender-hearted and patient. He doesn't criticize the kid for his emotions surrounding his first kill. At the same time, he expects the kid to follow through on the responsibilities of the kill. On another note, this is the first time it's stated that the old man doesn't share the kid's Indian heritage, which means that he's limited in how much he can teach Frank about who he is. While recognizing that this is a real limitation, the old man also acknowledges that he can teach Frank much that's valuable about being "a good man."



The old man offers the kid space to deal with the overwhelming emotions of his first kill. He also encourages him to express gratitude for the sustenance he receives from the land, which is another way he teaches the kid to be at home in nature.



The old man has imparted to the kid the importance of living harmoniously with nature. For the kid, this takes on a spiritual significance: entering into nature's rhythms is what makes him feel most at peace with himself and his environment.



After reflecting on his memories of his upbringing—especially his experiences of the old man's fatherhood—the kid agrees to accompany Eldon through the backcountry. He learns that his suspicions are correct: his father is dying. It's something he'll have to face without the old man's help, though the old man's teaching and guidance will make the kid's journey with his father possible.



As Eldon prepares for his final journey, his girlfriend observes a father-son resemblance. The resemblance is only physical—though it's a real connection, it doesn't go far beneath the surface. Eldon may be Frank's father, but there's more to fatherhood than biological paternity.



Later, the kid leads his horse along the commercial part of town. His father struggles to adjust to the horse's rhythm, especially when traffic noise unsettles her. People stare at them. His father ignores it, but the kid dislikes attention. He feels ashamed, as if everybody knows his father won't return alive. As they reach the mountain trail, both the horse and the men begin to relax. His father's boozy, rotten smell bothers the kid, though, and he sweats with the effort of leading the horse up the ridge.

As they rest at the top, his father looks down at the milltown and remarks that he lived there a long time. The kid reorganizes their pack, and his father observes that they have no food and no gun. The kid says he'll get what they need and leaves it at that. His father keeps watching the town, his eyes red, as the kid turns the horse. They plunge deeper into the woods, and the sounds of the town fall silent.

By evening, they've covered five or six miles, following a stream. His father rides slumped, and the kid occasionally slaps his shin to make sure he's still alive. When they reach a place where the stream widens into a pool, the kid helps his father down. While his father sits on a rock and smokes, the kid gets a blazing fire going within minutes. He sets a fishing line in the pool and soon catches a fat trout, which he cleans and sticks over the fire, catching a second one soon after. He and his father eat the fish right off the sticks.

Afterward, the kid goes into the woods and gathers saplings and spruce boughs. He builds a lean-to and then piles logs behind the fire so that the heat will go towards the lean-to. He helps his father into the lean-to, settling him on the spruce boughs. The man is weak and groans, asking for his bottle

As the kid sits smoking beside him, his father asks how he learned to do all this. The kid explains that whatever the old man didn't teach him, he taught himself. His father says he never spent much time out in the woods. He always had to work—scavenging wood and selling it to people, mostly Indians and half-Indians, north of here in the Peace Country. It was difficult to get hired anywhere else.

His father's parents were both "half-breeds." Not Métis, like the French Indians—Ojibway, mixed with Scot. Neither whites nor Indians ever wanted his family around. So his family, and others like theirs, followed the work they could find, camping or squatting, never settling in a permanent home.

Eldon isn't used to riding a horse, underscoring the differences between him and the kid. The kid also feels the weight of what they're about to do—by caring for his father on his final journey, he's taking on a tremendous responsibility that will force him to mature even more.



As they leave Eldon's home behind for good, Eldon seems to be touched by old memories. Heading into the wilderness, they transition into the kid's territory, which is unfamiliar to Eldon. This is shown by the fact that Frank is confident in his ability to survive off the land, and Eldon isn't.



Barely conscious and unable to fend for himself, Eldon clearly isn't doing very well. The kid relies on his wilderness survival skills to provide for the two of them. Frank is completely within his element in the woods while Eldon is a stranger there, highlighting the stark difference in their respective upbringings.



The kid is conscientious about his father's needs and uses the material on hand to provide Eldon with shelter and warmth. In contrast, his father is helpless and needy. Frank is occupying the more fatherly role on this journey.



The old man wasn't raised to live off the land the way Frank was. From his account of his life, Eldon didn't have that opportunity because of the need for bare survival. Hiring discrimination was one factor—he had to find other ways to make a living. (The Peace Country refers to the Peace River region of Alberta and British Columbia.)



Frank's father explains more about their heritage—details he's hearing for the first time. With their mixed European and indigenous heritage, their family didn't fit into a single community, and their unsettled existence reflects that.



When they reached the Peace Country, survival was difficult. Some remembered how to survive on the land, but they didn't have horses, and there wasn't time to hunt big game. So they mostly forgot what they knew—just waited around the mills for work to open up, although they rarely got any. The kid puts more logs on the fire and adds more hooks to the fishing line. Then he stands on a boulder looking at the shape of the mountain against the sky.

Finally, the kid asks his father why nobody in the family just tried living on the land. His father says he spent all his time learning how to survive in a town. The kid is unsympathetic, though. He asks his father if he thinks he's the only one who's ever had it rough—after all, he, too, has been dealt a rough hand. His father doesn't argue. He just says he had to learn “white man things” if he wanted to live.

If that's the case, the kid wonders, then what are they doing out here? His father is silent for a while, then finally says, “I owe.” He adds, “I'm tired, Frank.” The kid is startled—he's never heard his father use his name before. His father sits up awkwardly and reaches out to squeeze the kid's arm. Then he wraps himself in his coat and quickly falls asleep. The kid watches him and tries to see beyond what he already knows, but he just sees an aged, gaunt man. Finally, he goes back into the woods, looks at the stars, and gathers some wood, thinking of his father's childhood scavenging to survive.

CHAPTER 8

The narrative shifts to the kid's first memory of his father. He was almost six, and it was summertime. He was tacking a covering onto the hens' hutch to protect them from predators. This was a good example of the old man's approach. He listened to the kid's questions and showed him how to do things. But then he left the kid alone. Later, he'd help the kid as necessary. But mostly the kid was left to work and learn on his own. Working on the hutch was fun for him, so he didn't really notice the hovering man at first. They chatted briefly about the “varmint,” then the man headed into the house.

When the kid finished his task, he went into the house. Right away, he heard the men's voices conversing in a steady, rumbling way that suggested a serious subject. The kid put his tools away, making a little noise so they knew he was there. When he got to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of milk, the old man introduced “Eldon.” Eldon asked him about the hen hutch, and the kid quipped that the “varmint” would let him know if he did a good job or not. His father laughed. The old man rubbed his hair, and the kid beamed.

Because of the pressing need for economic survival, Eldon's people lost touch with aspects of their traditional heritage. They had to spend their time seeking work in order to survive on the terms of the majority society, so their ancestral ways were gradually eclipsed and forgotten.



The kid and his father have experienced very different hardships. Eldon grew up knowing his biological family but lacking the opportunity to learn their traditional ways (they had to learn “white man things” instead). Frank grew up with a white father figure, gaining a semblance of traditional knowledge in a nontraditional way.



Given his dad's untraditional upbringing, the kid doesn't understand why he would want to die in the wilderness. It's too complicated for his father to explain right now. He has a sense of obligation—it's not yet clear to whom, but he's exhausted from the weight of it. He's also clearly trying to make a connection with Frank, though the effort is fumbling. At this point, he and the kid are still strangers to each other.



The kid's childhood memories of his father provide context for his conflicted feelings in the present. Unlike Eldon, the old man was a constant fatherly presence in Frank's life, coaching and supporting him for as long as he can remember. As a father, the old man seemed to find it important to give Frank a sense of pride in his work and self-sufficiency. Eldon, in contrast, appears out of nowhere and can only vaguely relate to what the kid's doing.



Frank is used to being included in adult conversations and concerns, as shown by his precociously dry sense of humor—which sounds a lot like the old man's. In fact, he seems to be the old man's son in every way, even as he's introduced to the man he doesn't realize is his biological father.



The kid drank his milk and listened as the men sipped whisky and talked. When Eldon mentioned getting seasonal work from an acquaintance, the old man pointed out that four seasonals add up to a year. He also had to pawn his saw, so logging work was out. One cause for optimism was his father's regular work at the mill, although the old man didn't seem too hopeful. The old man clattered around the kitchen warming stew and biscuits while Eldon and the kid looked at each other. The kid watched silently as Eldon poured himself another big helping of whisky, winking and holding a finger to his lips.

Over supper, the men talked about the farm, then the kid washed the dishes and put them away. He sensed Eldon staring at him and felt that Eldon wanted to speak, but he never did. The kid finally excused himself and went to bed. At one point, he heard a sob, and the old man's voice got louder. Then things grew quieter again.

The next morning, over the milking, the kid asked the old man who this man was. Eldon was still asleep, on the couch by the woodstove. The old man said he's someone he used to know very well, but now he's a different man. When the kid asked about Eldon's drinking, the old man said whisky keeps varmints away—things like memories, desires, other people. He went on to say that sometimes, things get so broken inside a person that they're difficult to fix. That's what happened to Eldon. The old man lets him come sometimes so he can talk through his sadness. By the time they finish their chores, they found Eldon had gone. He left some bills in a jar.

Almost a year later, the kid was out herding the cows when he saw the man again. As he approached the barn, he saw a beat-up pickup truck in the lane whose bed was filled with rusty tools. After the kid stabled the horse, he went into the house and found it empty, so he wandered down to the woodlot and suddenly heard yelling. The old man sounded harsher than the kid had ever heard him. As he got closer, the kid saw from the scuffed earth that they'd been fighting. They were both out of breath, and there was even a little blood on Eldon's face. Both men looked down as the kid walked up and sat on a stump between them.

Eldon ordered the old man to "Tell him," but the old man said it wasn't his job. Eldon hesitated for a long time, which makes the kid feel anxious. After taking a swig from a flask and staggering slightly, Eldon faced the kid. The old man put his arm around him, telling the kid to listen. Finally, Eldon said, "I'm your pap." The kid stared at the old man—he thought *he* was his father. The old man explained that he's raising him. He loves him. But there's a difference.

Eldon struggles to stay employed consistently, which frustrates the old man. The kid still doesn't know the relationship between the two men or Eldon's relationship with him. When the man slyly sneaks more whisky—awkwardly letting Frank in on the secret—it suggests that Eldon's drinking is a contentious matter between the two men.



The kid remains an outsider at this point, protected from the drama in Eldon's life that will someday impact his own. As far as he knows, Eldon is just a troubled stranger with whom the old man is somehow involved.



The old man chooses not to tell the kid that Eldon is his father—this significance of this choice becomes clear later. For now, the old man speaks to Frank in terms he can understand (especially having just worked on a chicken coop)—drinking is a way that troubled people try to protect themselves from things that seem dangerous to them. This also shows that, despite his anger and frustration with Eldon, the old man is also sympathetic to his pain.



The next time Eldon appears in Frank's life, the tension between Eldon and the old man has reached a breaking point. It's notable that, even though Frank is still a small child at this point, he unhesitatingly puts himself in the middle of the men's scuffle, assuming the situation is relevant to him instead of being afraid, as most kids likely would be. The old man has raised him to be forthright and not to shrink from challenges—and he's also never been in a situation with adults that has given him reason to feel unsafe.



The old man refuses to be the one to tell Frank who his father is, even at the risk of causing the kid greater pain and confusion. This suggests that certain people have a responsibility to tell certain truths—that it's not right for just anyone to voice them. The old man's explanation also suggest that while raising and loving someone is key to parenthood, biological paternity is also significant.



The kid peered at Eldon and asked how it could be true that he's his father. Eldon said it's complicated. If it's complicated, the kid protested, then he doesn't understand why Eldon would tell him. Eldon was startled—he said the old man has taught the kid to talk like a man. The old man said that somebody needed to.

Eldon said he wasn't sure why he came—he just felt like he had to come and tell the kid, so he did. When the kid said he didn't understand, Eldon replied that he's too sober for this discussion. The kid started to feel sorry for Eldon, whose eyes were teary and whose hands were shaking. The old man pointed out that truth is never easy, especially when it's been withheld for a long time.

Eldon said he'd better go; he needed to think. But the old man said that no matter where Eldon went, the truth would follow him. Now that he's told the truth, he owes seven years' worth of lost time, and he can do that by making the coming years different—he'd better start by stopping the drinking. The kid just looked back and forth from the old man to Eldon, not knowing what to do. Finally Eldon said that he didn't think this through and walks off. The kid asked the old man about his mother and the old man's face darkened a bit. He said it was Eldon's job to tell him that.

CHAPTER 9

The next morning, Eldon is feverish. When the kid shows concern, Eldon says there's nothing he can do—his liver is shutting down. The kid cleans and cooks three more trout then readies the horse and starts packing up camp. He lays the saplings and boughs from the lean-to in the woods. His father asks why, and the kid explains it's respectful to leave things as you found them. His father denies that anything can ever be left as you found it, and the kid says he would know. More words bubble beneath the surface, but he says nothing more.

As they head out of camp, his father again struggles to get comfortable on the mare. He says that Ojibways historically aren't horse-oriented. The kid keeps an eye out for cougars as they travel. When he spots a bobcat print and wants to point it out to his father, he sees that Eldon is already slumping in the saddle. He has a smell of moldering leaves. At this thought, the kid can't suppress a lump in his throat, even though the emotion angers him.

Young Frank perceives that his father hasn't thought through the implications of this revelation—that there's a bigger story here that his father isn't yet ready to tell. Eldon hadn't counted on the kid being so perceptive. The old man's cutting remark, meanwhile, makes it clear that Eldon isn't teaching the kid how to be a man.



Eldon, used to just getting by to survive, isn't used to thinking more than a step or two ahead about his actions. He's also not used to handling stressful situations without resorting to alcohol. Remarkably, Frank feels sympathy for his father's pain even though he doesn't understand it. The old man makes the point that truth-telling comes with a painful cost.



The old man's remarks suggest that telling the truth, by itself, isn't necessarily enough. Especially when they've failed others, people need to back up their words with actions. Eldon isn't used to taking that kind of responsibility; he has a habit of running away from it. The kid senses that there's a bigger story he doesn't know yet. But again, the old man refuses to be the one to tell him. His attitude suggests that the timing of a story can be less important than who tells it.



Back in the narrative's present, the kid is taking care of his father again. Even when he was a little kid, unsure about Eldon's role in his life, the kid showed greater thoughtfulness and concern than his father did. Here, the pattern continues. This passage again highlights that Eldon isn't at home in the wilderness the way Frank is. And his remark about leaving things the way you found them appears to be quietly self-deprecating—he knows he's caused damage in his life and believes it can't be undone.



Though Eldon doesn't share Frank's interests, Frank nevertheless makes an effort to include his father in them, like showing off his ability to spot animal signs. But the time for that sort of connection, it seems, is already past. Frank feels pained by this, but also angry with himself for allowing himself to feel hurt by his father.



The trail climbs upwards for the rest of the morning. At midday, they rest among a clump of pines. The kid makes a paste out of mushrooms, greens, and berries, which he serves to his father on a stick. Reluctant initially, Eldon is surprised how good it tastes. The kid tells him how the old man taught him to gather plants. The old man used to say it's important to spend time gathering what you need to keep you strong. He called that a medicine walk.

They sit silently, smoking, his father drinking a little and looking at the trees. After a while, the kid says he wants to take his father to a place worth seeing nearby. There are symbols painted on the rock; the old man took him there and explained it was sacred. He promises to lug his father up there to see it, and while Eldon thinks it sounds like too much work, the kid says sometimes a person doesn't know what they need until they see it.

Eldon calls him a philosopher, and the kid says that's not true. Thoughts just come to him sometimes when he's out on the land. Eldon says he never had a mind for anything like that; his back got him through. When the kid adds, "and the hooch," his father glares and tells him not to judge. But the kid says he's just watching; he doesn't know what he's seeing yet. He'll let Eldon know when he figures it out. He puts out the fire and helps his father into the saddle.

They make their way up a narrow path. The forest is thinner up here, and soon the path grows steep. At last they reach a narrow ledge. The kid secures the horse and guides his father up the trail, holding onto his belt. They stop frequently so Eldon can catch his breath. Eventually, they reach another ledge in front of a flat cliff. The kid eases Eldon down. When Eldon looks up, his mouth drops open in awe. The kid sits beside him. They look at the symbols—painted birds, animals, **stars**, and other beings covering the entire wall, 20 feet up. At last, Eldon tells the kid to take him closer. He rests his hand against the wall and asks what they mean. The kid figures they're stories about people's lives. It doesn't bother him that they're a mystery—sometimes that's the only way it can give you anything.

Eldon is impressed by the kid's ability to survive on what's readily at hand—which, again, is something that the old man taught him. The old man seems to have had a double meaning—that it's worth taking the time to collect things that will strengthen you, not necessarily just nourishing plants. The book's title comes from this concept of a "medicine walk." The title implies that, whether he yet realizes it or not, Frank is gathering such things during his journey with Eldon.



Frank still reaches for ways to connect with his father. He wants to share something that the old man, in his efforts to help Frank connect with his heritage, has shared with him. In passing along the old man's teachings to his own father, Frank follows a somewhat indirect path, yet Frank believes it's worth the effort, even with his father nearing death.



Frank still feels bitter toward his father for drinking. When Eldon defends himself—there's a lot Frank doesn't yet know about Eldon's past—Frank explains that he's commenting on what he sees. In this sense, Frank studies his father almost like he studies an animal's signs in the woods. He assumes that his father can be "interpreted" just as simply and accurately.



When they reach the sacred paintings, it seems to have been worth the painful climb. The meaning of the paintings isn't known. The kid's remark suggests that this mystery actually makes the paintings more valuable, not less. In other words, just because the meaning isn't clear doesn't mean they're not conveying something truthful and worth hanging onto. This could be interpreted as a comment on the stories Eldon tells Frank, too, though it's unclear if Frank realizes that yet.



The kid asks Eldon if he ever learned any “Indian stuff.” He sinks down against the wall and says no. He was always busy trying to survive, and stories didn’t seem to contribute to that. The kid says he always wanted to understand more about where he came from. He used to sit here all the time, thinking the pictures held some clue. Even when they didn’t, he figured somebody should try to understand the pictures—it seemed like everyone else had forgotten. He adds that he isn’t sure why he brought his father here—maybe it was just for himself. His father takes a drink of whisky and says maybe it was.

Here, Eldon resists the idea that stories are inherently valuable (though as he’ll explain later, he actually believes in—and fears—the power of stories). Though impressed by the paintings, he seems uncomfortable digging into the subject of “Indian stuff.” Ironically, despite being raised by a white guardian, Frank grew up with more freedom and opportunity to think about his heritage than Eldon did.



CHAPTER 10

By the time they reach the bottom of the cliff, his father is weaker. The kid settles his father against a rock and then rests, taking in the sounds of the land. He senses there’s rain coming, so he needs to get his father to a nearby trapper’s cabin he knows about. They set off again, eventually finding an overgrown trail that leads into a marsh where they see a crumbling cabin with smoke coming out of the chimney. A burly woman steps out, holding a shotgun; she wears men’s clothes and walks heavily. Her face looks Native, though she’s fair-skinned and blue-eyed. She stares at them and gruffly asks about Eldon’s sickness. Since it isn’t something catching, she agrees to let them stay the night. She introduces herself as Becca Charlie.

Frank and Eldon find the trapper’s cabin unexpectedly occupied. Though Becca Charlie is also half Indian, she has a more integrated sense of her Native heritage than either of the men do. Besides offering a respite on their journey, the stay with Becca gives the men a glimpse of someone who’s more at peace with who she is, for whom being Indian is simply part of daily life.



Becca helps the kid get Eldon into the cabin. The cabin is roughly furnished now, and there are dishes, pots, and clothing. The floor looks well swept. Becca explains that she redid the roof and walls last summer, and she tells them to make themselves at home. The kid goes out to tend the horse and sees a privy and a tangled garden in the back. There’s also a grave marked with a wooden cross. It wasn’t there before.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Becca has reclaimed the abandoned cabin and made it a home. Though the details aren’t given until later in the story, the lovingly rebuilt cabin likely reminds Eldon of Frank’s mother, with whom he lived in a renovated cabin before Frank was born. (This might explain Eldon’s grumpiness around Becca.)



Back inside, the kid drinks a steaming mug of tea made of pine gum and mint. He smiles to himself—Becca, short and squat, looks like a gnome. They chat about his father’s condition. Becca says her father took to drink as well, and the kid figures that’s who is buried out back. They listen as the rain moves in. Eventually Becca explains that her father was Chilcotin and her mother was Scotch. She was raised knowing the old ways of both parents.

Becca and Frank have much in common. Like Frank, Becca lives off the land; she knows what it’s like to care for an alcoholic parent, and to grow up with a half-Indian identity. Unlike Frank, she was raised with a full awareness of both sides of her ancestry. (The Chilcotin, or Tsilhqot’in, people are an Athabaskan-speaking group from British Columbia)



After napping in front of the fire, the kid wakes to the smell of biscuits and finds his father sitting at the table. He asks Frank for more hooch. The kid suggests more cedar tea, since his father has done well today, but his father refuses. Becca tells the kid he shouldn't let a drunk push him around. When Eldon gets defensive, she says he's in her house. It was her grandfather's before her, and she brought her father here to die. Eldon apologizes and thanks her for her kindness in letting them stay.

The kid and Becca eagerly eat the stew and biscuits, but Eldon barely touches his food. After they're done, Becca takes the last of the stew and a bit of biscuit outside for the spirits of her ancestors and the trees and the animals. Eldon thinks it's a waste of food, but Becca says not eating it is wasteful. After she goes outside, Eldon calls her bitter and washed out. The kid just thinks she's tough and straight-talking. Becca joins them on the porch with a pipe, and the three of them smoke in silence as the rain slows.

After studying Eldon in silence for a long time, Becca says she wouldn't have expected him to follow "the warrior way"—going West to die and be buried. She can tell he wasn't taught traditional ways, but it's also clear that he's led a sorry life, and she figures he's trying to exit life in an honorable way. She doubts it will work, though. The kid notices Eldon softening. Eldon decides to move back to the fire. He says he has a story he needs to tell. The kid and Becca settle near him in front of the hot fire.

CHAPTER 11

Eldon was 11 when his father went to fight in the war. It was the first time he learned that things could be taken away from him. His father's existence became reduced to envelopes. He and his mother were living on a beet farm in Alberta, working for meager pay. When his father sent his pay home, they had meat and new clothes. But his mother worried. And one day, a man came to the door, and soon his mother collapsed on the floor, wailing. He ran from the house, yelling, knowing the hole in his life would never be filled.

Becca has experience in dealing with an alcoholic parent. Though Eldon objects to Becca's forthrightness, he also respects her care for her own family as well as her hospitality.



Native traditions are an active part of Becca's daily life in a way that they aren't for Eldon and Frank. Though Eldon might really think that Becca's practice of setting aside food for the spirits is foolish and wasteful, it's also possible that he finds her matter-of-fact practices challenging, making him painfully aware of this lack in his own life.



Because of her background, Becca understands what Eldon is trying to do—make up for the failures in his life by drawing on native practices before it's too late. But she suspects that it's indeed too late for this to work out as Eldon hopes it will. Spiritual practices can't just be adopted as a quick fix.



Eldon begins to tell another story from his childhood. Eldon's life has been filled with loss. Early on, his family life seems to have been relatively stable, even though he was poor. His father's choice to fight in World War II seems to have been motivated at least partly by the desire to provide for his family. This worked for a while, but the cost to his family proves too great, as Eldon faces the first of many griefs that won't fully heal.



After this, Eldon's mother began to decline. She would dance in the polka-dot dress she bought with his father's war pay. Other times she sat blank and silent. She told Eldon he must be the man of the house now. He wanted to protect his mother, so at 13, he began to work as if it was his war. They traveled in a caravan of broken-down trucks and cars, seeking work—fruit picking, wood cutting, and other menial labor. They wandered all over. One summer, they worked on a railroad and filled their pockets. Eldon grew strong and skilled, feeling proud of his ability to provide for his mother.

Eldon never bothered with school, and there was nobody to notice or care that he didn't go. He learned about tools and machines instead, becoming proficient at fixing things. Though he was never good with words himself, he loved it when his mother would read to him from classic literature at night. He made one friend, Jimmy Weaseltail, who was half-blood. They worked hard, driving one another, and soon gained a reputation for their determination and their joy in work, which was all they knew. Jimmy liked to listen to Eldon's mother read, too. Eldon's memories of the three of them sitting together are his idea of family.

In the summer of 1948, they wound up in the Nechako Valley in British Columbia where Eldon and Jimmy corralled flotillas of logs downriver to the sawmill. The work was like a game to them, and they never worried about the danger. They loved the thrill. Their foreman, Jenks, encouraged them in this, saying caution is deadlier than playfulness and daring. He taught them logrolling, which required dexterity and fearlessness.

Jimmy and Eldon worked together spinning timbers, an elegant dance. Jimmy told Jenks that his father was in rodeos; that's how he had the guts for logrolling. Eldon wasn't sure where he got his courage. It didn't feel dangerous to him—just free. Jenks told the boys about his adventures working in logging camps all the way across Canada before finally settling down here. So Eldon opened up about his life, too. He explained that his mother's gumption was his inspiration and Jenks was intrigued.

Jenks started having meals in the cookhouse where Eldon's mother works. Eventually, he started eating in the family's shack, bringing plenty of wine and beer. Eldon saw his mother grow girlish and relaxed in Jenks's company. Jenks himself was animated, too. Then she read to them, quieting and enchanting the three of them.

Like Frank, Eldon spent much of his youth without a dad. As a kid, Eldon had a strong sense of responsibility for his family and, like Frank, a good work ethic. In fact, he stepped up to care for his mother in a remarkably precocious way for a young teenager. Given how much Eldon's life falls apart later, this sets up the expectation of even heavier grief to come.



Hard work was part of Eldon's childhood, and, like Frank, he took work seriously. Stories were another significant part of his life. Though he later questions the value of stories, Eldon took their importance for granted when he was young. They helped draw him, his mother, and Jimmy together in a familial bond in the midst of difficult circumstances.



Eldon's youth was marked not just by hard work and skill, but also by friendship and even joy. Again, even with the hardships, his earlier life held more happiness and promise than his adulthood.



Eldon showed more courage and initiative in his youth than he does now. He also showed greater willingness to open up about his own story than he showed in subsequent years, by opening up to Jenks. His memories create the impression that something disastrous will happen later on.



Jenks brings something into Eldon's home that hasn't been there for a long time—happiness for his mother, and an overall sense of domestic tranquility. At this point, however, it's unclear if Jenks is to be trusted.



Stories were Eldon's "wound." They came to remind him not of books read by firelight, but of "the sudden holes life can sometimes fall into." Soon, Jenks spent most of his time in their shack, and before long, Jenks and Eldon's mother were sharing a bed. Meanwhile, he became a harsher, more demanding boss. Eldon shrugged off the new limits Jenks set—he was raised to work for work's sake.

After a month, he sees his mother's first bruise. It's a purple ring around her throat. Her eyes look dull. Eldon cusses when he looks at her, but his mother holds up a hand to him, saying she said things she shouldn't. He stops shaking and embraces her. That night, he stares at Jenks while his mother reads to them. Jenks doesn't say anything to him, and it infuriates Eldon.

A week later, Eldon sees more bruises. Through the half-open bathroom door, he can see that his mother is studying them in the mirror and trying not to cry. But when she sees Eldon watching her, she abruptly closes the door. That night, he sits at the fire clenching and unclenching his fists and wishing he could hit both of them. That night, he and Jimmy smoke out back in the moonless night. Eldon says that if this happens again, or worse, something will have to give. Jimmy says to count him in.

Four nights later, Eldon is out in the trees. Neither he nor Jimmy can stand listening to his mother read anymore, not with Jenks sitting there. Now Eldon watches the cabin and waits. Eventually, he hears a slap and a crash. He and Jimmy rush into the house where his mother is screaming. They find Jenks clutching her throat, ready to hit her. Her eyes fill with horror when she sees them, then she crumples to the floor as Jenks lets her go. He smiles at the boys' challenge, taunting them. It pains Eldon to see his mother huddling under the table in fear.

Eldon can hardly breathe, and his arms are trembling. He ducks a punch from Jenks and is then sent sprawling by a kick. Before he can recover his wits, he hears a whack and Jenks's body collapses on the floor beside him. Jenks's eyes seem amazed as he realizes he's bleeding, and then he closes his eyes and goes limp. Eldon looks at Jimmy; he's holding a hunting knife and a club. His mother crawls to Jenks and cries. She cradles his head in her lap as he moans. Eldon stands up and says Jenks deserved this, but she protests that they don't know him. Anyway, they'll have to run. Eldon asks if she would choose Jenks over him; she says this is how it has to be.

Though Eldon had once treasured his mother's stories, they became a symbol of his family's vulnerability. The stories helped bring Jenks into his home, and Jenks started taking a less fatherly, more dominating role.



Eldon sees evidence that Jenks is abusing his mother, though his mother makes excuses for Jenks's behavior. Jenks, briefly a father figure in Eldon's life, has betrayed him. The sense of familial peace and harmony in their home is dashed within a matter of weeks.



In addition to feeling that Jenks has betrayed him, Eldon is angry with his mother for letting Jenks into their life and tolerating his abuse. He and Jimmy (who has also found shelter in Eldon's home and who especially loves Eldon's mother) make plans to put an end to Jenks's behavior.



Jenks disrupts the family circle he had briefly seemed to help complete—Jimmy and Eldon have essentially been pushed outside the house. When they catch Jenks in violence firsthand, they force their way back in.



Though Eldon obviously meant to confront Jenks, Jimmy goes a step further and injures him, perhaps fatally. But when Eldon's mother takes Jenks's side, Eldon takes this as a rejection of himself once and for all.



Eldon rapidly packs, taking his jar of wages out of the cupboard. He tells his mother she has a man to provide for her now and heads for the door. Jimmy says that he hopes Jenks makes it, but if he does, he'll have to watch his back. He'll never know where Jimmy might be. He's crying as he joins Eldon on the porch, and Eldon's mother tells them to go. Jimmy angrily drives his knife into the doorjamb, and he and Eldon walk away.

For years now, Eldon has taken great pride in providing for his mother. When Jenks enters the picture, he feels displaced from that role, and what's more, his mother seems willing to let Jenks take his place, thereby rejecting Eldon. Eldon feels like a failure.



CHAPTER 12

The kid asks his father if he ever went back, and he says no. Eldon is trembling. His face looks more shadowed and lined. He explains that he and Jimmy were too proud to return; they found whatever work they could, traveling, enjoying money and the company of men. Becka asks if Eldon ever wanted to find out how his mother fared, and Eldon looks at the kid with a woeful, vulnerable look that embarrasses him. Finally, Eldon says he never knew how to try. His anger cooled off, but then he was overcome by guilt for leaving his mother with Jenks. To cope with the shame, he drank.

Telling this story is costly for Eldon. He's giving Frank a key to understanding his family's past, but the act of telling weakens him physically at the same time as it unburdens him emotionally. There's a sense that withholding the truth over so many years has sickened Eldon beyond the point of healing. In part, this happened because Eldon coped with his guilt by drinking, establishing a lifelong pattern for dealing with loss and grief.



The kid can't meet his father's eyes, and Eldon says that love and shame don't mix; one always dominates the other. The kid accuses Eldon of cheating him out of a grandmother with his cowardice. Eldon protests that he never got to be a kid—his life was hard. At least the kid had someone to take care of him. The kid stirs the fire and then says there's more to it than being taken care of. He was always picked on for not knowing who he was, mocked for being Indian. Eldon says that's just like him, but the kid replies that he's nothing like Eldon—for one thing, he's not a coward.

While Eldon explains that his shame prevented him from trying to reconcile with his mother, Frank just sees that Eldon's cowardly choices have failed him. Father and son each see something in the other's life that they lacked: Eldon sees that Frank at least got to grow up being cared for instead of having to fend for himself, but Frank sees that Eldon at least had the chance to know his Indian family—a chance he threw away and denied to the kid, too.



After a while, the kid acknowledges that he understands that his father was scared to go to jail. He's about to cry; he never got to have a mother. His father stares at him for a while and finally says that, if he'd stayed, Jenks's friends would've half killed him. The kid says that would have been better than being half alive.

While fear of retaliation seems to have been a factor for Eldon, Frank doesn't fully see Eldon's side of things, either—that Eldon felt rejected in his role as man of the house. He sees Eldon the way he's long thought of him—as simply cowardly and selfish.



That night the kid sleeps close to the fire, listening to the rain and his father's breathing. When he sees Eldon shaking, he puts his own blanket over him. Becka sits down with him and they watch Eldon sleep. Becka says his father was brave to tell him that story—most people would just try to forget.

Despite his conflicted feelings about Eldon, Frank feels protective of him, too. Becka encourages Frank to reconsider his view of Eldon. Telling stories is a courageous act, she suggests, that not just anyone would do.



Becka asks if those who raised him ever told him anything about his mother. But the kid says Eldon was always too drunk to tell him, and the old man didn't say anything either. As they sip tea together, the kid says his father doesn't seem like much of a warrior to him. But to Becka, the truth of a person lies where it can't be seen. When the kid says his father just talks in stories, Becka replies that our stories are all we are.

In the morning, Becka gives them porridge with berries and Eldon fidgets with his food. The kid tends to the horse and gathers their supplies. Eldon looks yellower and shakes as Becka walks him out of the house. It takes both of them to hoist the feverish man onto the horse. They tie his hands and feet to the stirrups and pommel, then Becka gives the kid a bundle containing a soothing medicine—it helped her own father near the end. She warns him that when Eldon becomes too sick to drink booze, he'll get sicker. It will be ugly, but the medicine will help. She waves off the kid's thanks and invites him to stop in on his way home. He nods, then leads the mare, bearing the slumped figure of his father, off into the chill morning.

CHAPTER 13

The horse seems to sense that the situation is serious; the kid doesn't even have to hold the reins. The kid fills his lungs with the fragrance of the rain-soaked land and feels drained from the previous night. He can't fit together the bits of history his father has given him and he doesn't know what's going to happen next. It's not clear if he can do what will have to be done.

Suddenly the mare snorts and rears. They've come around a long bend, and the kid wasn't paying attention to the wind direction. In front of them, standing on its hind legs, is a boar grizzly, roaring at them. The kid seizes the shying horse's reins. Eldon struggles to keep himself steady in the saddle. The kid ties the horse to a tree and unties his father. He explains to his father that they can't run, so he'll have to face the bear.

When the kid approaches the bear, it's swinging its head back and forth. He knows that if he shows the bear his back, it will know he's afraid. He walks toward it instead, making himself look as big as possible, widening his eyes and growling. He sees that the bear is a juvenile, but it's still dangerous. The bear bellows back and drops to the ground. The kid holds the bear's gaze and continues moving slowly forward. At last, it breaks its position and slowly retreats, looking back over its shoulder. When it reaches the next bend in the trail, it runs.

Even though the old man knew that Eldon might not tell Frank the truth for a long time, if ever, he steadfastly refuses to tell Frank about his mother, believing the story isn't his to tell—withholding it is more ethical for him than telling it. Becka encourages Frank with the idea that by telling Frank his stories, Eldon is doing something generous—he's offering Frank himself.



Eldon's and Frank's stay with Becka is an important stop in their "medicine walk." Becka literally provides them with medicine to help Eldon in his final days, but she also provides Frank with sympathy and perspective—helping him reconsider the value of his father's stories. This prepares Frank to care for his father better and receive what he has to say in their last days together. Becka's knowledge of native ways, integrated into her daily life, also models a way of life that neither Frank nor Eldon has fully experienced.



Hearing someone's story doesn't automatically mean that the details fall neatly into place. Eldon remains a mystery to Frank, and the memories he's shared don't yet add up. He's frightened by the reality of Eldon's imminent death.



Frank is so caught up in his situation that his awareness of nature—normally so instinctual—briefly fails him. The appearance of the bear, whom Frank can't avoid facing, suggests that his father's death (and perhaps Eldon's whole legacy) is just as unavoidable and intimidating for Frank.



Frank's approach to the bear—remaining steadfast and refusing to show his fear—reflects his approach to life in general. He faces situations with determination and honesty. This suggests that Frank's years of experiences in the wilderness have shaped his attitude about life in general. Similarly, his attitudes about nature most fully reveal who Frank is.



The kid releases his breath and suddenly the air is full of sounds again. He makes his way back to the trees and calms the spooked mare, then he eases his father onto his back. Eldon says he feels booze sick and is in pain, so the kid takes a glass jar of medicine out of Becka's sack. Its contents smell fungal and rotted. His father makes a face as he swallows some. After a little, he says the booze sickness is fading. He just feels lightheaded.

He asks the kid how he knew what to do about the bear and the kid replies that out here, you do what you have to. Anyway, everything takes guts. His father watches awhile and then, lulled by the medicine, gives in to sleep. The kid touches his father's cheek, which is less fevered now. He rests his hand there for a moment before rising to make camp.

In the late afternoon, his father wakes up. He's calmer and no longer shaking. When the kid offers him hooch, he declines it. They watch the snapping fire for a while, then Eldon asks the kid to pour out the remaining hooch; he wants to go clean and get by on Becka's juice as best he can. When Eldon takes another dose, he grows dreamy and asks for a story. But he falls asleep while the kid is still trying to think of one. As the sun sets, the kid quietly withdraws the booze bottles from the pack, walks to the creek, and stands on the bank holding them.

CHAPTER 14

When the kid was nine, he and the old man rode horses to the mill town, Parson's Gap, for the first time. It was late spring, before the heavier farm work began. The old man explained that Eldon had written to summon Frank, but he didn't know why. The kid wondered what Eldon did in the mill town and the old man laughed, saying that Eldon does lots of things and makes his own way in the world, something he can't help but admire. The old man figured that Eldon and the kid will "visit," and when the kid wonders how to visit, the old man said, "Damned if I know."

The old man believed that Eldon probably wanted to get to know Frank in the way a father knows his son, but the kid wasn't sure what that meant. The old man wasn't sure, either; he was raised to work, and that's the main thing he and his dad did together. Every once in a while, they'd go fishing. Sometimes, while they fished, his dad would tell stories about his life. The old man would hold onto every word of these rare stories.

Frank's success in intimidating the bear suggests that he'll also be successful in facing up to his fears about his father's death. Becka's unpleasant medicine helps soothe Eldon's painful craving for booze. Becka had understood that Eldon should be as clear-minded as possible for the conversations ahead.



Frank's comment that everything takes guts suggests that, with Becka's prompting, he's at least come around to appreciating his father's courage. His tender gesture toward Eldon confirms that.



By throwing out his remaining alcohol, Eldon is making an effort to end his life better than he's been living it. His willingness to do this shows how important Frank is to him, and also suggests that Becka's plain words got through to Eldon in spite of his indignation. Eldon's request for a story recalls his fondness for his mother's stories and suggests that even though stories pain him, he still finds them worthwhile.



Frank recalls some childhood memories of his father. Eldon took enough of an interest in Frank to invite him to visit in Parson's Gap. Frank's humorous exchange with the old man shows that like his guardian, Frank is more comfortable on the farm or in the woods than interacting socially. The old man's remark about Eldon shows that he has some positive regard for Eldon—the flipside of his unreliability is his ingenuity.



Frank is unfamiliar with traditional father-son interactions. The old man's memories of his father show that he thinks of Frank as a son—he mainly works alongside Frank, just like he did with his own father. Such interactions have been missing in Frank's interactions with Eldon.



They reached Parson's Gap in the early evening, bunking in the barn belonging to the old man's Métis friends. The kid enjoyed himself as they talked and laughed together. The next day, they walked through the town and the kid was fascinated by the people, the smell of the nearby mill, and the fancy old houses overlooking the river. He asked the old man if his father lived in one of those houses, but the old man said it was unlikely. He was given an address closer to the mill.

The mill was dirty and loud, and the houses near it were smaller, often in disrepair, with car frames rusting in the yards. It smelled like grease and latrines; the streets were filled with cracks and potholes. They found a treeless street and walked to a clapboard house with a crumbling chimney and rotted fence. As they approached the door, they heard yelling and smashing bottles. They stepped through a broken door and find room three, which is where the noise is coming from. The old man knocked and a voice told him to bring the fresh hooch. He opened the door and saw Eldon and a woman dancing to a staticky radio.

The woman asked who the kid was, and Eldon turned in surprise, sending the woman tumbling. He said he wasn't expecting them. The old man pointed out that Eldon wrote, but Eldon said he wasn't expecting it to be today; he just got paid and he's letting off steam. As he tried to straighten the furniture that got pushed aside, Eldon staggered, bumped into the woman, and laughed. He said they should have written before they came, but the old man said it wouldn't have made any difference.

Eldon had trouble focusing. He sat down on a chair, rubbing his face with grimy hands, and said maybe they can do whatever the kid likes best. The kid stared at his flustered father and finally said that he's supposed to get to know him like a father knows a son. But it seems like all Eldon wants to do is drink and break things. He doesn't even know what having a father means except for what Eldon has shown him.

Eldon says he's working at the mine now and could buy the kid something nice, but the old man points out that the kid needs *Eldon*, not his money. Eldon says he's sorry, and the old man tells the kid to wait outside. Out in the yard, the kid hears raised voices in the house and feels like crying, though he doesn't know why. Eventually the old man comes out and says he's sorry that Frank had to see his father drunk, offering to take Frank for ice cream. The kid says he and Eldon have something in common—Eldon doesn't know anything about being a father, and he doesn't know anything about being a son. The old man puts his hands on the kid's shoulders and says he knows everything there is to know about being a son.

Used to an isolated wilderness life, Frank is fascinated by the town environment. Its strangeness also reflects his unfamiliarity with his father's life. Eldon's way of life is a mystery to him, like everything else in Parson's Gap.



Eldon is living in poverty. When Frank and the old man arrive, Eldon's drinking is immediately apparent. He's in no condition to welcome his son, and his living situation suggests that there's no room in his life for Frank whatsoever. The only guest he's looking for is one who'll bring more whisky.



Despite his claimed desire to be a presence in Frank's life, Eldon clearly doesn't make him a priority. The old man sees that despite Eldon's protests, he doesn't think about Frank that much and isn't capable of following through on his promises.



At age nine, Frank speaks with a combination of childlike bluntness and adult insight that throws Eldon off guard. In short, Frank senses that fatherhood is more than just biology, but he knows Eldon is only meeting the minimum requirement. His actions suggest that he doesn't really care about being in Frank's life.



Frank is too young to fully understand what he's seen—he just knows he doesn't feel valued by Eldon. After the old man takes Eldon to task for his failure, Frank tries to articulate this to the old man. But the old man tells Frank he's wrong that he doesn't know what it means to be a son. He implies that Frank is a son to him, and even if Eldon continues to fail him, the old man will still care for him—to act as a father to him in ways Eldon can't.



The kid didn't go again until the following year, on his birthday. The old man stayed with his friends at the farm and the kid walked to his father's place alone, feeling sad as he remembered the previous year. He still felt an aching connection to his father. Not having a father made him feel like an outsider, and while he knew the old man was his guardian, it wasn't the same thing as a father. His classmates' fathers seemed quiet and strong, certainly never drunk. He figured fathers can only be known over time, which convinces him to see his father again.

The old man showed him his father's letter. Eldon has promised to be sober, and he says he wants to be with his son on such an important birthday. The old man said it's up to the kid whether he goes. The kid looked older than ten these days; because of his farm work, he was bulky, and he walked more confidently and purposefully than a child. As he walked through the town, people stared at him.

He reached his father's new neighborhood, which was neater and brighter, with groomed lawns and verandas on the houses. His father's house had flower boxes and a porch swing and he heard laughter inside. A tall, white-haired, blue-eyed woman answered the door and introduced herself as Jenna. She welcomed him into the bright, well-cared-for house and fetched Eldon, who enters the room clean-shaven and neatly dressed. His appearance made the kid smile.

Eldon introduced Jenna as his landlady. He was a roomer here, along with other mill workers, and Jenna cooked for them. Jenna had packed a big picnic for them. Eldon said the kid would have to open his gift in order to know what else they're doing. The kid walked to the kitchen and found a narrow package on the table. He stared at it, then gently tugged the paper off. His father told him to just rip it. Inside he found a fishing rod. He'd never used one before, since the old man taught him to set out baited lines. Eldon said he was going to teach the kid to fly-fish and they each ate a slice of birthday cake that Jenna had baked. Then Jenna told Eldon to be careful with her truck—no foolishness. Eldon promised and told the kid he won't have any hooch today.

As they leave, the kid thanked Jenna. She smiled at him, rested her hand on his head, and gave him a steady look before telling him to have the best day. Jenna kept staring at them while they climbed into the truck. Eldon told the kid that Jenna is a worrywart and a snoop, but the kid thought she was nice. His father drove slowly down the street. After he turned the corner, he stepped on the gas and worked the clutch, spinning gravel. They sped out of the mill town.

Despite the old man's anger with Eldon and his protectiveness of Frank, he knows it's important for Frank to keep trying to have a relationship with Eldon. Based on what he sees of his peers' fathers, Frank concludes that he hasn't had enough time to solve the mystery of his father. He hopes that deep down in Eldon, he'll discover a consistent, reliable father.



The old man gives Frank the chance to decide if he really wants to see his father. Seasoned by farm work and the old man's nurture, Frank is growing up in every way and is more mature than the average 10-year-old—a testament to the fact that he actually does have a good dad (the old man).



Unlike last year, Eldon's improved surroundings and appearance suggest that he's moved up in the world and might really be trying to be a better father. Frank is heartened by his father's appearance—to him, Eldon looks like a dad, ready and eager to spend time with his son.



Frank's birthday celebration with Eldon is the most conventional father-son experience he's ever had. In fact, with Jenna's maternal presence, it's the closest to a traditional family experience he's had as well. He's even unfamiliar with the tradition of unwrapping a gift. With the promise of a fishing trip, Eldon actually seems to be making an effort to give Frank the experience he's dreamed of. Jenna, too, seems to believe Eldon is capable of that and is invested in helping make it happen.



Jenna's loving and serious gestures hint that she understands how significant this day is for Frank, and that perhaps she's seen scenarios like this in her rooming house before. Ominously, Eldon initially makes a show of being careful and responsible, but he then reverts to his usual self as soon as they're out of sight.



They drove down a single lane road in the country towards a narrow creek with small rapids. Eldon parked by a group of birch trees and the kid got out and closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of the sun, the sound of the creek, and the smell of the nearby bog. His father showed him how to assemble his fishing rod, explaining that using a fly rod is more about grace than strength. He demonstrated how to cast the line. Then he guided the kid in doing the same. After a dozen tries, the kid learns to mimic his father's graceful cast.

They walked to a wide pool, and Eldon taught the kid how to cast so that his line rode the current. As Eldon walked down to the next pool, leaving him to fish, the kid thought that his father seemed more confident here—even happy. The kid kept practicing, not noticing as time slipped away. Around mid-afternoon, he heard his father yelling. When he hurried up the bank, he found his father struggling to hold a large trout. Then his father slipped and crashed on a rock, the fish flying out of his arms, landing in the shallows and swimming away. His father fell again, so the kid ran and grabbed Eldon's hand, pulling him out of the pond. He smelled whisky on his father's breath and told him he was drunk. Eldon said he was just celebrating the kid's birthday and suggested eating their picnic; he's lost his rod anyway.

The kid stomped over to the trees and sat by the picnic basket, but his father rifled in the truck for another bottle of booze. As Eldon gobbled his sandwich, he chugged the bottle. Then the kid got in the driver's seat of the truck and turned the key in the ignition. His father stumbled over and asked what he was doing, and the kid replied that he'd been driving a tractor since he was eight. He told his father to get in or walk home. Eldon finally climbed into the passenger seat, reeking of whisky, and the kid drove the truck slowly down the bumpy road. Eldon slurred, "Happy birthday."

The kid drove slowly and carefully back to town, focusing on the road. Eldon fell asleep halfway home. When the kid found his father's rooming house, it was evening. He saw Jenna on the sidewalk, jumped out, and handed her the truck keys. Two men from the rooming house dragged Eldon from the truck and got him into the house. He asked Jenna for writing materials and she brought paper and pen. Leaning against the hood of the truck, he wrote in big childish letters, "You lied to me!"

The next time the kid sees his father, he's 12. In the meantime, he has learned to let go of his expectations; as a farmer, he marks the passage of time by seasons, not special occasions. But when another letter from Eldon comes, the old man encourages him to go visit. He rides to Parson's Gap by himself for the first time.

This is a singular experience in Frank's life. He's getting to enjoy his favorite environment, the outdoors, with his father for the first time. And in addition to this, his father is teaching him a skill, something the old man has usually done. Eldon's patient instruction even suggests that he has the potential to be a good father in some ways. So far, the day is fulfilling Frank's hopes for a father-son experience.



The idealized father-son scene is disrupted when Frank finds out his father has been drinking the whole time. In fact, Eldon seems to have taken advantage of his son's happy absorption in fishing to step aside and drink in secret. While Eldon makes a joke of the whole situation, later on, it'll be revealed that fear of failure is a major motivation for Eldon's drinking. His fear is so strong that the father-son outing was almost bound to fail.



Given Frank's training on the farm, it's not very surprising that he's capable of driving the pickup truck, but it makes for a tragic role-reversal: instead of enjoying Eldon's love and care, Frank has to take responsibility for his father. It's a painful coming-of-age memory for him, as he learns again that Eldon doesn't keep his promises and is incapable of acting like a father.



Again, Frank is forced to take a more adult, responsible role—a dangerous one even for a precocious child—while his father shows himself to be completely unreliable. His note to Eldon sums up the current status of their relationship—Frank is just a kid, but he's already facing stark truths about his dad.



Frank starts giving up on Eldon. But even though recent experiences have been so disappointing, the old man still sees the value of Frank maintaining a relationship with Eldon, hoping that Eldon will eventually open up to Frank about his past.



When he reaches the town, his father is with a woman, Chevy, who has blackened teeth. They have supper together, then his father goes to a bar with the woman and leaves the kid to sleep on a rocking chair. When the couple comes home, they have sex in the dark. Once they turn on the light and notice the kid, the woman leers at him. His father grins drunkenly and tells him the woman wants to see him watching them. As the couple starts having sex again, the kid quietly slips out of the room and returns to his horse. He and Eldon were supposed to go on a camping trip.

The following September, the kid started getting letters from his father about Christmas. Eldon told him about the big feast they'd have, the tree they'd cut down, and the presents he'd get. The kid grew excited. Usually, he and the old man exchanged a few practical gifts, then went for a snowshoe hike while their turkey roasted. The kid associated Christmas with the silent, sleeping land. The old man tried to discourage him from expecting anything different this year. But the kid couldn't stop himself. When they went to town to meet the bus, his father wasn't on it.

The kid stomped around the parking lot, pounding his fists against his thighs and wanting to scream or cry. He knelt in the snow. The old man said he should have never let Eldon near Frank. But the kid said he was angry at himself, for getting his hopes up after what he'd seen. The old man told him there's no shame in having a heart, and that he had to keep moving through the pain. By the time they got back to the farm, he had.

CHAPTER 15

The kid wakes up before dawn, works the kinks out of his back, and washes up at the creek. When he checks on Eldon, he finds his father's face hot. In his pack, he's surprised to find some extra supplies that Becka snuck in—beans, bacon, and bread. The kid heats the food over the fire. His father wakes up hungry but grimacing in pain. He's disappointed to hear that the hooch has been dumped. The kid tells him he didn't dump all of it.

When the food is ready, Eldon tries to eat some bacon and can't stomach it. The kid feeds him some beans and makes a cold compress in the creek, pressing the damp shirt to his father's head. After breaking camp and stamping out the fire, his father weakly remarks that the kid is very careful. The kid says he has to be—when you're alone in the wilderness, there's nobody on your back trail. Eldon says he left a lot of back trail in his day, but he wasn't lonely. He thinks a man makes a choice that he doesn't need others walking with him. The kid agrees—he thinks that's why he's gotten to know the land so well. He feels best when he's alone.

This is the most shocking of Frank's many negative childhood memories. It's questionable whether Eldon is even sober enough to remember what happened, but Frank will never be able to forget it. He's stuck with another wounding memory of Eldon failing him.



Even though Eldon has disappointed Frank many times before, Frank can't stop himself from getting his hopes up again. This shows that even though Frank is well cared for by the old man, the longing for relationship with his biological father can't just be suppressed. Once again, though, Eldon makes promises which he fails to fulfill. The promises he makes seem to correspond to the disappointments—as if they very act of promising leads to self-defeating fear and then to failure.



Up until now, Frank has been emotionally restrained, even when faced with Eldon's failures. This time proves to be too much for him, though it manifests as anger at himself for putting himself in a position to be disappointed. He's bearing a complex emotional burden because of his father's failures.



Back in the narrative's present, Eldon continues to worsen. Even though Eldon had summoned the resolve to ask Frank to dump the whisky, he still struggles to accept the reality of it. Frank, wisely not taking Eldon at his word, held back some of the hooch for later.



From all the time he's spent in the wilderness, Frank knows that a person has to fend for themselves and take responsibility for their own actions. This might also be a veiled remark about Eldon's absence. In a way, the solace of the land has supported him through that, to the point that he's come to favor being alone. Eldon says he prefers being alone, too, but it seems more likely that he fears obligation to others.



Eldon watches the kid rolling a cigarette and says that he always preferred holding words in his head to speaking. The words never come out quite right. But he always enjoyed hearing a good story. The kid says he was taught that most talking is a waste of time, but his father says he wishes he'd figured out how to say more about what he's seen and done—soon, there will be nobody to speak for him. He recalls that his mother used to say, "Stories get told one word at a time."

After a long silence, the kid helps his father onto the horse. They spend the morning making their way up a ridge, the mare treading gently as Eldon falls unconscious. At noon, they stop in a mossy, shadowed glade. The kid finds his father soaked with sweat. He gives Eldon some medicine, and Eldon says he can't sleep—he's in a harder fight now, and he wonders how much farther they have to go. The kid thinks they can get there by evening. After a rest, they pass through one of the kid's favorite trapping spots, and he tells his father about his adventures here. Once he started coming here alone, he came to know the feel of the place, and he was never afraid.

In reply, Eldon suddenly croaks out, "You're a good man." The old man has done a good job, Eldon says, and he asks if the old man knows how good the kid is at surviving in the wilderness. The kid assures him he knows. They continue in silence. By evening, they come to the foot of the ridge his father wanted to reach. Eldon is breathing raggedly, feverish and shivering, and the bright evening is full of birdsong. When they reach the crest of the ridge, they see a turquoise river, full of glacier melt, flowing down into the flood plain. Deer and a black bear move along the river. Snowy peaks line the opposite side of the valley.

The kid helps his father down from the horse and eases him against a saddle so he can look down on the valley. After Eldon is soothed to sleep by the medicine, the kid creeps into the forest to hunt. He listens for a long time before hearing some grouse. When he whistles in their direction, they shelter in the lower branches of the trees, and the kid throws stones and fells two birds. Back at the camp, he builds a fire, then cleans and skewers the birds. As the sun sets, he finds his father clammy. He's clearly full of pain, so the kid gives him more medicine. He feels afraid of what's coming.

Eldon admits he's never really known how to express himself, but now he feels the pressure to do so before he dies. His mother's proverb suggests that stories, like life, unfold a piece at a time and must be handled accordingly instead of being viewed as a whole.



As their journey continues, Eldon gradually gets closer to death. Now that Eldon has told Frank some of his stories, Frank opens up a little more to Eldon in return, talking about the places he loves most, where he's most able to be himself. His unaccustomed openness shows that he's softening enough toward Eldon to reciprocate with some of his own memories.



Here, Eldon pays Frank a surprising compliment. In addition to being his most open praise of Frank, his words also acknowledge the old man's accomplishments in acting as a father to Frank, helping mold Frank into who he is. This also means acknowledging what he's failed to be. Meanwhile, they reach the goal of their journey—the ridge where Eldon intends to die.



Frank once again uses his hunting skill to provide for himself and Eldon. In the meantime, it's obvious that Eldon is rapidly approaching death, and for all his maturity, Frank has never faced something like this before.



After Eldon wakes up again, the kid helps him to the fireside and gets him to swallow two pieces of grouse. Following another doze, his father speaks in a monotone. He says that Jimmy used to tell him that human beings are a “Great Mystery” and that the old Indians did everything in order to learn to live with that mystery. They didn’t try to solve it or make sense of it—they just learned to be with it. Eldon wishes he’d learned to do that.

Eldon tells Frank that he’s never belonged anywhere or to anyone. At some point, he accepted that was just his lot in life. He figured he deserved it because of what he’d done, and what he hasn’t done. After a coughing fit, he goes on. When he learned he was dying, he remembered this spot. He came here while working as a logger scout at 15. He spent two days sitting on the cliff overlooking the valley and didn’t think about anything in particular—he just felt a measure of peace. That’s why he chose to come back here to die, it was the only place he ever fit.

Out of the shadows, his father’s voice comes again. He tells Frank he once killed a man. As the kid sits close to him to hand him a cigarette, he explains he’s never spoken of this, but it’s what Frank needs to know about him. He arranges himself as comfortably as he can, breathes, raises his head, and begins to speak.

CHAPTER 16

Jumping back to the years after he abandoned his mother, Eldon says that he and Jimmy had never heard of Korea, but in the bunkhouses in 1951, it’s all anyone could talk about. Some of the men missed World War II and were eager to prove themselves in combat. After reading in the newspapers about the campaign of Hill 677, soon Eldon and Jimmy could talk of nothing else, either. Jimmy suggested that they enlist. They could get training, then come back and earn better money. Eldon agreed. At 18, they were assigned to the Royal Canadian Regiment.

They traveled across Canada with a raucous group of mostly dropouts and fellow itinerant workers. War didn’t really mean much to them—it was more about bravado, something they associate with the open lands rushing past their train. At night, he thought about his father and his mother, whom he hadn’t seen in four years. He was afraid of dying.

Eldon’s old friend Jimmy was his closest contact with elements of Indian heritage. Jimmy suggested that, in the Native view, life isn’t necessarily about having everything figured out. It’s about being at peace with what’s not understood. This is exactly what Eldon has always struggled with, turning to alcohol to cope instead.



Unlike Frank, Eldon has never discovered a place where he fit. The lone exception was this mountain ridge—the only place where he ever felt capable of accepting the mystery of life and being at peace. It’s significant that he chooses to die here—it fits with the novel’s argument that it’s within nature that human beings tend to find peace with themselves.



Now that he’s returned to a place where he once new peace, Eldon feels prepared to tell Frank one of his most painful and consequential memories. The land seems to lend him strength to tell his story instead of continuing to keep it hidden.



Hill 677 refers to the Battle of Kapyong in April 1951, which was fought between Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand forces and the Chinese army. Canadian resistance to a Chinese assault famously prevented the Chinese from breaking through the United Nations defenses. Stories like these encouraged men like Jimmy and Eldon to seek a sense of purpose through fighting and to set themselves up for a better life.



War isn’t very real to Eldon at this point. Like logrolling and other jobs he and Jimmy have enjoyed over the years, it’s just another exhilarating adventure. However, Eldon can’t forget memories of his father’s death and how his loss affected him and his mother.



When they reached Camp Petawawa, they were swept into basic training. It was the hardest work Eldon has ever done, but he loved the exertion, and he and Jimmy pushed one another as they'd always done before. The two of them could disappear into the woods, untraceable. At the end of training, they were assigned together to the 3rd battalion and sent for advanced weapons training. Unlike Jimmy, Eldon struggled to commit himself to war. He had questions about it. But he was loyal to Jimmy, and he became a dependable fighter. At Nippon Bara, the two of them got sent out on reconnaissance patrols. Jimmy is sure that it's because they're the best soldiers—it's who they are now.

They were set up on a hill outside Pusan, a short distance from the Chinese troops. They spent their days in trenches and their nights making patrols into no-man's-land. As the sun dipped toward twilight, the fighting would begin. They would crawl out of their trenches and into a nightmarish barrage, bodies collapsing around them. When the barrage stopped, they would inch forward in the darkness until they encountered the enemy and were plunged instantly into wrestling knife-fights. Then, when ordered to disengage, they would crawl backwards to the safety of the trenches. This went on for months.

CHAPTER 17

For a while, the kid is lost in the images of the war. When his father speaks again, he says that "Starlight" is a teacher's name—Jimmy told him that one night in the war, saying that a man should know why he's called what he is, and Frank should know, too. The kid says he's always wondered about it. According to Jimmy, **Starlight** was the name given to those who were taught by the Star People, long ago. The Star People would come out of the stars on clear nights, sit with people, and teach them. The wisest people, the Starlights, were taught more. They were meant to become teachers and storytellers themselves. The kid thinks the name makes sense for him. He wishes he'd known about it before now.

Eldon starts talking about the war again. Waiting in the trench one night he tells Frank, Jimmy told Eldon that Ojibways used to bury warriors sitting upright, facing east toward the sunrise, with their weapons around them. This was so that they could someday follow the sun into the Happy Hunting Grounds and become warriors again.

Camp Petawawa was a major military training camp in Eastern Ontario, and Nippon Bara was a weapons training camp in Japan, both places which featured in the Canadian experience of World War II. Well accustomed to hard work, Eldon and Jimmy thrive in training and distinguish themselves as valuable workers. For Eldon, the war has more to do with friendship than ideals, which will shape his whole experience of the war—tragically, it turns out.



In Korea, the war quickly goes from exhilarating adventure to terrifying ordeal. They face fear, carnage, and death on a daily basis. Noticeably absent is any real sense of the purposes for which they're fighting. They just face brutal hand-to-hand fighting day in and day out with little respite.



Eldon interrupts his account of the war with one of the stories Jimmy shared with him. Eldon had never felt confident about who he was or where he belonged; in a real way, Jimmy gave him a sense of identity. Here he does it by telling Eldon the origin of the Starlight surname according to Ojibway legend. It's said to be connected to storytelling—the very thing Eldon finds so difficult yet feels compelled to do. It's another example of a way that knowledge of one's heritage can be passed down in indirect ways.



This is the origin of Eldon's desire to be buried in the "warrior way." It's another bit of Ojibway heritage that Eldon, and now Frank, glean indirectly by way of Jimmy.



Jimmy told Eldon that, if he got killed, he wanted Eldon to swear to make sure he got buried like that. In the darkness, he cut a gash in his palm. Jimmy marked Eldon's cheeks with lines of blood and told Eldon to do the same. When it was done, Jimmy said this meant that now, they'll carry each other into battle. Then they sat against the wall of the trench. Eldon looked up at the **stars** and wondered if somehow his dead father got to settle down somewhere and learn about the story of his name.

The lieutenant crawled through the trench and told Jimmy and Eldon that every company was sending out volunteers for advance reconnaissance. He needed to know if they were okay with the assignment. They said he could count on them, so he told them to go straight out and back and not to be heroes. They checked their weapons, coated their faces with boot-black, and then looked at each other. Wordlessly, they crawled out of the trench together.

The two crawled steadily across the open. All they could hear was wind, and all they could see was dark. When they heard voices, Eldon trembled and felt like crying. Jimmy rested a hand on his back. Then a shell hit behind them, close to their line. When Eldon started to rise, Jimmy pulled him to the ground. The Chinese started running toward them. When Jimmy jumped up and stabbed one of the soldiers through the gut, Eldon was shocked to his feet, too. He and Jimmy zigzagged back toward their lines, dodging shells. At one point, Jimmy grunted and hit the ground, hit by rifle fire. Eldon fell down beside him and pulled him close. He pulled Jimmy into the shelter of some boulders.

Hearing the broken English of the Chinese soldiers, Eldon tried to move Jimmy more securely under cover, but Jimmy screamed and started thrashing, driven wild by the pain. Eldon knew his friend's screams would instantly give their position away, so he pinned him with a knee and covered his mouth. He also pressed his knife to Jimmy's ribs. When Jimmy went still, he closed his eyes for a moment. Then he looked at Eldon with an expression of peace and nodded at him. Eldon twisted his knife into Jimmy as he was trained to do and leaned his cheek against Jimmy's until he heard Jimmy breathe his last. Then he got up and ran, screaming and crying.

While awaiting battle, Eldon made a promise to Jimmy, and the two of them swore loyalty to one another. These promises end up having a tremendous impact on Eldon's future. At the time, they made him think of his father who was killed in battle. In a way, this is the closest Eldon has been to his long-dead father.



Throughout their friendship, Eldon and Jimmy have been able to cooperate without even speaking. Their scouting assignment is the ultimate test of this instinctive ability.



Even under life-and-death pressure, Jimmy was a steadying presence for Eldon. And even after Jimmy was shot, Eldon instinctively helped and protected his fallen friend under fire, demonstrating the friends' deep loyalty to one another.



Though Eldon had been considering the likelihood of death ever since he enlisted, he didn't imagine a scenario like this. He's clearly acting out of instinct rather than malice, as he's responding to the realities of their desperate situation on the battlefield. In the ultimate example of the friends' ability to communicate, Jimmy also clearly assents to what Eldon decides he must do. It's also an extremely traumatizing event, as Eldon ends the life of the only friend who's ever made him feel at home in the world.



Eldon tells Frank that he didn't want to die. When he had gotten back to the trenches, he'd lied and claimed that Jimmy was killed by a Chinese patrol. His body was never found. Soon afterwards, Eldon started drinking heavily and was dishonorably discharged. He was only 18, and he's never talked about it since. The kid stirs the fire and looks at his father's gaunt shape. He says it must have been hard to carry this memory of Jimmy all this time, and his father starts trembling, so the kid helps him stretch out and pours water into his mouth. With effort, his father rasps, "The **stars** are in us."

The kid tends the fire and looks at the shapes of the **stars**. He tries to feel the stars inside himself, but he just feels empty. After a while, the kid says that Jimmy probably would have died anyway, but his father says there's no way of knowing that. Nonetheless, the kid says it's better to think that than to feel like a coward all his life. His father looks at him bitterly and says he is hard—is it because he's spent so much time out here? The kid says he prefers it out here—there are no lies. He says he's never been in a war of his own, but he's still living in the one his father never finished.

The kid's insides are churning, and he feels angry. He pokes at the fire, and his father asks if he thinks he can forgive him. The kid says he isn't the one who has to forgive. After his father falls asleep, the kid watches him and says, "War's nearly over."

CHAPTER 18

It's chilly the next morning. The kid gives his father some medicine and some hooch, though it's difficult for Eldon to swallow. Then he heads down to the stream to water the mare and refill his canteen. He spears some trout and guts and cleans them, then carries them back up the ridge. He also hunts some mushrooms and cooks all of this over the fire. His father is suffering from the shakes, and when the kid touches him, he convulses. The kid offers him some hooch, but he refuses it. Giving him medicine instead calms him almost immediately; he lies on his side and stares at the kid.

As the kid whittles on a stick, his father finally says there is one more thing. The kid knows what that is: "my mother." When he asks how he can know for sure that his father is telling him the truth, Eldon says he couldn't lie about her. He tried to lie to himself and drink it away, but it didn't work. He asks Frank to help him sit up, so the kid settles him on a log and wraps a blanket around him. His father looks frightened.

Killing Jimmy was traumatizing, and Eldon knew that if he told what he'd done, things likely wouldn't have gone any better for him. He began to cope with the pain by erasing his memories. But hiding the truth all this time has deepened and prolonged Eldon's pain instead of alleviating it. His comment about the stars is a recognition of the story Jimmy once shared with him about his name's origins.



Frank finds it difficult to connect to what his father tells him—he thinks his father has reacted out of cowardice by running away from the truth of what he'd done. He's only known lies from Eldon in the past, and he doesn't fully trust his father now. All he knows is what Eldon's own pain has cost him over the years—robbing him of his father's presence.



Frank implies that Eldon needs Jimmy's forgiveness, although that isn't really true—Frank is clearly angry at his father. Still, he feels compassion toward Eldon, too, recognizing his lifelong battle.



The next day, it's clear that Eldon's condition is worsening even more. The more Eldon unburdens himself of his stories, the more his condition seems to decline, suggesting that telling stories is costly for a person, but it also lightens them enough to move on.



Each of Eldon's stories has revealed a little more of his pain to Frank, giving the kid insight into Eldon's fears and failures. The most important story still remains—the one that accounts for a big part of who Frank is, which has always been a mystery to him.



Eldon says that time was something he always carried around with him. It wasn't until after Korea that he figured that out. He'd go through stretches of calm, clear-minded hard work, but he'd always eventually feel hunted down by a sense of foreboding and danger. Then he'd start drinking again, until time became indistinct. He thought that if he did this, he'd find a place that was free of memory.

He wound up returning to Nechako. He took whatever jobs he could in Parson's Gap, enough to pay for his next binge. He had a reputation for being a hard worker, but once he earned a paycheck, he became unpredictable. He lived in flophouses and abandoned buildings, alternating between drunken, raucous spells in which he charmed women, and crashing, angry lows that drove people away.

When such crashes came, he'd wind up on a corner known as The Dollar Holler. Raggedly dressed men drifted together around dawn and drank and smoked and talked a little. As morning broke, trucks would pull up. The men would make themselves as presentable as they could and start yelling at the trucks. The trucks' drivers would pick one or two men for half a day's labor. Most would end up shuffling back home. For a couple years, this was the only way Eldon found work.

Eldon became a regular customer at Charlie's. He felt like part of something there and took care to faithfully pay his tab. It was the working man atmosphere of the place that he loved, right down to the grunge and occasional fights. He also loved the predictability. Then, one payday, he was drinking in a corner, aching from a trench-digging job, and he noticed a change in the jukebox music. There was a semicircle of people gathered around a dancing couple; the man was ungainly and awkward, but the woman was tall, thin, and graceful, with long hair that whirled as she spins. She kept twirling out of her partner's reach. When the song ended, she embraced the man, and the crowd dissipated.

When Eldon sat back down, there was an older man with a bronzed face sitting across from him. He asked if he could sit there, and he offered to buy Eldon a drink. As they drank together, the man, Bunky, admired the girl and tells Eldon that she's Indian like him. Eldon asked him what a name like "Bunky" could mean. The man explained it's a childhood nickname—his frizzy hair always makes him look as if he'd just rolled out of bed. The music starts again, and they watched as the couple started dancing again, to a country waltz. The woman's proud face grabbed Eldon's heart.

After the war, Eldon felt like his memories threatened to track him down and overwhelm him. Drinking—effectively outrunning and obliterating the memories for a brief time—seemed the only way to cope with them.



Eldon had the skills and ability to be a valuable worker, but coping with his memories—trying to keep the past at a distance by drinking and partying—took too big a toll. Whatever progress he made was quickly undone by his self-destructive habits.



Because of his drinking, Eldon continued to struggle to find a permanent place in his community, only earning enough money to fund his next drinking binge. For someone with Eldon's potential, such reduced circumstances would likely be demoralizing, but he's too absorbed in outrunning his memories to gain a stabler foothold in life.



Charlie's bar is the closest thing Eldon has to a stable home or family atmosphere. It's at this low point in his life, when he was no one and nothing, that things unexpectedly change.



Significantly, Bunky enters Eldon's life at the same time the beautiful woman does. The man is friendly and forthright, in contrast to Eldon's reserve. However, they share a helpless admiration for the woman.



A small, sweating, toothless man entered the bar. Eldon told Bunky it was Everett Eames, a man he knew a little from working together in the bush. Eames walked toward the table full of lumberjacks where the graceful woman was sitting. The woman's big dance partner, Dingo, told Eames, a "mooch," to get out and get a job. The woman looked worried and tried to stop Dingo, but he stood up, grabbed Eames's collar, and dumped a pitcher of beer into his face. Eames desperately gulped it down, making the whole bar laugh. When Dingo started pouring a second pitcher, Bunky moved over to their table and said, "That's enough."

The other lumberjacks stood up. Dingo drew up to his full height and threatened the older man, but Bunky stood his ground, saying this wasn't right. Finally Dingo stood aside and said Bunky could side with the mooch if he wanted, so Bunky pulled Eames to his feet and got him a whisky and beer at the bar and clapped him on the back. Then he sat down with Eldon again. Suddenly, the woman was standing at their table. She told Bunky it was the kindest, bravest act she's ever seen. She introduced herself as Angie Pratt. Bunky introduces Eldon, but Angie was focused on Bunky. Eldon studied her cheekbones, her black eyes, and the motions of her hands as she talked. He was in love before he knew it. Eventually he got up, shook hands with Angie, and left her with Bunky.

CHAPTER 19

A week later, Eldon was hungover at The Dollar Holler. It was a foggy day, and two trucks pulled up, Bunky and Angie sitting in the cab of one. They waved him over. Bunky said he could offer Eldon a couple weeks' work, plus room and board, to put up 10 acres of fencing. Eldon said he'd do it, but that he's shaky and needs a drink. Bunky looked like he wanted to say no, but Angie squeezed his shoulder, and Bunky gave in. When Eldon started for the back, Bunky told him to sit up front with them.

Bunky drove them through the bush and farmland until they pulled up a long driveway. He parked beside a barn and showed Eldon a tractor packed with everything he'll need to build the fence. Inside the house, Angie took down a bottle and poured him a drink. She also served him some stew and bread. Bunky told Eldon that finding him was Angie's idea.

Bunky automatically sides with those who are dismissed and mocked by others. He has an ability to find dignity and worth even in people that others see as worthless. His attitude toward Eames has implications for his relationship with Eldon, who's also down on his luck. Angie also displays a similar impulse.



Despite his age and smaller stature, Bunky exudes a quiet confidence—something that allows him to confront others when he believes they're in the wrong. This confidence and kindness immediately draws Angie. For his part, though, Eldon feels he has no place in the conversation—he's just in the way—so he removes himself from the situation, figuring he has no chance with Angie.



When Bunky and Angie—who are evidently together now—find Eldon, Eldon is in bad shape. But they're willing to do him a kindness and even treat him with dignity, something he's not used to. Already there's a sense that Eldon's time with Bunky and Angie will be consequential for his future, though it's not clear how.



At Charlie's, Angie had seemed to pay attention only to Bunky, but she's obviously been thinking of Eldon. She also takes care to make him feel at home, sensing he's not used to feeling that way.



After the meal, Eldon felt clearer. Bunky lead him out to the tractor and fired it up, then he directed Eldon to drive them into a nearby field. He showed him the boundaries he wants for the fence, then walked back toward the house. Eldon occupied himself with sorting out the supplies. The morning passed lost in work, but at noon, he returned to the tractor and found Angie sitting there. She brought his lunch—and a flask. She smiled at Eldon and said Bunky is the best man she’s ever known, but there are things he doesn’t understand. She told him she understood the need.

Eldon started eating a sandwich and asked Angie about herself. She explained that she was half Cree and came from west of Winnipeg. He replied that he didn’t know where he came from. Since he didn’t, he figured it was a waste of time to miss it. Angie said it feels good to miss things, because it reminds you you’re alive. After finishing his lunch, Eldon said he’d better get back to work, and Angie told him he could talk to her. He longed to touch her, but he told her he was there to work, not talk. She kept gazing at him, making his heart pound, but he turned away and said he’d see her at supper.

They ate venison for supper. Bunky watched him closely and questioned him about the job, but they mostly ate in silence. After dinner, Bunky prepared a pipe and explained that every night, they sat in front of the fire while Angie told stories. Eldon stared at the floor, reluctant, but he followed them into the living room, unable to stop gazing at Angie. Bunky told Eldon that Angie’s a “tale spinner.” Angie added that the stories just seem to be inside her—she finds them, and they tell themselves.

Bunky asked for a story about the sea, so Angie described an underwater being who longed to explore the world above. Eventually, the creature grabbed a whale’s tail, and the whale pulled her to the surface. She drifted on the waves and landed on a beach. But she became homesick. A dolphin came and listened to her story, then carried her back to her underwater home. The dolphin told her that since she’s experienced the world above, she will always carry the memory with her. The being spent the rest of her life telling stories about her adventure. When Angie finished the story, Eldon was embarrassed to realize he’d been crying. After Eldon headed to his sleeping place in the loft, he thought about Angie’s shining eyes—he recognized something about them.

When he’s clear-headed (and when people show confidence in his potential), Eldon is capable of rising to the occasion and doing good work. Angie notices this, and she also quietly hints that she understands Eldon’s pain and identifies with him.



Angie has a sense of her identity and holds onto it, believing that even loss has a more positive side, because it somehow reminds a person of who they are. She lets Eldon know that she senses his pain and that it’s safe to talk to her about it. Even though he’s drawn to her, Eldon is unused to sharing his thoughts and resists her pull.



Bunky is still figuring Eldon out, watching and considering him. Eldon still resists being folded into the household. As it turns out, this has at least something to do with the fact that Angie, with her “tale spinning,” reminds Eldon of his mother and the “wound” stories have caused him. Angie seems to share the Starlight penchant for stories.



Angie’s story speaks of the power of storytelling, longing, the loss of home, and memory. It especially seems to call back to her conversation with Eldon earlier that day, when she encouraged him to tell his own stories. Though the story’s meaning isn’t clearly spelled out, its implications seem to touch Eldon’s “wound” where stories are concerned. It’s also implied that Angie’s eyes somehow remind him of his mother’s nightly fireside storytelling.



The work was hard because of the stony ground. By lunchtime the next day, Eldon was exhausted. Angie brought him lunch but no flask, and they sat together on the tractor's running board and ate. He quietly watched Angie as she talked about her parents. Her dad died of a heart attack when she was 12, and after that, her mother was never the same. She had trouble providing for them, and she brought home a string of men who always left. She died of heartbreak when Angie was 16. Angie decided she never wanted to be completely dependent on a man, so she started working. She developed a reputation for cooking and managing kitchens on work sites.

As she worked, Angie learned more about men. Men always want to own a woman, she told Eldon, until they see something they don't like, or that they feel detracts from them in some way. Then they just disappear. Even Bunky isn't perfect. He's heroic and gentle, but gritty, too. They smoked quietly together for a while. Eldon refused to say anything about his past. Angie told him he's like a kid drawing in the sand because he doesn't know how to express himself yet. Eldon replied that some stories don't need to be told.

Angie put her arm around him. They sat silently for a while. Looking at him, she told Eldon he had the makings of a hero, too. He tells her he didn't. She lifted his chin with her hand and told him nobody knows that for sure until life demands heroism of them. She kissed him quickly and walked home across the field.

That night, Angie appeared on the stairs of the barn loft, wearing a nightdress. She sat on the edge of his cot and took his hand. As she touched his face, he tried to say something to her but found no words. When he tried, she hushed him. He pulls her to him, and they kissed before she stepped away and descended the ladder.

CHAPTER 20

Bunky finished the wood-cutting job he'd been doing and returned to farm work, meaning that he was around much more. When Angie brought Eldon his lunch, Bunky tagged along. Bunky walked along the new fence line and praised Eldon's work. When Eldon said that he figured he was motivated by desperation, Bunky replied that Eldon no longer looked so desperate. Eldon just stared at his shoes.

As Angie opens up to Eldon about her memories, it's clear that her upbringing has some similarities with Eldon's. She, too, is familiar with loss and grief—the pain of losing her father and watching her mother decline. And, like Eldon, she sought solace in hard work.



Angie has also known loss in love and is careful not to trust men too much. After she finishes her story, she senses that Eldon wants to tell her more about himself but that this part of him is immature or undeveloped. Eldon continues to insist that it isn't necessary to tell his stories.



Angie sees potential in Eldon where most people don't; even he denies it's there. She believes it just hasn't had a chance to emerge yet.



Angie reciprocates Eldon's feelings for her. This time, though, she encourages him not to speak too soon, suggesting that it's okay for him to take the time to figure out how to express himself.



Bunky's presence complicates Eldon's and Angie's feelings for one another. Bunky seems to think that Eldon's looking better because he's working, eating well, and not drinking. Eldon feels ashamed that his progress is partly due to his growing bond with Angie, whom Bunky believes is devoted to him.



Eldon started getting up at dawn so he could avoid Bunky. He was used to guilt, but he wasn't used to dealing with guilt while sober. Whenever he was around Bunky, he was afraid he'd say or do something to betray his feelings. Now that he'd stopped drinking, he also felt more physically fit. He and Bunky talked about that one evening—how good it feels to labor on the land. Bunky said it “comes to fill a man,” and Eldon agreed, but said he's not given to poetry. Bunky protested that poetry is just expressing what's already there, and it opens a person up. To Eldon, it seemed like Bunky was starting to talk like Angie, and Bunky laughed and said he never expected that to happen to him, but he likes it.

Eldon started watching Angie when Bunky wasn't around. He took in small details, like the shape of her wrist while stirring a pot, and her joyful and thoughtful expressions. Every once in a while, she caught him looking and gave him a small smile. He savored her storytelling in the evenings. She seemed to become a different person when she told stories, and he could picture the stories when he closed his eyes. He kept waiting for her to appear in the barn loft again, but she never did.

The fencing job took 16 days. That last morning, Bunky went to town for errands, and just as Eldon was finishing up, Angie walked over. She watched him splashing his water jug over himself and said it's fun to see the pleasure men take in hard work. Eldon asked if that's why she used to enjoy taking jobs in work camps, so she could be reminded of her father. She looked surprised and sat down on the grass, thoughtful. She told him she always knew there was more to him. He apologized for what he said, but she said there's nothing wrong with saying what you think. People can work through its rightness or wrongness together.

Eldon sat down next to her and reflected that he got used to leaving big things unsaid. After a while, that made it hard to say anything difficult. Angie objected—she said men think that getting to the root of things is hard, but it's not; it's just plain speaking, like telling a story. And telling stories is good—it changes things and makes a person lighter. She'd like to know more of his stories. Eldon said he couldn't see why, but she took his hand and kissed it, saying she just did. He took her in his arms, and soon they were making love in the grass, both of them moved to tears. Afterward, Angie told him she wasn't sure yet what they'd do about Bunky, but Eldon should remember that this was a good thing. He promised he would.

Eldon has always coped with guilt by erasing it with alcohol, but he doesn't have that to fall back on now. Though Bunky is making an effort to befriend Eldon, Eldon fears getting too close to him because Bunky will inevitably pick up on his feelings for Angie, whom Bunky clearly loves.



Eldon's attraction to Angie grows, especially when she tells stories. Though Eldon has resisted stories—both others and telling his own—for years, he can't resist Angie's, and they satisfy him on a deep level. Meanwhile, she seems to wait for Eldon to approach her.



Eldon's comment shows that he's been paying attention to Angie's stories of her past, thinking about them, and making connections—ones she hasn't even necessarily made herself. It's the most he's ever opened up to her, and she encourages him not to regret that—it's a way of opening up to another person, something he's been afraid of doing up till now.



Angie draws things out of Eldon. For example, he's finally able to acknowledge that his habit of withholding the truth hasn't been good for him. Angie encourages him to reconsider whether telling the truth is really that difficult, suggesting that stories have a healing function that shouldn't be feared. They finally consummate their desire for one another, irrevocably complicating things not only between themselves, but also between themselves and Bunky.



That night at supper, they feasted on roasted moose and vegetables. Bunky told Eldon he'd earned it and that he was proud of the work he'd done. He gave Eldon a fat envelope of cash. Eldon thanked him—he felt better than he had in a long time. Bunky said that a “man’s past ain’t his measure,” and he has always figured that “ya prove who ya are in the day yer in.”

Eldon offered to clean up after the meal, while Bunky and Angie went to the porch to smoke. He felt like he was waiting to be punished. He slowly washed the dishes and even cleaned the appliances until they shone. Feeling trapped, he craved a drink. Finally, he went outside and told Bunky and Angie he was going for a walk and wouldn't be in for the nightly story. Bunky told him he was a good man and he'd hire him anytime. Eldon started walking into the field, feeling a familiar ache building up. When he heard Angie laughing from a distance, he felt sure that she'd stay with Bunky, because he was predictable and safe. He didn't blame her.

Eldon dreamed of a valley shining in the sunset and felt at peace there. Then he heard footsteps approaching and saw Angie climbing up the ladder. As they started having sex, he was unsure if he was awake or dreaming. He felt they were outside of space and time and that the feeling would never end, until suddenly there was lamplight and Bunky's voice saying, “What the hell?”

CHAPTER 21

Eldon, Angie, and Bunky sat silently in the kitchen. Bunky kept thumping his fist on the table and finally stood up and moved toward Eldon. Eldon waited for Bunky's fist to meet his head, but Bunky just swore and stepped away. His face was filled with despair as he asked if this is how the two of them repay him. Eldon quietly apologizes, and Angie said it wasn't Eldon's fault. Bunky told Angie he loved her and gave her everything he could. If she knew that, then how could she have done this?

Eldon said that he didn't have any plan, but he hadn't wanted to get in the way of Bunky and Angie's love. Bunky laughed bitterly and asked if Eldon loved Angie; Eldon looked at her and said yes. When Bunky asked if she loved Eldon, she said yes. Then Bunky sat down at the table and weep. Afterward, he said Angie had come into his life like a sudden hope, and he'd believed in it—believed they could turn his place into a home. Angie said that sometimes things just happen, and there's nothing you can do to prepare.

Bunky's warmth and pride puts Eldon in an awkward position. Eldon has accomplished something to be proud of, for the first time in a long time, but the milestone is overshadowed by guilt about what Bunky doesn't yet know. The dramatic irony builds with Bunky's maxim about the measure of a man's character.



Eldon fights the desire to cope with guilt the way he normally does—by drinking. Without the ability to drown out his guilt, the only thing he can do is avoid the others, retreating into himself. He also doubts his ability to be what Angie needs, a fear that will continue to haunt him and eventually be his undoing.



Eldon dreams of the ridge where he felt he belonged, suggesting that's the way Angie makes him feel, too. Because of his dream, it's unclear at first whether his rendezvous with Angie is real or a dream, but Bunky's interruption makes things unambiguous.



Normally reserved, Bunky's anger is all the more striking in the aftermath of Angie and Eldon's meeting in the loft. At the same time, his restraint from attacking Eldon shows just how heartbroken he is at their betrayal. Opening up to both of them leads to grief, as love always makes people vulnerable to loss in the novel.



Because Bunky is normally unemotional, the simple clarity of his emotion is especially striking compared to characters like Eldon who typically hide their feelings. Throughout the book, he's an example of someone who copes with grief in a healthy, outward way as opposed to an inward way that risks consuming a person and hurting those around them.



Bunky asked Eldon what he planned to do, and while Eldon didn't have things figured out, he knew he wanted Angie. Sadly, Bunky said that Eldon can't be a booze-hound, and that if he hurt Angie while drinking, Bunky would come and find him. Angie said they'd take care of each other, looking stubborn and sure. She feels that she recognizes and knows Eldon, she said, and that's enough for her. Bunky said it had better be.

Bunky thought Eldon was a good man, but now, he said, he'd need to be convinced. Nonetheless, he gave them his stake truck so that, wherever they ended up, Angie wouldn't have to take the bus. Then Bunky asked them to leave before he had to face them again. As Angie hugged him goodbye, Bunky wept again. Before he strode out the door, he pointed at Eldon and warned him to take care of her. He could live with a broken heart, but Eldon must "be a man about this. Or else."

After they gathered their belongings, they went out to the truck and Angie found a roll of bills Bunky had left for them. It's a lot of money to get them started. Eldon didn't want to accept it, but Angie said it's Bunky's way of taking care of her. She told Eldon that she wanted to explain this to Bunky someday, but right now she couldn't even explain it to herself. He wiped her tears away, and they got into the truck and drove off into the night.

CHAPTER 22

The kid asks Eldon where he went after that. Eldon says hollowly that he kept following the work, like he'd said he would. And for the longest time, he didn't drink. He had to keep to his promise, because Angie "was a wonder"—he wants Frank to know that. While he coughs, the kid snaps some branches off a tree, feeling only rage. He had a right, he tells Eldon, to know all this before now. Eldon says he could never find the words to talk about her.

The kid says Eldon can't just drop this on him and die, and Eldon admits that there's no way he can make it up to him. He falls silent for so long that the kid isn't sure he's alive. Finally, he asks to be moved to the rock so he can sit and watch dawn break over the valley below. The kid wraps a blanket around his father, and they sit and look at the **stars**. Eldon says Angie would be proud to know Frank is her son. Rocking in pain, Eldon says he wishes he could get back the drunken, wasted years. But all he has left is the story of her.

Bunky had looked forward to building a stable home with Angie, and he doubts that Eldon can provide the same. The suddenness and shock of their betrayal feels like a mockery of the care he's invested in both of them over the past few weeks.



Earlier that same day, Bunky had said that he judges a man by his actions and not by his past. He realizes now that he didn't have the full picture of Eldon's actions, and Eldon isn't the man he'd believed at first. Despite his pain, Bunky puts Angie's wellbeing above his own heartbreak, another example of his generosity even in the midst of sincere grief.



Eldon concludes the story of his relationship with Frank's mother. Once again, Bunky put love before bitterness by helping the two of them get established.



Frank resents the fact that all of this was kept from him all his life. After being uninformed about his background his whole life, his father drops the whole story on him just before his death.



Eldon can't make up for the absence and grief Frank feels. But by telling Frank about Angie, Eldon gave him all he could. By refraining from telling Frank Angie's story, Bunky allowed Eldon to be the one to do so. Given Bunky's feelings for Angie, his choice begins to make more sense; his own account of Angie would have been colored by more complicated emotions.



Angie made her way as a camp cook, and he got work at a sawmill. They found a lakeside cabin that they worked on fixing up together. Angie taught Eldon how to insulate the cabin for winter. They dug a garden plot for the next spring. This whole time, Eldon didn't think about drinking. He happily worked and brought home money for their home together. For the first time in his life, Eldon felt he could settle down. He no longer wanted to run away, as he'd done his whole life. Angie even got him thinking about going back and reclaiming other parts of his past.

In the fall of that first year, Angie found out she was pregnant. Eldon had never felt so humbled in his life. He felt tied to his unborn child in their shared need for Angie—the thought frightened him. The kid sees how desperate his father looks and moves in front of him in case he tries to jump off the cliff. He says that Eldon was scared that he couldn't be what he needed to be, but Eldon says it was more—he was afraid he “couldn't be what I never was.” He'd always been too ashamed to tell Angie about Jimmy and his mother. He wanted to be strong for her, but thinking about his weakness awakened a darkness in him, which pulled him back to drinking. He believed he would always lose or destroy those who meant the most to him—it's what he'd always done.

At first Eldon just had a beer or two over lunch. Before long, he was thinking about drinking all the time. By the time the baby was due, he was drinking in secret, kept awake at night by the certainty he was going to fail. The shame made him drink more.

One rainy night, he was at a tavern, broke. He drove home drunk and stumbled toward the cabin. He saw that the door was thrown open. He almost fell over Angie in the doorway. She was clutching her belly and screaming. He managed to get Angie into the truck and drive her to the hospital, getting stuck in the mud and rain several times. The baby was in a kneeling breech, and by the time the doctors performed an emergency Caesarean, Angie's life was ebbing away. Afterward, the doctor told Eldon that if he'd gotten home in time, Angie would have had a chance. Eldon left the hospital in search of the only thing that would dull his pain.

CHAPTER 23

Eldon never got to say goodbye, he tells the kid, who is slumped on the ground, a deep ache in his guts. He feels a mounting rage at his father's silence, so he wanders into the woods, kicks at the earth, and finally erupts in tears until he's spent. He's about to lose his father, and his mother will always be a mystery to him.

At first, it looked like Angie and Eldon were able to make things work. Angie's influence brought much good out of Eldon, helping him think differently about the value of memories and stories in his life instead of trying to make them disappear.



The news of Angie's pregnancy awakened the fear and darkness in Eldon that had gone dormant. Despite his love for Angie, he never trusted her enough to tell her his whole story, and that story relentlessly pulled him back into the past in a way that prevented him from facing the future. Believing he was stuck in a destructive pattern, he resorted to alcohol again—a self-fulfilling prophecy.



At first Eldon thought he could keep his drinking under control, but it soon began to overpower him. Shame over his past paralyzed him with fear of the future.



Eldon confesses the most painful part of his story: because of his drinking, Eldon's fear of failure ended up coming true—he failed to be there for Angie and the baby when they needed him most. As a result, Frank grew up without a mother or a present father.



Having finally heard the whole story, Frank grieves. Even though the novel suggests that Eldon's story will ultimately help Frank heal and regain a fuller sense of his identity, it also opens him up to deeper pain and loss, too.



When he finally returns to his father, Eldon asks for a drink but soon starts retching, ruining his blanket. The kid wraps his own coat around his father. He asks Eldon if he ever thought of going to Bunky for help, and Eldon replies that he might as well reveal Bunky's identity: he took Frank to Bunky when he was a week or two old. He couldn't look at the baby without seeing Angie. Since he thought his loving Angie had killed her, he was afraid that looking at Frank would make him hate his son, too. Bringing Frank to Bunky was the only thing he was proud of in his life.

Eldon was scared the day he drove to Bunky's. He left the baby under some trees and walked up to the house. Bunky came out on the porch and told Eldon he had no time for him. When Eldon finally got the words out about what had happened, Bunky staggered as if shot. He collapsed in a rocker and says he could kill Eldon for not being there when Angie needed him. Eldon said he wished he would—it would make things easier. But Bunky said Eldon doesn't deserve easier.

Eldon finally convinced Bunky to see the baby; he stared at Frank through the truck window for a long time. Then he wiped his eyes and told Eldon to bring him up to the house for fresh cow's milk. They sat on the porch, and Bunky held and fed Frank, looking happy. Finally, he told Eldon he'd take on the responsibility of Frank. Not for Eldon, but for Angie and her son. He said he owes Angie—she'd brought him to life and made him better. Eldon knew what that meant. He walked away, realizing that the hole left in him by Angie's death would never be filled up.

Dawn is breaking. The kid can't think of anything to say, so Eldon picks up the story again. He says Bunky promised he'd do his best to teach Frank "Indian things," even though he wasn't one, and he'd show him Angie's way, too. He even said that Eldon could come whenever he wanted, as long as he wasn't drinking. He gave the kid the name Franklin after a man who tried to catch lightning with a key and a kite, knowing he'd change the world if he did. He says it takes courage to want something for others.

His father's whole body is shaking. The kid tries to see something of himself in Eldon, but all he can see is a sad, dying man. He helps his father back to the fireside and builds up the fire again, then makes a shelter out of spruce branches to shade his father from the sun. Thinking about what he's heard, it feels like somebody else's story; his father doesn't seem like the same person. Wondering what effect time might have on himself, the kid feels pity for his father's sorrowful life and comfortless death. He longs for his mother, who is just a ghost in his life than can never become flesh.

Though the story has heavily implied that Bunky is the old man, Eldon here makes it explicit. Eldon also describes what's arguably the most unselfishly "fatherly" act of his life—surrendering Frank to Bunky's care, thereby ensuring that Frank will grow up with a truly present father figure, even if it's not his biological dad.



Eldon's visit to Bunky suggests that he did learn something important from Angie. Angie had first given Eldon the feeling that maybe it's possible to retrace your steps and come to terms with your past. In this way, at least, Eldon succeeded in showing that kind of courage.



Bunky copes with his grief by accepting Frank into his life to raise him. This is another example of Bunky's approach to grief—looking outward instead of burying grief inside. For his part Eldon is left with nothing but his pain and guilt.



From the beginning, Bunky recognized that there'd be limitations in what he could do for Frank—he couldn't really teach him an Indian perspective, for example—but he could do his best, as he later told Frank, to help him become a good person. When he names Frank after Benjamin Franklin, Bunky reveals something about his own outlook, too—a desire to give, even when it makes him vulnerable.



Even though Frank doesn't feel any closer to his father right now, he respects his father's effort to tell him the truth and shows compassion to him, as she's done all along. He recognizes that he doesn't know what life will do to him, either. In any case, his father has nothing left to lose, and Frank does the best he can to help him end his days with some comfort and dignity.



The kid sits by the fire and whittles while his father sleeps. When he wakes up, the kid moves him closer to the fire and tells him he should have revealed all of this a long time ago. Eldon says he couldn't; Angie was his "breath," and he hasn't breathed easily for the rest of his life. He says he's surprised the kid doesn't hate him and asks Frank to walk him back to the cliff's edge. They stand there together, looking down at the valley and the river running through it toward the mountains beyond. At one point, his father raises his hands and softly moans, "I'm sorry."

CHAPTER 24

Back beside the fire, his father's condition worsens. Each time he vomits, he suffers terrible pain. After nightfall, the only thing the kid can do to keep his father warm is to lay beside him and hold him close. When the kid falls asleep, he dreams of a man and woman sitting together on a blanket, talking quietly. In the dream, Frank is on a porch at sunset. He sees a woman off in the fields, waving at him with both arms. At first, the kid thinks she is waving at him. Then he sees his father running across the field toward her.

The kid hears his father die with a small breath and a jolt. As he wakes up, he feels the heavy silence, and he's afraid to break it. Finally, he gets up and builds up the fire. Then he reaches out and touches his father's face, closing his eyes and feeling his own face at the same time. As he closes his father's eyes, he says, "Shh. Hush," though he doesn't know why.

CHAPTER 25

It takes the kid all morning to dig his father's grave. The ground is hard and full of rocks that take time to root out. He also gathers a pile of heavy stones to place on top so that no creatures can get at his father's remains. Then he washes his hands and looks at his father's body. He suddenly shouts that he doesn't know what he's doing and cries again, feeling a new pain.

The kid cradles his father, who isn't very heavy, and sets him down beside the hole. He gets some boughs and moss to line it with and also sprinkles some tobacco, the only ritual he knows. Trying to think of something to say, he feels only a deep silence inside him, but he is content with that. He climbs down into the grave with his father and arranges him with his arms across his chest and his head against his knees.

Eldon tries to explain that it's Angie who had made him strong; without her, he didn't feel strong enough to tell Frank the truth. Arguably, though, it's Angie's example that frees Eldon, even now, to finally unburden himself. At last, Eldon is able, on some level, to let go of his pain, apologizing to all those he's hurt.



Implicitly, Frank's dream occurs just as Eldon dies and reflects what Eldon dreamed or saw as he died. Frank dreams of being on the porch of his parents' cabin and witnessing their reunion in the afterlife, their story coming full circle.



After Eldon dies, Frank feels for some resemblance between his father's face and his own. As he closes his father's eyes, Frank seems to tell Eldon that he's done telling his story and can now rest at last.



After finally getting to know his father in a deeper way, Frank loses him all over again and carries the heavy responsibility of burying him. His tears are a clear reminder that despite his maturity, Frank is still just a kid, and he's suffered great losses.



As he buries his father, Frank does for Eldon what Eldon couldn't do for Jimmy and buries him in the warrior way. Though Frank said earlier that he couldn't see Eldon as a warrior, he now acknowledges that he was—not just a war veteran, but a lifelong fighter who's finally getting to rest.



Then he climbs out and piles the dirt and stones on top, suddenly feeling a deeper anguish and weeping and cursing freely. He screams as he hefts the largest rock on top. When he's done, the sorrow feels lighter. He tells his father the war is over, and he hopes he'll find Angie waiting for him. He knows there are more words to say, but they're beyond him for now, so he just looks at the valley for a while. Then he breaks down the campsite and gets ready for the trip home.

Frank has always treasured the land; now it will also bear the memory of his father's death. Like Bunky, Frank has also always found solace in work, and the effort of burying Eldon brings some release. Eldon, too, can finally rest.



CHAPTER 26

It takes two days to get back from the farm. He puts the mare in the barn and stands watching the old man work for a while. He's repairing some of the horse stalls, so intent on his work that he doesn't notice Frank. He looks aged, but his work has a familiar, comfortable rhythm. The kid sees himself in the old man—the respect for work he's taught him. He quietly puts on his tool belt and goes to help. The old man looks surprised for just a second, then smiles faintly. They finish repairing the stalls and get ready to repaint them.

When Frank gets back to the farm, he's immediately met with a fitting sight: the old man. When Frank recognizes himself in Bunky, it confirms what Frank already knows deep down, namely that Bunky is most truly his father and has been so all Frank's life. Bunky is the one who taught Frank his values, loved him, and made him the man he is. They fall naturally into a shared working rhythm that matches their relationships.



Finally the kid tells him, "He's gone." The old man isn't surprised. He says he hopes it wasn't too hard for Frank, and the kid just says, "Yeah." They work hard and quickly, and soon the painting is done, so they wash up for lunch. Inside, their routine feels comfortingly familiar. After they've eaten, the kid finally says, "He told me, ya know." The old man says he'd always hoped Eldon would. He sees Angie in the kid every day, and it's like watching her take her place in the world. He says that Eldon never told him the whole story of his life, though.

Bunky doesn't push Frank to tell him his story, just as he never pushed the story of Frank's past on him. Now that he's free to speak of Angie, Bunky tells him that Angie has been in him all along, though Frank couldn't know it.



After the meal, they sit on the porch and smoke. The kid starts telling the story of his journey with his father. Then the old man suggests they take a walk. As he looks around the familiar farm, the kid reflects that he doesn't know if his father ever got what he wanted. Maybe it was forgiveness, but he doesn't know if he can face that yet. The old man says it's okay if the kid is upset with him for not telling him everything, but the kid says there's nothing to forgive—the old man was his father over the years. The old man's eyes shine at this.

Frank brings the story full circle by telling Bunky Eldon's story. He also acknowledges that Bunky is really his father, something Eldon's death allows Frank to recognize and articulate more fully. Though hearing his biological father's stories was a necessary part of understanding who he is, Frank already understood a big part of himself thanks to the old man.



The kid brought a stone back from the grave for the old man, and the old man thanks him and says they'll keep it on the hearth and talk about it if they need to. The kid isn't sure what to feel, and the old man says that when things are taken away from a person, sometimes it feels like there's a hole inside that the wind blows through. All you can do then is follow the wind. He knows it isn't much of an answer, but being out on the land always made him feel better. He pulls the kid into a long embrace, and the kid breathes the familiar scent of the old man.

Bunky assures Frank that they can talk about their grief as they feel the need to, and that this process will take time. There's no shortcut for grief, but as both he and Frank have always known, nature will provide stability and comfort.



At sunset, the kid goes out to the pasture and gets onto the old man's grey mare. He rides her out to the edge of the trees and looks back at the farm. Looking toward the back acres his father fenced, he thinks about the time when his father had almost been happy. Then he rides the mare up the ridge and watches the shape of the land change in the fading light, feeling like he's entered a dream world and can see ghostly people among the trees—men riding ponies, singing women, and children chasing dogs. He thinks he can hear them shouting to him happily. He raises a hand to them, thinking of the line of people he's never known. Then he rides home to the old man who's waiting for him.

Frank's ride across Bunky's farm brings him a sense of unity about his identity. Overlooking the land he's always loved, he's finally able to envision the Indian part of him, now a part of that same land. This suggests that the missing part of Frank has been more or less found and that over time, his grief will heal. In the meantime, he returns home to Bunky, where he belongs.





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