Riding the Bus with My Sister

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RACHEL SIMON

As she explains in *Riding the Bus with My Sister*, Rachel Simon was born in Newark, New Jersey and raised in various towns across New Jersey and Pennsylvania. She was interested in writing from a very young age and spent must of her childhood composing letters and stories on her typewriter. After her parents' tumultuous divorce and her mother's remarriage to an abusive conman, she went away to boarding school and then to Bryn Mawr College, where she studied anthropology. Her once-troubled relationship with her family is the foundation of much of her work, including *Riding the Bus with My Sister*. After graduation, Simon took a series of jobs, including as a paralegal and bookstore manager, before getting a graduate degree in creative writing. She published her first book, the short story collection *Little Nightmares, Little Dreams*, in 1990 and her second, the novel *The Magic Touch*, in 1994. After writing a column for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and teaching creative writing for several years, she spent 1999 riding the buses around Reading, Pennsylvania with her sister Beth. Based on this experience, she published *Riding the Bus with My Sister* in 2002. This was when her career particularly took off: she became a popular speaker about disability and continued to write about the subject, including in her bestselling 2011 novel *The Story of Beautiful Girl*, which tells the story of a couple with disabilities who are locked in an institution in the 1960s but fall in love and escape. Simon lives in Delaware, where she continues to write and teach.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Riding the Bus with My Sister*, Rachel Simon notes that most people with disabilities were confined to the home or isolated in institutions until the mid-20th century. (She explores this history more in-depth in her 2011 novel *The Story of Beautiful Girl*.) Simon believes that the same thing likely would have happened to her sister Beth if it weren't for the disability justice movement that has struggled for decades to win equal access and treatment for people with disabilities. This movement has made it possible for people like Simon's sister Beth to access the social support and government programs that they need in order to live free, dignified lives. While the disabled President Franklin D. Roosevelt put an important public face to disability issues in the 1930s, and returning World War II veterans with disabilities began fighting for accommodations and services in the 1940s, the public only began to recognize disability as a civil rights issue in the 1970s. The disability justice movement worked alongside the civil rights movement of the 1960s and built on its successes. Important early milestones in the movement include the creation of the National Association for Retarded Children (now called the Arc of the United States) in the 1940s and the UC Berkeley's Disabled Students Program, which began providing accommodations for students with disabilities in the 1960s and later became the model for similar programs at educational institutions around the U.S. Although the U.S. disability justice movement won a number of significant policy victories in the 1970s, especially in schools and universities, its most significant accomplishment by far has been the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, which comprehensively guarantees equal access for people with disabilities and protects them against discrimination. Simon also notes how the term "mental retardation" was phased out during the early 2000s; the term "intellectual disability" is now far more common. Today, one in five Americans lives with a disability, and the disability justice movement continues to fight discrimination, poverty, and unequal access to services and healthcare.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Rachel Simon's other books include the popular novel *The Story of Beautiful Girl* (2011), the handbook *The Writer's Survival Guide* (1997), and the short story collection *Little Nightmares, Little Dreams* (1990). Other prominent memoirs about disability include Harriet McBryde Johnson's *Too Late to Die Young: Nearly True Tales From a Life* (2005), Emily Rapp's *The Still Point of the Turning World* (2013), Judith Heumann's *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* (2020), and Helen Keller's famous autobiography *The Story of My Life* (1903). In addition to Simon's *The Story of Beautiful Girl*, a few bestselling novels about disability include Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989), Susan R. Nussbaum's *Good Kings Bad Kings* (2013), and Mark Haddon's popular but highly controversial *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). Meanwhile, accessible books that focus on intellectual and developmental disabilities include James C. Harris's *Intellectual Disability: A Guide for Families and Professionals* (2010), Bryna Siegel and Stuart Silverstein's *"What About Me?": Growing Up with a Developmentally Disabled Sibling* (2007), and Robert Bogdan and Steven J. Taylor's *The Social Meaning of Mental Retardation: Two Life Stories* (1994). Books specifically focused on the self-determination movement include Deanna J. Sands and Michael L. Wehmeyer's *Self-Determination Across the Life Span: Independence and Choice for People with Disabilities* (1996), Richard M. Ryan's *The Handbook of Self-Determination Research* (2002), and Judy Mark's pamphlet *Profiles in Self-Determination:*

Inspiration for a Full Life (2019).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Riding the Bus with My Sister: A True Life Journey
- **When Written:** 1999–2002
- **Where Written:** Philadelphia and Reading, Pennsylvania
- **When Published:** August 1, 2002
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir, Creative Nonfiction, Disability Studies
- **Setting:** Reading, Pennsylvania; several other places in Pennsylvania and New Jersey; and the American Southwest
- **Climax:** Rachel and Beth have an explosive argument over a towel, then reconcile.
- **Antagonist:** Rachel and Beth's mother and stepfather
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Movie Adaptation. After the publication of *Riding the Bus with My Sister*, Rachel Simon's friends repeatedly asked her who she would want to play Beth, if her book were ever made into a movie. She assumed that this would never happen, but one day, she decided that the best candidate would be Rosie O'Donnell. Just five days later, Rosie O'Donnell called Rachel out of the blue, saying that she read the book, loved it, and wanted to make a movie out of it. She ended up playing Beth, just as Rachel had hoped.

PLOT SUMMARY

Riding the Bus with My Sister is writer Rachel Simon's memoir about the year she dedicates to visiting and reconnecting with her sister Beth, who has a developmental disability and spends her days riding the bus routes around her Pennsylvania city. Over this year, Rachel finally manages to understand Beth's unusual lifestyle, critically reflect on her own life choices, and appreciate the "traveling community" of bus drivers and fellow passengers that Beth has formed. In parallel with her visits to Beth, the book also covers Rachel and Beth's difficult childhood and explores the connections between their upbringing and their adult lives.

The book opens with Rachel, who has become a solitary workaholic, deciding to visit Beth. They are only 11 months apart in age, grew up as best friends, and live just a few hours apart—but they haven't seen each other in years. But then, Rachel's editor suggests that she write a story about Beth, and she agrees. On the day of Rachel's visit, Beth wakes Rachel up before dawn, then eagerly leads her to the bus shelter, where they board and ride one bus after another, all day.

Rachel quickly realizes that the buses offer Beth a vibrant, fulfilling social life: she knows every single bus driver and spends all day talking to them about life, society, and bus company gossip. While some passengers and drivers look down on her, most view her as a valuable member of the local community. Thus, by riding the buses, Beth achieves the kind of free, independent, joyful life that most people with developmental disabilities strive for. Her life is a testament to how new norms, laws, and social programs have made it possible for people with disabilities to live on their own terms—or achieve true self-determination—since the 1970s. In fact, Rachel concludes that Beth's life on the buses is happier, richer, and even more interesting than her own life as a writer and teacher. So, when Beth asks Rachel to keep visiting and riding the buses for a whole year, Rachel knows that she has to say yes.

Over the next several months, Rachel visits Beth every few weeks and rides with all of her favorite drivers—like Tim, an intellectual who views bus driving as a unique window into the life of his city, and Jacob, who explains how his miraculous recovery from severe alcoholism taught him the value of selflessness and mercy. As they walk through town, Beth introduces Rachel to her misfit and outcast friends but also offers some concerning news, like a story about getting into a serious brawl with a homeless couple. Rachel meets Beth's favorite driver, the quiet, thoughtful, "exotically handsome" Rodolpho, and then visits the bus drivers' lounge, where Beth is a frequent honorary guest—and source of constant conflict.

Rachel and Beth go out for lunch with Beth's boyfriend Jesse, who also has a developmental disability. But as with Beth, Jesse's disability doesn't define him: he may be illiterate and extremely shy, but he's also an accomplished martial artist, champion bicycle racer, and well-known man-about-town. Rachel admires the wise way he fends off prejudice and explains his love for Beth. Meanwhile, Beth tries to set Rachel up with a handsome driver named Rick, but Rachel isn't interested—even though it has been four years since she broke up with her longtime boyfriend Sam, she isn't ready to date anyone else yet.

Throughout the book, Rachel alternates these stories with memories of her and Beth's childhood. She explains how, just weeks after giving birth to Beth, her mother already knew that something was wrong: unlike other children, Beth barely cried or reacted to the environment. The doctor eventually realized that Beth was developmentally disabled, but he couldn't explain why (nobody ever has). While Beth and Rachel always played together as children, Beth often acted unusually. Beth and Rachel's parents told their three non-disabled children that they would eventually have to chip in to care for Beth, and when she was little, Rachel was proud to do her part. But then, her parents' marriage fell apart: her father moved away, while her mother fell into a serious depression and became far less caring and attentive. Facing a miserable home life and isolation

and bullying at school, Beth started acting out by bossing around her siblings and publicly embarrassing them.

Meanwhile, back in the present, Beth introduces Rachel to a series of other drivers. Estella overcame abuse and abandonment as a young woman, and now she spends her days advising her passengers through their own personal crises. Silly, sleep-deprived Bailey talks about the value of optimism and tries to help Beth get a job by hiring her to babysit his children. And fiercely independent, open-minded Jack talks about his struggles to find love and the way his previous job as a community service counselor has enabled him to direct passengers to professional resources like rehab.

Around this time of year, Rachel also takes the time to seriously learn about Beth's disability for the first time in her life. Between internet research and conversations with Beth's case manager Olivia, Rachel learns that people with intellectual disabilities often struggle with cognitive tasks, social skills, and recognizing the consequences of their actions. But while such people need extra support in areas like self-care and social interactions, once they get this support, they can do virtually everything that non-disabled people can. This is why many disability activists now favor the self-determination model, which holds that people like Beth should be able to make and follow their own informed choices about how to live, rather than be forced to comply with their family members' and caregivers' decisions. Rachel calls Beth "the embodiment of self-determination," because she lives according to her own rules and desires. In fact, Beth doesn't want to change anything at all in her life, no matter how much Rachel wishes she did.

The narrative from the past picks up after Rachel and Beth's parents' divorce. Their mother remarries an abusive conman who kicks all the kids out of the house—besides Beth. Then, for several months, the conman disappears with Beth and her mother, until Beth suddenly reappears in New York one day. Beth explains that the conman took her and her mother to the Southwest, then forced them to move from hotel to hotel because he thought the government was coming after him. He beat and threatened them constantly. Despite this, for several years after Beth's return, the family didn't hear anything from their mother. They started to deeply resent her. But one day, Rachel learned that her mother was living nearby, and she eventually decided to get in touch. When she did, she learned that her mother was full of guilt and regret about abandoning her children. She resolved to treat her mother with compassion and mercy.

Meanwhile, the family struggled to find the same compassion and mercy for Beth. As a teenager, she had a hard time adjusting to her new peers and responsibilities, and she started seriously rebelling once again. Her "escalating self-centeredness and manipulativeness" annoyed the whole family and made her intolerable when her father briefly found her a job. By her early twenties, she was living in her father's basement, spending all her time watching TV. The family knew that this wasn't sustainable but couldn't decide what to do. Eventually, she agreed to do structured job training and move into a group home. But after a few years, she insisted on moving out on her own, and some time later, she started riding the buses. This is how she ended up living the life that she lives today.

Back in the present, Rachel starts finding a true sense of community through Beth's network of friends and bus drivers. Rachel and Beth join Jacob and his family on a trip to the Jersey Shore. And when Beth has to undergo a major eye surgery, Jacob insists on tagging along and driving her and Rachel to the hospital. Meanwhile, Rachel also meets Bert, a semi-retired driver from New York City who uses humor to raise his passengers' spirits, and Cliff, a strapping new driver who is Beth's favorite because he races cars on the weekends. Rachel goes on a handful of dates with the driver Beth planned to set her up with, Rick. They get along wonderfully, but Rachel still knows that she doesn't want another relationship yet. One day, while Beth and the driver Melanie chat about men on an empty bus route through the countryside, Rachel looks at her reflection in the mirror and realizes that she has cut herself off from the people around her. She resolves to give back, and she starts counseling the bus drivers through their family and career issues.

In December, Rachel's last month of visits, she and the drivers Bailey and Rick decide to gift Beth a makeover. Beth looks gorgeous, but she doesn't like her new style and quickly returns to her old one. The next morning, she and Rachel get into a serious argument because she's reluctant to lend Rachel a towel. They still spend the day riding the buses, but they barely talk. In the evening, Rachel suggests that it's time for her to stop visiting, and she returns home. But Beth sends her a series of apology **letters** over the next week, promising to change. Rachel decides to forgive Beth and return to visit her for her annual care planning meeting in January. But Beth doesn't want to change anything: she's happy with her life and the services she's receiving.

After the meeting, Beth rides the buses, and Rachel spends the afternoon driving around town with Rick. They end up atop a mountain, overlooking Beth's city, watching the buses snake through the streets. In her brief afterword, Rachel reveals that her time with Beth and the bus drivers allowed her to find love again: she reunited with her ex-boyfriend Sam, and they got married a year and a half after she finished writing.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Rachel Simon – The author of *Riding the Bus With My Sister* is a Philadelphia-based writer in her forties who agrees to spend a

year repeatedly visiting her sister Beth and following her around her city on the buses she rides every day. In the book, Rachel uses these journeys to try to understand Beth's disability, heal their strained relationship, and learn about the politics of disability and accommodation in the contemporary U.S. But the road is far from straightforward: Beth can be extremely stubborn, and many of the most important questions about disability remain unanswered (like how people with intellectual disabilities can make their own informed medical decisions). Rachel's time with Beth also helps her process the childhood trauma they share and understand how Beth's lifelong process of development has turned her into the adult she is today. This is why she intersperses stories from their youth with her chronicles about her year with Beth. Finally, the friendships that Rachel forms (and lessons she learns from her new friends) enable her to reevaluate her isolated, workaholic writer's life. She realizes that she has been undervaluing the relationships in her life because she is afraid of being hurt again (like she was when she broke up with her boyfriend Sam), and she learns to make and maintain the kind of genuine connections that she has let fall by the wayside. At the very end of the book, she uses this newfound knowledge to rekindle her relationship with Sam—and they eventually get married. Thus, *Riding the Bus With My Sister* is arguably as much about Rachel's transformation as it is about Beth's life with her disability.

Beth – The central character in *Riding the Bus With My Sister*, Rachel Simon's sister Beth lives with a mild intellectual disability, resides alone in a subsidized apartment in a mid-sized Pennsylvania city, and spends her days riding the buses around town. In the book, Rachel repeatedly visits Beth in an attempt to understand her sister's life and developmental disability. Ultimately, Rachel finds that Beth is far happier, freer, and more independent than she ever could have imagined, largely because her treatment providers follow the principle of self-determination and give her the final power to make her own major life decisions. Beth is creative, enthusiastic, and extremely knowledgeable about everything involving buses—she knows all the routes, drivers, and internal bus company drama. But at times, she can also be cruel, manipulative, obsessive, and egotistical—usually because she ignores or fails to understand people's needs. Rachel depicts how both these sides of Beth have coexisted throughout her entire life. She also asks the difficult, sensitive question of how much of the problem is Beth's disability, and how much is Beth herself. Rachel's depiction of Beth serves in part to disrupt stereotypes about developmentally disabled people—and particularly to challenge the ideas that their disability is the most significant thing about their identity or daily life, or that their harmful behaviors cannot be changed because they're automatically the result of disability. Ultimately, Beth turns Rachel into a disability justice activist and teaches her numerous important lessons about community, love, and freedom.

Rachel and Beth's Mother – Rachel, Beth, Laura, and Max's mother is a librarian with a tumultuous past and difficult relationships with her children. When the children are little, she constantly plays games with them and cares for them. But then depression strikes her, and she has little energy for several years. After getting divorced from Rachel and Beth's father, her decision to marry the abusive conman and kick her children out of the house is the key turning point in Rachel and Beth's childhood. It leads them to feel abandoned by her for many years. Even when they finally reconnect with her years later, the children deeply resent her actions. However, Rachel comes to forgive her by empathizing with her and understanding the profound guilt, shame, and regret her mother feels about abandoning her children. She realizes that when her mother suffered abuse at the conman's hands, she responded by inadvertently abusing and traumatizing her own children. In fact, this explains why Rachel is so frightened of repeating her mother's mistakes and making poor romantic decisions out of loneliness and desperation. Ultimately, Rachel and Beth's troubled relationship with their mother demonstrates how power and manipulation can corrupt love, and how vulnerability and communication are the best solutions to disconnection and estrangement.

Rachel and Beth's Father – Rachel, Beth, Laura, and Max's father is a professor who runs a mail correspondence school during most of their childhood. After his marriage to his children's mother falls apart and ends in divorce, he only sees his children infrequently, and they resent not having him play a more significant role in their lives. However, after the children's mother marries the abusive conman, their father takes over custody of them. Beth ends up living with him until her mid-twenties and briefly working at his school, although her work ends up being too shoddy and unreliable. He then spends several years trying to find an appropriate alternative living situation for Beth. Well-meaning and reliable but distant, Rachel and Beth's father offers the care and self-sacrifice involved in love, but not necessarily the active support or moral lessons that Rachel finds from the bus drivers.

The Abusive Conman – After her divorce from Rachel and Beth's father, Rachel and Beth's mother marries an abusive conman who ends up kidnapping her and Beth, nearly beating their mother to death, and ruining her relationships with all of her children for years to come. When they got married, he took her and Beth to the Southwest, sold their car, and then forced them to travel on buses and hide out with him in hotels for several months, because he was convinced that the government was persecuting him. Rachel suggests that this experience might have influenced Beth's obsession with buses, and her narration implies that her mother married the conman because he promised her an all-consuming relationship that would help her escape from her depression and other everyday problems. (Needless to say, he ended up making these

problems far worse.) In addition to driving much of Rachel and Beth's family drama—particularly their long estrangement from their mother—he shows how dangerous it can be to confuse love with power and control over others.

Jesse – Jesse is Beth's boyfriend. Like her, he has a developmental disability, and they first met when they were both living in group homes. He is unusually shy, and he is blind in one eye because of a childhood accident. He often visits Beth at her apartment on evenings and weekends, but most of the time, he can be found riding his bicycle around the city and the surrounding area. In fact, Beth and Rachel run into him numerous times throughout the year while riding the buses. Since he's out in public so often, many people in the city are familiar and friendly with him. However, he also faces plenty of racism, as he's a Black man living in a small majority-white city. In particular, he and Beth face serious hostility as an interracial couple when they go out together. He struggles with many of the same issues as other people with intellectual disabilities—for instance, he can't read or write, he would score low on an IQ test, and he often struggles to communicate his ideas to others. However, he's remarkably talented in other fields, including martial arts and bike racing. He's also full of profound wisdom—more than anyone else in the book, he helps Rachel understand that love depends on selflessness and sacrifice, and he gives her a fruitful metaphor by comparing Beth's mind to a clock that can't be reset by anyone else. Jesse's life and accomplishments show that it's shortsighted to define people entirely through their disabilities, or to assume that they can't live full, free, independent lives just because they have deficits in some areas.

Jacob – Selfless, sincere Jacob is arguably the bus driver who most influences Rachel during her year of visits to Beth. He preaches the importance of trust, empathy, and gratitude. His saintly personality is rooted in his own experience: he nearly died after a long period of serious alcoholism but ultimately survived due to a liver transplant from an anonymous donor. After his recovery, he turned his life around and found religion. His calming presence helps Beth and Rachel reconnect and work through their own individual anxieties, and he serves as something of a moral compass for both of them. For instance, he tries to convince Beth to respond to conflict through mercy (or the Golden Rule) rather than revenge (or "an eye for an eye"). Nevertheless, he's still one of Beth's most loyal defenders, and he goes out of his way to help her and Rachel—for instance, he invites them to the Jersey Shore with his family, and he spends nearly a whole day off accompanying Beth to her eye surgery. Thus, in addition to communicating many critical lessons, Jacob represents how bus drivers can be true friends and sources of moral support to their passengers.

Rick – Rick is the attractive, sophisticated bus driver whom Beth repeatedly tries to set up on a date with Rachel. Eventually, she succeeds: Rick and Rachel go on a series of dates, and while Rachel doesn't feel ready to date anyone else after her breakup with Sam, she and Rick become close friends. He praises her for her open-mindedness, generosity, and empathy, which he argues make her "more human" than other people. Rick also helps plan Beth's makeover, and at the very end of her year, Rachel decides to drive around the city with Rick instead of riding the bus one last time with Beth. While they never start a romantic relationship of their own, Rick helps Rachel build back her confidence by showing her that she's courageous enough to open herself up to someone else and ultimately find love.

Bailey – Bailey—or "Crazy Bailey," as Beth calls him—is a fun-loving 40-something father and bus driver. He's chronically sleep-deprived because he constantly has to deal with his teenage children's antics, but he also tells Rachel about the importance of optimism, patience, and recognizing the limits of what one can control. He goes to extraordinary lengths to look out for Beth. He funds her makeover at the end of the book, and because he wants to help her get a job, he starts paying her to help get his kids ready for school in the morning. However, his efforts ultimately fail, because Beth refuses to work. This reflects Rachel's argument that truly loving people often requires simply accepting them rather than trying to change them.

Bert – Bert is a cheerful, eccentric bus driver from New York. After retiring to Pennsylvania, he got bored and decided to start driving a few hours a week to help fill his time. During free time on his bus route, he tells jokes and sings to his audience in an effort to improve their mood. He also tells Rachel and Beth about how tolerance, astute observation skills, and creativity are key to succeeding both in unpredictable jobs like his and in life more generally. Furthermore, he demonstrates how combining these traits with a lighthearted attitude can help people overcome obstacles. Rachel applies his wisdom when confronting her own romantic and family issues.

Claude – Claude is a cheery 40-something bus driver, the very first driver Rachel meets at the beginning of her journey, and the subject of her initial *Philadelphia Inquirer* article. Beth buys him coffee before riding his bus in the mornings, and he reimburses her. But later in the year, he gets angry with Beth over her refusal to get a job. She starts an argument between Claude and Cliff, then stops riding with Claude. This shows how Beth's stubbornness takes a serious toll on her relationships.

Cliff – Cliff is an attractive bus driver who starts working during the year Rachel spends visiting Beth. Because he's so "*fine*-looking" and spends his weekends racing his Mustang, he quickly replaces Rodolpho as Beth's favorite driver. Practically speaking, this means that Beth develops an obsessive crush on him, but she claims that she's really just trying to set him up with Olivia. She constantly speaks over him, and her bad behavior leads to one of her few conflicts with Rachel during the year they spend together. However, Cliff also tells Rachel

about the importance of adapting to challenges—and she starts using his advice to deal with Beth. Thus, while Beth's behavior toward Cliff embodies some of her worst characteristics, Cliff's demonstrates how others can avoid unnecessary conflicts by responding to manipulative behavior through empathy and creativity.

Estella – Estella is a driver whom one passenger calls the city's "great sounding board" because she can listen to anyone's problems and give them wise, level-headed advice. She tells Rachel that this ability stems from her own traumatic childhood: after running away from her cruel stepfather as a teenager, she fell into a series of abusive relationships and terrible jobs, until she began driving and found therapy. Like Jack, she demonstrates how bus drivers perform an important public service as healers, since they are often first person that others interact with after a crisis. Her attitude also shows how people are more likely to change for the better if they learn to accept their own shortcomings and believe in their power over their lives.

Jack – Jack is a tough, independent bus driver whom Rachel profiles. After Beth tells off a white mother and daughter for making racist comments about an interracial couple, Jack compliments her courage and explains that he grew up working in manual labor jobs with immigrants from all over the world. He also tells Rachel and Beth that he has been single for more than 20 years, in part because he feels too independent to tie himself down with a relationship, and in part because he is still in love with a girl from high school. He also explains that he can often help direct his passengers to the psychological and social services they need, because he used to be a community service counselor. He is an avid cook, and he loves giving his creations away to his passengers. As an ode to his skill and creativity, Rachel includes several of his traditional Pennsylvania German recipes in the book. In addition to showing how bus drivers can play an important role in helping others and holding their communities together, Jack shares Beth's stubborn independence and Rachel's bad luck with romance.

Melanie – Melanie is an enthusiastic, fun-loving 37-year-old driver who takes Beth and Rachel on a rural route through farming towns one night in November. Even though she's married, she chats with Beth about men, and they laugh wildly all evening. (In contrast, farther back in the bus, Rachel is in a more somber mood as she contemplates her own romantic failures.) Melanie later tells Rachel that, because everyone's time on earth is limited, friendship is of the utmost importance. This neatly captures the main lesson Rachel learns from Beth's vibrant friendships with so many drivers and community members around her city.

Rodolpho – Quiet, "exotically handsome" Rodolpho is Beth's favorite driver—until Cliff comes to town. She has a serious crush on him and often spends hours talking to him. Even though he doesn't say much in return, he appreciates her company. But in the past, Beth became so obsessed with Rodolpho—and told him so many explicit stories about her sex life—that he kicked her off his bus. Eventually, though, they reached an agreement that Beth can ride with him three times per week. Rodolpho dreams of becoming a pilot and isn't particularly committed to driving the bus. However, he worked so hard to save up for flying lessons that he ended up ruining his marriage. This taught him that relationships are more important than his dreams for his career. Still, at the end of the book, Rachel helps him try out acting, and he eventually becomes a police officer. Beyond showing how Beth's obsessiveness gets her in trouble, Rodolpho's story also reminds Rachel that she's foolish to completely sacrifice all of her relationships for the sake of her career.

Tim – Tim, whom Beth calls "Happy Timmy" and everyone else calls "Professor," is the first bus driver that Rachel profiles in depth. He's mild-mannered, extremely upbeat, and knowledgeable about a wide range of topics because of his lifelong interest in history, archaeology, and photography. He goodheartedly lectures Beth about the importance of being kind, and he tells Rachel that he loves driving the bus because it allows him to follow all the little details of everyday life in the city. For instance, he knows all of his passengers' names and loves nothing more than hearing their stories. Tim's ideas provide the foundation for Rachel's conclusions about why good bus drivers play such a valuable role in their community: they bring positivity into passengers' lives, they link people together because they know so many, and they store living memories about the histories of the places where they drive.

Sam – Sam is the boyfriend who Rachel broke up with four years before the events of the book. This breakup left her with very little money and virtually no social life, and she coped with these circumstances by totally dedicating herself to work for four years (until the year she started riding the buses with Beth). At the end of the book, Rachel finds the confidence to reconnect with Sam, and they eventually get married. This outcome shows how her time with Beth has taught her to love more courageously and authentically.

Vera – Vera is one of Beth's aides—she works for the agency that runs Beth's support programs, and she takes various different positions over the years. During the year when Rachel visits Beth, Vera's job is to check in on Beth several times a week and help her with daily tasks like food shopping. She also educates Rachel about self-determination and has a mild stroke (but quickly recovers) at the end of the book.

Olivia – Olivia is Beth's case manager and the leader of her annual care meetings. She works for the government and checks in once a month to ask if Beth is satisfied with the services that she is receiving. Olivia also helps educate Rachel about developmental disabilities and the principle of self-determination.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Max – Max is Rachel, Beth, and Laura's younger brother. In adulthood, until Rachel starts riding the buses with Beth, he is the closest sibling to Beth because he and his family visit her every month.

Laura – Laura is Rachel, Beth, and Max's older sister. In adulthood, she moves away to Colorado and only occasionally visits the rest of the family.

Ringo – Ringo is Rachel, Beth, Laura, and Max's family dog throughout most of their childhood.

TERMS

Self-Determination – Self-determination refers to people's ability to live according to their own personal choices, instead of having other people make those choices for them. In disability rights activism, self-determination means that people with disabilities should have the ultimate power over key decisions about their own health, work, living situation, relationships, support services, and more.

THEMES

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

DISABILITY, ACCESS, AND SELF-DETERMINATION

Riding the Bus with My Sister is Rachel Simon's memoir about her relationship with her sister Beth, who lives with a developmental disability and devotes her time to riding the buses around her Pennsylvania city. For many years, Rachel and her family viewed Beth's bus-riding as an eccentric, pointless, and slightly embarrassing hobby—they hoped that she would stop and get an ordinary job. But when Rachel decides to spend a year repeatedly visiting and riding the buses with Beth, she realizes that Beth is actually far happier and more fulfilled than she is. Not only does Beth treat bus-riding as seriously as any job, but she also finds a sustainable kind of freedom, excitement, and community through it. Rachel's experience with Beth leads her to rethink her assumptions about what a good life looks like for people with disabilities. Even though they have different needs, preferences, and strengths than non-disabled people, Rachel argues, they ultimately thrive under the same conditions as everyone else—when they have the freedom to live how they want and pursue their own desires. Thus, she concludes that society ought to give people with disabilities the specific kinds of resources and support that they need to flourish as individuals.

Rachel Simon's journey shows how simply understanding disabilities is the first step toward making the world better for disabled people. At first, Rachel struggles to connect with Beth simply because she doesn't fully understand Beth's disability. While she has always known that Beth is different, she doesn't clearly understand what it's like to be Beth, or why Beth lives the way she does. Neither do her family and friends—so everyone just tries not to talk about Beth. In fact, many of the people Beth meets in her day-to-day life avoid or insult her for the same reason. This shows how non-disabled people's failure to understand disabilities can isolate and marginalize people who have them. But, by choosing to participate in Beth's life, Rachel manages to finally understand it. She sees that Beth rides the buses not out of loneliness or boredom, but rather because she loves befriending the drivers and traveling around town. Far from the stereotype of developmentally disabled people as incompetent and defenseless, Beth is independent and streetwise—and far more so than Rachel. Thus, Rachel realizes that it's wrong to assume that developmentally disabled people are all the same and should live the same kinds of lives—instead, they have to be viewed and treated as individuals with their own particular needs, just like everyone else. Over her year with Beth, Rachel also starts to understand developmental disability itself. She learns that while people with mild intellectual disabilities (like Beth) generally struggle with certain everyday tasks and commitments, they're still able to understand complex ideas and make serious decisions. They just need the right support. Rachel concludes that, like everyone else, "Beth is on a journey"—but her "bus [just] chugs along a lot more slowly."

Based on her newfound understanding of disability, Rachel endorses self-determination—or the principle that, as much as possible, people with disabilities should make their own independent decisions about how to live. This principle contradicts the common wisdom about people with intellectual disabilities: that they are incapable of making their own decisions, so others must make those decisions for them. Rachel's time with her sister shows her that this one-size-fits-all model is wrong—for instance, formal treatment programs badly fail Beth, who prefers living alone and socializing with non-disabled people to living in a group home, surrounded by other people with intellectual disabilities. In fact, Beth's life embodies self-determination: she does what she wants with her time, and she doesn't want to change a thing. At her yearly meetings with her care team, she simply affirms that she's perfectly happy with the way things are—even if others, like Rachel and her parents, are not. Still, Rachel ultimately realizes that it's far more important for Beth to follow her *own* values than for her to follow other people's.

Rachel concludes that society has to make certain special accommodations for people with disabilities, to give them the same chances of achieving self-determination as non-disabled people. First and foremost, Rachel suggests that society must support people with disabilities by fighting prejudice against them. This includes encouraging tolerance and spreading reasonable expectations for dealing with people with disabilities, so that they can comfortably navigate public spaces (like Beth's buses). Needless to say, Rachel hopes that her book will play a part in this necessary culture change. Second, public investment in public services (like buses) and social service agencies (like the ones that support Beth) is key to ensuring that people with disabilities can live free, dignified lives. For instance, Beth's liaison Olivia checks up with her monthly to make sure that she is getting all the services she needs, and her nurse Mary attends medical appointments with her to make sure that she fully understands the doctors. But Rachel emphasizes that these agencies' purpose should be to help fulfill disabled people's individualized needs and desires, and not to impose other ways of life on them.

Of course, empathy and understanding are also key to helping people with disabilities flourish. But even after dedicating a year to understanding her sister and the disability rights movement, Rachel Simon admits that certain elements of self-determination still don't entirely make sense to her. For instance, she continues to worry about Beth's poor health habits and reluctance to go to the doctor. She hopes that Beth will eventually understand and change these habits, but she also recognizes that Beth's right to make her own decisions is still more important. Thus, doing what's best for Beth doesn't mean taking away her autonomy, but rather giving her the support she needs to make better decisions for herself.

LOVE AND FAMILY

Riding the Bus with My Sister centers on Rachel and Beth Simon's complex, difficult, but ultimately loving relationship. Rachel first visits Beth in the hopes of repairing their broken relationship, which is just one of the many frayed bonds in their family. Rachel and Beth share a complicated and traumatic past, defined most of all by their mother suddenly abandoning them in their early teenage years. This past has also taken a toll on Rachel's other relationships, including by straining her romantic relationship with her boyfriend Sam, which ended four years before the book's events. After that relationship, overcome with fear and paralysis, Rachel entirely gave up on finding love. Yet her year with Beth shows her a way out of her predicament: it teaches her that people must accept the vulnerability and uncertainty associated with love in order to experience its profound benefits.

Rachel's lonely, loveless life shows how a fear of vulnerability can lead people to run away from love and connection. Rachel explains how, for the four years before her year with Beth, she completely cut herself off from others. After breaking up with Sam, she completely dedicated herself to her work and gave up on most everything else—especially dating and seeing her family. She recognizes that this was a way to avoid confronting her loneliness and fear of failing in another relationship. This shows how people often choose to withdraw from love because they're afraid of the sacrifices involved. But Rachel's fear goes deeper: it stems from her childhood. As she recounts in her memoir's numerous flashback sections, after her parents divorced, her mother married an abusive conman who convinced her to kick her children out of the house. For many years after leaving the conman, Rachel and Beth's mother felt too guilty and ashamed of her actions to reconnect with her children. Meanwhile, the children grew isolated and distant from one another and their father. For instance, despite growing up as best friends, Rachel and Beth virtually stopped speaking in adulthood—they only wrote **letters**. This experience shows how abandonment and trauma reinforce one another in a vicious cycle: Rachel's mother abandoned her children because she was traumatized, and this traumatized them, which led them to abandon one another. In other words, the family's shared pain led them to the same shared solution: withdrawing from other people.

But this all changed when Rachel reached out to her mother: by showing that she was willing to try to understand her mother's mistakes, Rachel helped her mother find the courage to reconnect with all of her children. This step stopped the cycle of trauma and abandonment, making it possible for her, her mother, and her siblings to be vulnerable and authentic with one another instead. While Rachel grew distant from her family once again after her breakup with Sam, her relationship with her mother shows how people must accept their vulnerability in order to find love and connection. Rachel's quest to reconnect with Beth in this book is essentially her struggle to accept her own vulnerability—and love Beth despite her flaws, just as she did with her mother. After all, Beth is extremely difficult to love: while she can be very affectionate and caring, she generally "doesn't [...] notice that anyone else has needs"—especially Rachel. Thus, to rekindle her relationship with Beth, Rachel must accept that she will give more than she receives and get hurt repeatedly. Yet she decides that the benefits are worth this cost.

In fact, Rachel's year with Beth teaches her to love again—it shows her how to accept the vulnerability and uncertainty that comes with intimate relationships of all kinds. Loving Beth can be frustrating and thankless, but it teaches Rachel that selfless love can be rewarding even if the other person doesn't love her back or treat her with dignity. Over her year of visits, Rachel learns to tame the critical "dark voice" in her head and accept Beth's limitations. For instance, once Rachel accepts that Beth constantly interrupts people to talk about nothing, she's no

longer bothered by Beth's rudeness and indifference. In turn, Rachel realizes that accepting a loved one's flaws makes it far easier to accept her own—and therefore to pursue new relationships without dreading the possibility of them failing. Thus, Beth teaches Rachel that selfless love actually fosters self-respect. Paradoxically, Beth is also an excellent role model for how to love others authentically, without getting hurt, by accepting their limitations. While Rachel is suspicious and closed off to others, Beth is open and shameless with them. When they rudely insult her—which is often—Beth simply brushes them off and moves on. Her rule is, "if they're nasty twice, then they're not my friends." In this way, Beth is authentic and vulnerable with others, but she also doesn't let their negative judgments affect her.

Finally, the other friends that Rachel makes during her year with Beth—including Beth's boyfriend Jesse and the bus drivers Jacob and Bailey—also teach her to embrace vulnerability and uncertainty in her relationships with others. Most importantly, Rachel goes on a few dates with the bus driver Rick. At first, she's frightened to get close to him, because she knows that she isn't ready for another relationship yet. But when she admits this to him, he's understanding and respectful, which helps calm her fears. In fact, they become close friends, and this shows Rachel how vulnerability can invite connection and growth.

If she can love Beth, Rachel learns, then she can love anyone. By the end of the book, while the Simon family by no means heals all of its conflicts, Rachel finally builds up the confidence and courage to seek love again. She gets back in touch with her ex-boyfriend, Sam, and they give their relationship another shot. It's telling that the book ends on the day they get married—which never could have happened if Rachel hadn't rekindled her relationship with Beth first.

COMMUNITY VS. INDIVIDUALISM

At the beginning of her journey, Rachel Simon doesn't just lack close personal relationships—she also lacks any sense of a broader community. But this is by design: while she views her writing and teaching work as an important public service, she also believes that achieving the "Big Life" will require her to avoid tying herself down to any particular place or group of people. And she emphasizes that her experience isn't unique—rather, it's part of a longstanding pattern of weakening communal ties in American life. In fact, Rachel's sister Beth lives in a mid-sized, formerly industrial, gradually declining Pennsylvania city where buses are one of the only remaining public spaces for residents to have natural, spontaneous encounters. As a result, the buses become a key place for the city's residents to connect—and Beth, more than most contemporary Americans, manages to find a robust sense of community through the bus system. Thus, *Riding the Bus with My Sister* offers a lesson in the value of community, or meaningful and sustained connections with a wide group of people who live in the same place or share the same interests. Specifically, Rachel shows that building community is often a more sustainable, rewarding pathway to living a meaningful life than the individualistic achievements (like success, power, and class status) that contemporary American culture often prioritizes.

Rachel's lifestyle and her observations of Beth's city show how local communities are gradually eroding across the U.S. First and foremost, Rachel's own life exemplifies this: for four years before her research began, she did almost nothing but work. Even though her job was to tell other people's stories, she had virtually no relationships of any sort outside of work and her immediate family. Moreover, because of her workaholic, car-centric suburban lifestyle, she almost never interacted with people outside her own social circle and class. Thus, Rachel's life exemplifies how modern American culture encourages people to live disconnected individual lives, rather than participating in a broader community. Meanwhile, Beth's city shows how socioeconomic forces have accelerated this trend. Rachel frequently overhears bus passengers talk about the stores that used to line the main street, the parks and theaters where people used to congregate, and the factories where they used to work. But after industry left the city, it began shrinking and growing poor. Now, it feels desolate, lacks strong social and economic institutions, and is full of desperately lonely, aimless people. This reflects the broader decline in American communal life over the last half-century.

By riding the buses with Beth and meeting new people, Rachel rediscovers the value of community. First, public transportation provides one of the few truly collective spaces still left over in cities like Beth's. At home, Rachel never takes public transit and almost never shares space with unfamiliar people. In contrast, when she rides the bus with Beth, she's often surrounded by a crowd, and people spontaneously strike up conversations with one another. For instance, a group of women on Estella's bus gets into a long discussion about men and romance. This makes Rachel dread returning home to her lonely apartment, because it shows her that she's missing out on the chance to participate in larger communities. Meanwhile, Beth uses the bus system to plug into a particular "traveling community" of her own: the drivers. She knows them all by name, and they turn to her for gossip about the bus company and one another, just as often as she turns to them for their wisdom. For instance, Beth chats with Melanie about cute celebrities, with Jacob about morality, and with virtually everyone about her crush on Cliff. The drivers all have their own opinions about Beth, but by committing to riding the buses, she claims a place within a community of people who care about her.

Rachel's experience shows her how people can find a sense of purpose and meaning by consciously building communities. First, Beth and Rachel find a sense of company and

camaraderie on the buses, which they lack in their largely solitary lives. For instance, Estella's passengers love her primarily because she's a kind and generous listener. Even if she can't help them solve their problems, she's always willing to listen and make people feel less alone. This shows that a trusted community is a valuable resource in itself. In addition, community can help people access the specific resources they need. For instance, the bus driver Jack explains has directed passengers to rehabilitation programs, and Rachel becomes a resource too—she helps Rodolpho learn acting skills and make a career change. This shows that there's no contradiction between individual success and connection to the community—on the contrary, community support helps people succeed. Community also passes on collective wisdom, memory, and morality. The bus drivers and passengers do so in the form of advice and stories. For instance, Bert is full of stories about driving buses in New York, while Jacob talks about his own liver transplant to illustrate the Golden Rule (treat others as one wants to be treated). These stories create a sense of continuity within communities over time, and they pass down shared values. This shows that building sustained community relationships can help people lead richer, happier lives, especially in declining places like Beth's city.

While the sense of community that Rachel finds on the buses doesn't undermine the value she places on her work, it does help her see the folly in dedicating herself *entirely* to work. After all, work is fundamentally about contributing to society, or playing a meaningful part in a broader community. Without connection to that community, therefore, even the most fascinating and important work can start to feel like meaningless drudgery. By seeing how Beth has created such a connection, Rachel realizes how she can reinvigorate her own work with a sense of meaning. Just as Rachel contributes to her community through writing and teaching, Beth contributes to her own by riding the buses, offering friendship and companionship along the way.

GROWTH, CHANGE, AND MORALITY

Throughout *Riding the Bus with My Sister*, one of Rachel Simon's most pervasive frustrations with her sister Beth is that, while Beth fully understands how her behaviors harm herself and others and is fully capable of changing these behaviors, she simply chooses not to. Rachel knows that Beth's developmental disability makes it difficult for her to change, but she also sees that Beth's rigidity is just a more extreme version of the universal human tendency to stubbornly stick to harmful habits and routines. In fact, Rachel realizes that she, like Beth, often behaves like "a clock that nobody can reset." In her conversations with Beth, Beth's care team (including Olivia and Vera), and her numerous bus driver mentors (like Jacob and Cliff), Rachel constantly returns to the question of what truly makes people change for the better. She realizes that she cannot force the people she loves to change, and that instead, they are only likely to change when they face failure, crisis, and despair. Therefore, Rachel argues that people are caught between two equally natural drives—the impulse to stick to bad habits and the desire for self-improvement—and the pressures they face determine which of these drives wins out.

Rachel is consistently frustrated by Beth's inconsiderate behavior, which she desperately wants to change. First and foremost, nobody can stand Beth's incessant talking. As Rachel puts it, "She *is* so loud. And she talks *all the time*. About *nothing*. […] Over and over and *over*." It bothers Rachel, bus drivers like Rodolpho and Cliff, and even Rachel and Beth's father—when he got Beth a job in his office, he couldn't bear to drive to work with her, because she would talk over his music nonstop during the two-hour car ride. Ultimately, being around Beth isn't just frustrating because she talks about things that aren't relevant to other people—it's also frustrating because she has no consideration for other people's time, space, and attention. Moreover, Rachel also takes issue with Beth's manipulativeness, taste for revenge, and refusal to take responsibility for the conflicts she causes. For instance, while most insults don't faze Beth, when a "fat girl" yells at her, she spends days plotting to publicly humiliate the girl. She tells Rachel that she simply doesn't care about the girl's feelings. Similarly, she turns the drivers Claude and Cliff against each other when Claude suggests that she should get a job. These examples all show that Beth simply doesn't take other people's needs or moral worth into account.

Meanwhile, Rachel's conversations with the people surrounding Beth constantly return to the question of how people can improve their lives and moral character. For instance, Jacob tells Rachel and Beth about how he nearly drank himself to death, then had a religious revelation after a liver transplant. He uses this story to highlight the importance of mercy and forgiveness. Rachel, who already believes in mercy, finds the lesson touching. But Beth doesn't—she still believes in revenge, and she refuses to change. Similarly, the driver Bailey dedicates inordinate time and effort to helping Beth find a job, which he believes would give her meaningful day-to-day activities and help her contribute to society. He even tells Rachel that he cares for Beth as much as his own children. And yet Beth fails to appreciate Bailey's effort and flat-out refuses to consider getting a job, since she doesn't need the money. Worse, she doesn't even recognize or appreciate Bailey's effort to help her. In short, she rejects an opportunity to improve her life because she faces no consequences for refusing it.

Over the course of the book, Rachel decides that encouragement doesn't convince people to change nearly as well as serious consequences do. Beth's failed makeover lightheartedly captures this principle. After a group of

beauticians completely transforms Beth's look, everyone is delighted to see her—except Beth herself, who quickly returns to her old, proudly unfashionable style. This shows how she resists changing, even for the better, so long as it's harder and less comfortable than staying the same. As Rachel puts it, "Beth seems to need a cataclysmic event for her to change in any way." Similarly, while Beth generally refuses to see doctors and take even the most basic preventative health measures (like brushing her teeth properly or eating vegetables), Rachel *does* convince Beth to undergo two key surgeries: a sterilization procedure to prevent her from getting pregnant and an eye surgery to prevent her from going blind. These require lots of explanation and patience, but Rachel shows Beth that the "cataclysmic" consequences of failing to act—like having a child she's incapable of raising or losing her vision—justify taking action. Again, this shows how crisis can be a powerful force for change. Meanwhile, Rachel's key transformation in the book—her decision to finally prioritize relationships over work and start reaching out to other people—also affirms the principle she observed in Beth. Namely, she changes through a moment of crisis: while riding in the back of Melanie's bus, she accidentally sees her reflection in the window, and she glimpses the same emotions that she remembers seeing in her mother's face after her divorce (terror, self-pity, and shame over her failures). Like Beth, Rachel decides to change only when she finally grasps the catastrophic consequences of *failing* to change.

Ultimately, Rachel's year with Beth makes her optimistic about her own chances of finding love, her own capacity to build a community, and society's ability to help people with disabilities live fulfilling lives. But it generally makes her more pessimistic about the likelihood of Beth deciding to change for the better, and her own chances of forcing Beth to change. Rachel still affirms that people are capable of change, even without crises, but she just concludes that it's very difficult—and doubly so for people with intellectual disabilities, like Beth.

SYMBOLS

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

LETTERS AND CARDS

Beth and Rachel's letters and cards represent their struggle to bridge the vast mental, emotional, and geographical distances that separate them. As adults, they move to different cities and get caught up in different worlds: Rachel dedicates herself to her work, and Beth to riding the buses. For years, they don't see each other—although they try to stay in touch. Since they struggle to keep up conversations on the phone, they write letters instead. Every week, Rachel writes Beth one neat, formally written card, while Beth sends Rachel about a dozen short notes, erratically scribbled in magic marker and covered in stickers. Needless to say, these different approaches capture their opposite personalities and communication styles, but they manage to understand each other nonetheless.

Eventually, when Rachel concludes that the letters are a poor substitute for an actual relationship with Beth, she decides to actually visit Beth. Yet, during the year Rachel chronicles in her book, Beth keeps sending her letters between her visits. In particular, Beth uses her letters to share her own thoughts on events that she and Rachel experienced together. These letters show that even if Beth often makes snap judgments and acts irresponsibly in the moment, she *does* reflect on and learn from her behavior later on. For instance, after Rachel and Beth get into a nasty fight because Beth doesn't want to lend Rachel a towel, Beth doesn't apologize or express remorse for her behavior during the rest of Rachel's visit—but then she sends Rachel a series of apology cards later that week. These cards support Rachel's strong belief that Beth is capable of learning and growing, even if it generally takes her longer than others to do so. But without the cards, Rachel might never understand what Beth actually thinks about their relationship.

BETH AND RACHEL'S CLOTHES

Beth and Rachel's differing wardrobes represent not only the differences in their personalities, but also the way that their life experiences have led them to pursue their creativity in different ways. Their taste in clothes couldn't be less alike: like a stereotypical city-dwelling writer, Rachel habitually wears all black, while Beth sticks to bright colors—preferably multiple at a time, and especially purple. She also insists on wearing shorts whenever it's over 40°F outside. Early on in the book, Rachel decides that she admires Beth's creativity with her wardrobe, because it shows that Beth has been able to develop her individuality and embrace her quirks. Rachel implicitly links this to the self-determination movement: Beth's ability to wear whatever she wants is a small but clear sign that she is truly getting to live the life that she wants, rather than following someone else's formula.

In contrast, Rachel dresses to fit in with the people around her, which requires her to hide her individuality. As a non-disabled person, she is expected to dress according to certain norms that Beth chooses not to follow, and as a writer, she is expected to blend into the scene she is researching, rather than calling too much attention to herself. She adds color to her life not by adorning herself, but rather by pursuing and making sense of other people's stories. Thus, it's no surprise that at the beginning of the book, Rachel feels that she lacks an energy that Beth possesses in abundance—but by the end, Beth's color and vitality start to rub off on Rachel, too.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grand Central Publishing edition of *Riding the Bus with My Sister* published in 2013.

1. January: The Journey Quotes

Beth and I, both in our late thirties, were born eleven months apart, but we are different in more than age. She owns a wardrobe of blazingly bright colors and can leap out of bed before dawn. She is also a woman with mental retardation.

I've come here to give Beth her holiday present: I've come to ride the buses.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Rachel Simon begins *Riding the Bus with My Sister* by describing an ordinary morning before a day with her mentally disabled sister, Beth. She uses this passage to introduce the premise of her book: she decided to spend a year repeatedly visiting Beth in an effort to reconnect with her, learn about her disability, and figure out why she chooses to spend her days riding the bus routes around her city. Rachel and Beth have always been united by their love and shared experiences but divided by their family's struggle to understand Beth's condition. And in adulthood, their whole family has drifted apart, but Rachel has also come up with a possible solution to their issues: she realized that she can truly understand Beth if she puts the right kind of time and energy into their relationship. Rather than asking Beth to adapt to her family's way of life, for just one year, Rachel will adapt to Beth's.

The way Rachel introduces Beth is also significant. Rachel describes her family relationship with Beth first, Beth's personality second, and only then her disability. This is Rachel's way of showing that Beth's disability doesn't define her—instead, it's just one of the many aspects of her life and identity. Indeed, over the course of the book, Rachel hopes to show her readers that Beth's life is as purposeful and fulfilling as anyone else's. Through Beth's story, Rachel hopes to fight the damaging assumption that people with developmental disabilities, like Beth, can only live incomplete or inferior versions of non-disabled people's lives. Instead, Rachel shows that Beth and others like her can thrive when they build lives specifically adapted to their needs and abilities—exactly like everyone else in society.

In the predawn moonlight, as she chattered on about our labyrinthine itinerary, well aware that there are few if any other people in this world devoted to a calling of bell cords and exhaust fumes, she spontaneously threw back her head and trumpeted, "I'm *diffrent*! I'm *diffrent*!" as if she were hurling a challenge with all her might beyond the limits of the sky.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon, Beth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7-8

Explanation and Analysis

During their morning walk from Beth's apartment to their first bus of the day, Beth expresses a deep pride in being "*diff*rent" and living a life specifically suited to her special personality, interests, and needs. This makes an impression on Rachel, who remembers how, when they were children, Beth always felt out of place and was ashamed of her disability. Clearly, Beth has transformed, and she's happier than ever before.

This is the secret that Rachel hopes to unearth through her visits: what has Beth done right in order to flourish, and what can others learn from her? After all, Beth's life defies nearly all of the most common stereotypes about people with developmental disabilities. Most importantly, she lives independently, maintains a wide circle of (mostly non-disabled) friends, spends most of her days pursuing her passion (riding the buses), and doesn't particularly care about other people's prejudices. She isn't just living an ideal life for people with disabilities—she's living an ideal life, *period*. Her passion, focus, and dedication to her community make her an excellent role model for *anyone* who wants to excel in a particular area. And in turn, her ability to serve as a role model challenges the very idea that people with disabilities should have to live different kinds of lives than people without them.

> In the course of my life, cars and trains and jets have whisked me to wherever I wanted to go, and I was going places, I thought; I was racing my way to becoming a Somebody. A Somebody who would live a Big Life. What that meant exactly, I wasn't sure. I just knew that I longed to escape the restrictions of what I saw as a small life: friends and a family and a safe, unobjectionable job that would pay me a passably adequate income. Although this package encompassed just the kind of existence many people I knew were utterly content with, I wanted something more.
>
> Then, in the winter of my thirty-ninth year, I boarded a bus with my sister and discovered that I wanted broader and deeper rewards than those I would find in the Big Life.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon, Beth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

After introducing the premise of her book, Rachel admits that she hopes to learn not just *about* Beth and her lifestyle, but also *from* her. Rachel knows that she and Beth have very different, if not diametrically opposed, goals in life. But as soon as she visits Beth, she realizes that Beth has achieved many key goals that she still hasn't, like connecting authentically with others, joining a broader community, and building a sensible, balanced day-to-day routine. She realizes that this kind of "small life" actually brings "broader and deeper rewards" than the "Big Life" of writerly fame and success that she has been pursuing, and Beth teaches her how to build and be satisfied with a "small life."

While there's little chance that Rachel will quit her job and switch to Beth's bus-riding lifestyle, she *does* apply key lessons from Beth's life to improve her own throughout the book. In addition to honestly presenting her own personal motives for reconnecting with Beth, Rachel also uses this passage to fight the stereotype that people with developmental disabilities live incomplete, limited lives and have nothing to teach non-disabled people.

> *Mental age*. It was as if they thought that a person's daily passions—and literacy skills, emotional maturity, fashion preferences, musical tastes, hygiene habits, verbal abilities, social shrewdness, romantic longings, and common sense—could all fit neatly into a single box topped, like a child's birthday cake, with a wax 7, or 13, or 3. […] My friends seemed relieved to learn that people with mental retardation are individuals. I was relieved to omit just what an individual Beth happened to be.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11-12

Explanation and Analysis

Rachel briefly describes the vast gulf between her friends' assumptions about Beth and the reality of Beth's life. She notes that many Americans, including these friends, tend to think of people with developmental disabilities as overgrown children who need constant caretaking and can never master complex skills or ideas. In particular, mainstream culture is obsessed with the concept of "mental age"—a technical term in IQ testing—based on the incorrect assumption that someone who scores like an average 11-year-old on an IQ test is, for all intents and purposes, exactly like an 11-year-old.

As Rachel explains here, it's crucial to view people with developmental disabilities as complete, multifaceted individuals. Their IQ is only one part of who they are—it doesn't define them. For instance, Beth has far more interesting and colorful traits than her IQ—including her bus-riding hobby. So, just like scoring near the average on an IQ test doesn't make someone inherently average at everything they do, scoring low on an IQ test doesn't make people with developmental disabilities inherently broken, incapable of succeeding, or inferior to other people. Rachel thus implies that people like Beth deserve the same as everyone else: to be viewed and treated as individuals with their own unique capacities and needs, and not as interchangeable, overgrown children.

I did ride with her, and over that day I was touched by the bus drivers' compassion, saddened and sickened by how many people saw Beth simply as a nuisance, and awed by how someone historically exiled to society's Siberia not only survived, but thrived. Indeed, the Beth I remembered from years ago had a heavy, ungainly gait; the Beth I saw now was not only nimble-footed, but her demeanor was exuberant and self-assured. I was aware of my earlier objections to her bus riding, but they began to feel inexcusably feeble.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Jesse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

On her first day riding the buses with Beth over the holidays, Rachel quickly recognizes that Beth's day-to-day experiences reflect much broader, more important truths about disability and its place in society. The way people treat Beth is a measure of how compassionate and inclusive her society is in general. Stigma and prejudice partially determine whether people with disabilities are comfortable leading visible public lives, so rooting them out must be a key element of any attempt to make society more hospitable for people with disabilities.

On their first day together, Rachel sees that bus drivers and fellow passengers treat Beth in a wide variety of ways, ranging from polite and welcoming to rude and dismissive. She realizes how easy it would be to help people change their responses, and how significant of an effect this would have. After all, Rachel deeply respects Beth's courage, but she also realizes that Beth is probably an outlier: she has developed a thick skin and learned to deal with serious prejudice in a way that many other people with developmental disabilities (like her boyfriend, Jesse) aren't fearless enough to replicate. Thus, by seeing firsthand how Beth faces serious discrimination in public, Rachel realized how important it is to fight this discrimination—and by seeing how Beth handles it with courage and grace, Rachel also came to understand part of the solution.

I think, *You need to do this, even if you don't know where it will take you.*

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Over the holidays, when Rachel visits Beth for the first time in many years, she realizes that Beth's lifestyle is far more complex and interesting than she previously thought. Beth goes on to tell Rachel that she's happy about virtually everything in her life, with one exception: she wishes that Rachel would start visiting and riding the buses with her more often. This quote is Rachel's immediate reaction to Beth's request.

Rachel knows that she's too busy to make time for Beth, that she's likely to spend a whole year merely reliving the day she has just finished, and that she could try to repair her relationship with Beth in a number of other ways. Nevertheless, she concludes that she has to accept Beth's request—her internal voice of reason tells her that it's absolutely the right decision. And the voice turns out to be right: Beth teaches Rachel far more than Rachel teaches Beth, and these lessons help Rachel with many of her deepest, most troubling problems.

Later in the book, when Rachel explores the question of how people change, she concludes that people usually have to experience a crisis in order to recognize their problems, then make a concerted effort to overcome them. Unsurprisingly, this is exactly what happened before her visit to Beth: she realized that she was distancing herself from virtually all of her loved ones and doing nothing but work all day, every day. Thus, her visit to Beth wasn't just an interruption in this demanding schedule: it was also an invitation to experience a different world and way of living. Even if just subconsciously, Rachel immediately understood that Beth's life presented a promising, refreshing alternative to her own.

4. February: The Professor Quotes

"Yeah," she says with a quick nod. "He's *cool*."

Ah, yes. Cool. As my speech might sometimes seem unintelligible to Beth, so can hers seem to me, because Beth has her own lingo. And in Beth-speak, as I have gathered from her letters, "cool" does not concern hip attire or trendy indifference. Instead, it is the term of highest approval, bestowed only upon those people Beth deems worthy of her attention and trust, and crucial if one is to be promoted into her personal Top Ten (though, in truth, hip-hop shades or chiseled Brad Pitt features—neither of which the Professor possesses—are apt to increase the likelihood of admission). "Yes," I say. "I guess I do mean he's cool."

Related Characters: Rachel Simon, Beth (speaker), Tim

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

When Rachel and Beth ride on Tim's bus, Rachel calls Tim "personable"—which Beth then translates into her own personal equivalent and favorite word, "cool." Rachel explains that while "cool" can have all sorts of meanings in different contexts and it can be difficult to figure out exactly what Beth means when she uses it, the word is still Beth's highest form of praise.

Rachel's comments about the many meanings of "cool" show how Beth's disability often leads to communication problems that can prevent her from easily getting along with others or even create dangerous misunderstandings. At the same time, Beth's unique way of communicating is also an asset because it shows that she has an entirely different, original perspective on the world around her. Yet, above all, Rachel emphasizes that Beth's communication style isn't broken or inferior to non-disabled English speakers'—rather, she simply uses the same language in a different way.

> "Every day right here in this seat, I have history riding with me.

And that's what I like about it. There's so much richness on a bus—really, so much richness everywhere—if you just develop the ability to look at life with a different eye, and appreciate the opportunities offered to you."

Related Characters: Tim (speaker), Rachel Simon, Beth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his route, the bookish bus driver Tim explains why he values his job so highly: it gives him a special window into personal experiences and details in the environment that most people never manage to see (whether because they don't go to communal spaces like the bus, or because they overlook those details when they do). This idea completely transforms Rachel's perspective on bus-driving, which she previously imagined to be a repetitive, utterly boring profession. Instead, Tim shows her that bus drivers are really like novelists and philosophers: they get to spend all day sitting around, thinking about the meaning of life and the stories of the people who surround them. For a contemplative, intellectual person like him—or, for that matter, Rachel—it's actually a perfectly suitable, respectable working-class job.

Yet Beth views *riding* the bus as a perfect vocation for much the same reason: it lets her spend her time immersed in thought and conversation. Thus, Tim's speech shows how buses are actually the perfect spaces for combining Rachel and Beth's very different perspectives on life and the world. It's no wonder that buses ultimately bring them together and help them rescue their relationship.

7. March: Streetwise Quotes

> "I told her, but she said I still couldn't come in. If they don't want me there, I don't want to go there."

I try to wash the outrage from my face, as well as my surprise at her reaction. I think of the bookstore customers who'd call the president of the company if we dared say such a thing to them. I think of the libraries that homeless people have sued successfully so they could pass their days at a reading table. But lawyers, and the right to demand rights, are part of a world that Beth's aware of but doesn't seem to want to inhabit.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon, Beth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Beth tells Rachel that finding a public bathroom is often the hardest part about her bus-riding lifestyle. Some, like the restroom at city hall, are dangerous; many others, like the one she describes here, simply refuse to let her in, even though they're technically supposed to be open to the public.

Although this discrimination might seem like a mere minor convenience, Rachel explains here, it's actually deeply significant—and not only because it's a personal inconvenience to Beth. This discrimination shows that in Beth's city, people with disabilities simply aren't included as equals in public life. And this atmosphere of exclusion can have dramatic consequences: it can dissuade people with disabilities from going out, socializing, or taking public-

facing jobs. In other words, discrimination is a powerful force acting to keep people with disabilities invisible in American life, so fighting it is absolutely crucial to creating the conditions necessary for them to thrive.

Despite this, as Rachel notes here, Beth isn't interesting in litigating for the sake of justice; she mostly cares about making her next bus. And Rachel understands—while she recognizes the injustice that Beth faces, she also recognizes that it's not fair to expect Beth to enforce inclusiveness around her city.

There it is again, that deep voice grumbling on inside me: *How can she be so blithe about the possibility of trouble? You can't let her do that. She may be putting herself in real jeopardy!*

I take a deep breath. Despite her familiarity with this city, I'm not sure she fully understands, or accepts, how perilous the world can be. Yet if I get too "bossy," I know she'll dig in her heels all the harder. I also know it would be a great loss if I let some inner voice of criticism come between us. I'm enamored of her feistiness and her keen-witted street savvy. I feel privileged to be her sidekick. I want this year to go on.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Jesse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75-76

Explanation and Analysis

After Beth admits that she and her boyfriend, Jesse, got into a fight with a homeless couple on a street corner, Rachel starts to worry about Beth's safety. In fact, as Beth's older sister, Rachel has *always* worried about her and felt obligated to protect her. Thus, she's distraught to realize that Beth's day-to-day routine may put her in serious danger, and that if something happens to her, it's entirely possible that nobody in the family will find out. Worse still, Beth struggles to accurately assess risk because of her disability, and anytime other people point out danger to her, she flatly resists acknowledging it.

As a result, Beth's risky behavior puts Rachel in a delicate position—but one that she has always had to occupy throughout her whole life. On the one hand, Rachel's primary concern is for Beth's safety, and she desperately wishes that she could just tell Beth to stop acting so carelessly. On the other, she knows that Beth will ignore or lash out against her if she says anything on the subject, so she decides that the best solution is to keep her concerns to herself. This situation captures why it's so difficult to love Beth: doing so requires Rachel to accept that Beth will probably never take her concerns seriously, deliberately act against her own best interests, and refuse to change. But it also shows why it can be so difficult for society to adequately accommodate people with disabilities, without forcing them to act against their own wishes (and thereby violating their autonomy).

8. March: Into Out There Quotes

Mommy sits Max and Laura and me down in her room and closes the door. She tells us, "Beth needs a little extra help sometimes, and whenever you see that she does, help her. Don't you ever forget: it could have happened to any one of you."

[...]

Daddy says, "Some people send mentally retarded kids away to institutions, but we'll never do that. Ever, ever, ever. We'll always have room for her."
Then when they get up and open the doors I think about how we just heard two words that they never say in front of Beth: "mentally retarded." We never ask why, we just go back to playing with her. But we know, too, not to say those words where she can hear them.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon, Rachel and Beth's Mother, Rachel and Beth's Father (speaker), Beth , Max, Laura

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82-83

Explanation and Analysis

Rachel and Beth's parents set clear and high-minded expectations for how Rachel, Max, and Laura should treat Beth. They emphasize that no matter how society has abused people with disabilities in the past, Rachel, Max, and Laura must treat Beth in the way that they would like to be treated if they had her same condition. They tell Rachel, Max, and Laura that accommodating their sister will ultimately become their responsibility, and that they must absolutely avoid telling Beth that she's different or inferior because of her "retardation" (or, in today's language, her developmental disability).

In practice, this directive becomes difficult later in life, when the family endures serious conflicts and nobody in the family has the space or energy to accommodate Beth. But Rachel's unyielding belief in this principle is what fundamentally pushes her to reconnect with Beth and ride the buses: she feels that she has failed to live up to her promise and wants to do something to the effect. Indeed,

her parents' wisdom always guides Rachel's relationship with Beth: Rachel views herself as Beth's protector but also her moral equal. She understands that a disability "*could have happened to*" any of her siblings, or anyone else in society, which means that *everyone* should make the effort necessary to accommodate Beth and others like her. In reality, this idea is just a simplified version of self-determination: since Beth is no worse than anyone else, her parents insist, she deserves the same life opportunities as everyone else—she'll just need some extra help along the way.

12. May: Lunch with Jesse Quotes

I tell my friends I want to know what "their own kind" means. […] Okay, so she's a tiny, sassy, roly-poly, Crayola-bright, nonpracticing Jewish chatterbox, and he's a five-feet-four, bashful, sinewy, Lycra-clad, nonpracticing Baptist loner. Yet she makes sure he's safer by buying him a bike helmet. He makes sure she's prettier by shaving the hair that grows on her face. They scratch each other's backs, and they accept each other's moles. They argue over her queen bee ways or his reticence; they make up. He hangs his bike awards in her apartment. She keeps the redial button on her phone set to call him. They agree that they both want their own space and should remain unmarried, visiting in mornings or evenings, remaining alone with their dreams. I am still longing to meet *my* own kind, whatever that is, and I wonder who among these critics has met theirs.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Jesse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126-127

Explanation and Analysis

Rachel explains that Beth's relationship with her boyfriend, Jesse, provokes plenty of controversy around their city—less because they are both developmentally disabled than because Beth is white and Jesse is Black. People often tell Beth and Jesse to "stick with their own kind," by which they mean dating other people of the same race. But Rachel sees that if there were really "kinds" of people, Beth and Jesse would certainly be the same "kind." This isn't because they have similar disabilities, but rather because they never fail to love, support, and understand each other. Their relationship is stronger than any other that Rachel knows, and as she admits here, she actually envies it.

After all, it would be just as coherent for people to celebrate Beth and Jesse for dating "their own kind"—people with developmental disabilities—or condemn them for dating outside "their own kind," meaning their own gender. But nobody is saying this—their comments are motivated by nothing but racism. And while *Riding the Bus with My Sister* isn't primarily about race, Rachel emphasizes that racism, ableism, and all other forms of discrimination and exclusion are inherently linked. Just like defining people with developmental disabilities by their scores on IQ tests, defining people by their race means reducing their complex lives and personalities to a single trait that they haven't even chosen. Why, Rachel asks, is race the only "kind" that matters?

The hostess, who is also the waitress, has shed all traces of her earlier inhospitality, and she doesn't ignore Beth and Jesse, as some waitresses would do, waiting for me to act as the interpreter. Instead, she asks them what they want. It must be taxing for her, I think, as she pockets her pad and walks off; it's perplexing enough for me. And how *can* she assess the proper way to behave, when my conversations with friends have made plain to me how little even the most enlightened of them knows about people like my sister? After all, until Beth's generation, many people with mental retardation were shut away in institutions and attics.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Jesse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

When Rachel, Beth, and Jesse go out for lunch, Rachel notices how difficult it can be for them (and other people with developmental disabilities) to navigate everyday social interactions, like ordering at a restaurant. But this isn't because of their disabilities—rather, it's because *other people* don't know how to behave around people with their kind of developmental disabilities. Of course, Rachel argues that the right way is to treat them like anyone else, while making accommodations for their disabilities when necessary. At the restaurant, she's pleasantly surprised when the waitress takes Beth and Jesse's orders normally, instead of treating them like children, nuisances, or otherwise incapable of choosing and communicating for themselves.

At the same time, Rachel also deeply empathizes with non-disabled people like the waitress, because she recognizes

that most people aren't used to interacting with people with developmental disabilities, so they don't know how to do it. They don't have a clear script or norm in mind, as they might when dealing with groups like blind people or wheelchair users, who are somewhat more visible in mainstream society. Because people with developmental disabilities have been locked behind closed doors for generations, there will inevitably be some bumps in the road when society finally decides to include them. Of course, this speaks to the importance of visibility: the more that people with developmental disabilities participate in mainstream society, the more that mainstream society will learn to accept them and treat them as equals.

Beth wipes a bread crumb from Jesse's small mustache. I bite into a roll, so frazzled that my hand is trembling. Now I understand that it's not just Jesse's blind eye or mental disability that discourages him from accepting my offers to join us in restaurants. There's so much separateness in this almost empty room that I can't breathe.

"Don't pay him no mind," Jesse says quietly, having observed more than I'd realized. "People is gonna look all day, and they might say that they don't think it's right, but it's not really for them to judge. As long as you be nice to a person, looks don't matter. You in this world, and you gotta accept it."
"*Yeah*," Beth says. "Sometimes people give us looks, but I don't *think* about it."

Related Characters: Rachel Simon, Beth , Jesse (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

At lunch, Rachel notices an old man staring at Beth and Jesse. As she explains here, she starts to worry, but Jesse immediately calms her down. He's used to it—as a Black man with a developmental disability, who is also blind in one eye, he constantly attracts attention in public. (Unfortunately, because of this, he often avoids going out at all.)

Jesse tells Rachel about his personal philosophy: he can't stop people's prejudice before it starts, so all he can hope to do is fight it after it gets going. He does this by treating others well—he responds with empathy and acceptance, even when they neither accept nor empathize with him.

At first, Rachel finds this idea difficult to swallow—it's so far from the inclusion and equality that she knows people with developmental disabilities deserve. It's also very different from what Beth does: she either ignores or retaliates against people who treat her badly. But Rachel eventually concludes that Jesse's approach is a modest but realistic and effective strategy for combatting prejudice. She tries her best to adopt it—although she still finds it difficult not to react angrily when people mistreat Beth.

"You want to know 'bout love?" he says, lowering his glass. Then he sits up straight and says slowly, "Love is when you care for somebody, and you be willing to go out of your way and do anything for that person, and to take care of that person, and if they have problems, that you can help them out any way you know how. If they sick, that you can bring 'em medicine, or give 'em a helping hand. That's what love is."

Related Characters: Rachel Simon, Jesse (speaker), Beth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134-135

Explanation and Analysis

During their lunch, while Beth goes to the bathroom, Rachel asks Jesse about love. She wants to understand what Jesse feels for Beth, but she also wants to understand love for herself, since her own romantic life seems increasingly empty and hopeless. Jesse offers this characteristically wise, thoughtful response—which Rachel thinks should put to rest the absurd misconception that because certain kinds of cognitive tasks are harder for developmentally disabled people, they can't think complex thoughts at all.

Jesse essentially defines love as selflessly caring for another person, which means that his love for Beth is about each of them putting the other's needs above their own. This helps Rachel understand how her own selfless, often grueling year-long effort to prioritize Beth's needs is really just an extension of her sisterly love. It also helps her see why Beth's refusal to take anyone else's needs into account poses such problems in her everyday life.

15. June: The Earth Mother Quotes

❝ *Put a lid on it, Beth*, the dark voice inside me wants to say—the same voice that's been piping up since this year began, and especially in my past few trips to see her. *You've said precisely the same thing to every driver today, regardless of how the last one responded. Can't you get back to a sweeter mood? Would it be such a hardship to listen to someone else for a minute?*

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Estella

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

When Rachel and Beth board Estella's bus, a passenger named Josie is telling Estella about how her husband suffered a severe illness and got hospitalized. But Beth interrupts Josie to start talking about her own drama with other bus drivers. Rachel is frustrated—Beth's concerns are clearly neither as serious nor as urgent as Josie's. If Rachel empathizes with Beth, who either does not understand or does not care about Josie's needs, then she is essentially helping victimize an innocent woman. On the other hand, if she empathizes with Josie, she will not only fail to account for Beth's disability but also likely offend and alienate her. Rachel knows that the right answer is *both*: she has to try to understand Beth's behavior *and* its effect on Josie. But this is difficult, since "the dark voice" in her head sincerely believes that Beth is in the wrong, and she has always found Beth's constant chatter maddening.

Rachel's fight against her "dark voice" represents her struggle to live up to the values that her parents taught her: she has to treat Beth as a dignified equal, while also accommodating her disability. In situations like this one, Rachel struggles to identify the right balance between these two principles. Is Beth's chatter part of her disability, and therefore to be accommodated, or does treating Beth as an equal mean acknowledging when her talking is annoying, just like she would do for anyone else? Rachel's struggle to love Beth well is ultimately about her struggle to identify and achieve this balance.

❝ I glance around, and realize with surprise that all the passengers happen to be female. Soon our chat in the front of the bus has rippled out to every unrequited teenager, too-young-to-vote mother, starry-eyed fiancée, common-law wife, football widow, three-time divorcée, golden-anniversary grandmother, and avowed single woman until the whole bus is talking together about men: the good, the bad, and their own choices.

[…] Maybe this is what it used to be like once upon a time. Maybe, when women gathered for quilting bees, or when men played checkers outside the general store, or when everyone came together at village dances and July Fourth picnics, this ease helped people feel less alone in their worries. Maybe, too, this was the swiftness with which neighbors became friends, and the simplicity with which one person's tale became another person's teacher.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon, Estella (speaker), Beth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162-163

Explanation and Analysis

When Rachel and Beth ride on Estella's bus with a crowd of other female passengers, the conversation naturally turns to men. Rachel realizes that the bus is serving as the kind of communal space that has long since ceased to exist in much of the U.S. At its best, the bus is a safe, inclusive environment where people can tell stories, discuss personal challenges, and imagine better futures together. It allows scattered individuals to recognize what they share and form a collective, however momentarily.

Most importantly, the bus is a welcome antidote to the U.S.'s highly individualistic, isolating culture. It gives Rachel a sense of camaraderie, of belonging to something greater, that she hasn't felt in ages. And it shows her what kind of life is possible if she learns to build enduring connections with other people and places, instead of spending her life fleeing from them. At first, she assumed that Beth wastes her time riding the buses because of boredom or mere obsessiveness. But now, she realizes that Beth actually chooses to ride because she gleans profound wisdom, support, and love from the communities that she finds onboard.

16. June: Disabilities Quotes

❝ I hang up in a swirl of relief and shame. I have lived with mental retardation for thirty-nine years, and I have never asked anyone what it really is. In the interest of raising four equal children, our parents almost never uttered the words except in private and never added books about mental retardation to our shelves. In fact, I'd read about this disability only in works of fiction [...] and none of them answered the questions that I hadn't thought to ask. But why should it have occurred to me to do so? Mental retardation had just always been my sister, and my sister had always been it.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Olivia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

As Rachel gradually grows less patient and more frustrated with Beth, she starts to ask which aspects of Beth's misbehavior are the result of her personality, and which are due to her disability. She realizes that despite being Beth's sister all her life, she actually knows very little about developmental disability (or "mental retardation," as Beth's condition was called in the past). She knows that thousands of psychologists dedicate their lives to studying people like Beth, but she doesn't know what they have actually found. She also knows that thousands of social workers like Olivia dedicate their lives to helping people with developmental disabilities, but she knows next to nothing about the best practices they have decided to follow. After talking with Olivia, who seems to share none of her frustrations with Beth, Rachel decides to do some research.

But first, Rachel asks herself why she hasn't bothered to do this research earlier. How is it possible, she asks, that she has lived 39 years of her life with Beth as a sister but never bothered to actually spend a day learning about Beth's condition? She realizes that she never thought of Beth's condition as something separate from Beth herself—she learned how to accommodate her sister, not how to behave toward people with developmental disabilities in the abstract. Her parents didn't want Beth to think of herself as lesser, so they avoided the topic of her exact condition. As a result, Rachel's personal relationship with Beth and Olivia's professional relationship with Beth look totally different. But now that she's an adult and knows that she has Beth's best interests in mind, Rachel believes that learning more about Beth's disability can only help her.

❝ I still have not untangled how much is Beth and how much is Beth's brain, nor whether, when she does not welcome new conversations, fashions, manners, boundaries, or concepts of space, it is because she cannot, or will not, or is simply not in a mood to open her mind at a given moment. I also have not ascertained how much, if any, of her self-centeredness is a result of her mental retardation. And, given the inextricable weave of nature and nurture, of self and society, that exists in all of us, it seems unlikely that I ever will.

But now I do know that, like me, and the drivers, Beth is on a journey. It's just that Beth's bus chugs along a lot more slowly.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Jesse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

After reading about developmental disabilities on the internet for several hours, Rachel feels that she understands Beth's condition much better than before. She learns that people like Beth simply struggle with certain cognitive, analytical, social, and emotional tasks, which means that interacting, loving, and working with them often requires more empathy and tolerance than usual. Beth's incessant talking, chronic impatience, and willful ignorance about consequences are at least partially the result of her disability, which means that it's Rachel's responsibility to accommodate them.

At the same time, Rachel's research also shows her that she can never fully separate Beth's personality from her disability, no matter how much she wants to. There are no clear lines—she will never be able to say which of Beth's misbehaviors are poor choices, for which she should be held responsible, and which are the inevitable result of her disability. As Rachel explains here, this means that she will always have to live with serious moral uncertainty—she will never be able to definitively say when it is or isn't fair to hold Beth fully responsible for her actions.

Through her research, Rachel also reaches an essential insight about the fundamental nature of Beth's condition: developmental disability isn't a limitation on people's *potential*, but rather on *the rate at which they learn*. Thus, Beth can achieve any of the same things as non-disabled people—she will just learn significantly slower. Just as Jesse became a master martial artist through time and practice, Beth can achieve her own dreams, too, if she's willing to put in the time and effort. This is why Rachel compares Beth to a bus: she can reach the same destination as others, but her journey will have to take a bit longer.

18. July: The Optimist Quotes

❝ Wouldn't it be nice, even liberating, if I could begin to see beyond my cynicism and resistance and controlling impulses? [...] I think about how so many of these drivers, at crucial turning points, learned to view and inhabit their own lives in fresh ways, [and] slowly it comes to me.

Beth is living by *her own choices*, unfettered by the whims of an institution or group home placement decision; she travels according to the starred dots on *her* map; she eats what *she* likes when *she's* hungry; she boldly dresses in a fireworks display of ensembles that declare, Look at me, I count in this world. She is, in many ways, the embodiment of self-determination.

A tension that I hadn't even realized I'd been feeling—a tension that has possessed my body throughout this day—for weeks, no, for *months*—begins to ease.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Bailey, Olivia, Beth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

On Bailey's bus, Rachel notices the stark contrast between her own jumpy impatience with Beth and Bailey's endless patience and generosity toward her. Bailey tells her that driving the bus has taught him to accept the things he cannot control while being optimistic about the things he can. Impressed by Bailey's ability to reframe his thoughts and change his perspective, Rachel tries to do the same thing to address her conflicts with Beth. She combines Bailey's insight with the basic principle of self-determination, which she learned about from Olivia: to whatever extent possible, people with developmental disabilities should live according to their own life decisions.

By combining these two ideas, Rachel realizes that the solution to her conflicts with Beth isn't expecting Beth to eventually change, but rather embracing change *herself*. Beth is living a free, autonomous life—and Rachel has no right to change her. Instead, she should think of Beth's faults the same way she would anyone else's: she can choose to tolerate and adapt to them, or she can decide that dealing with them isn't worth the effort of sustaining a relationship with Beth. But she can't expect to make Beth change, because Beth is an adult who makes her own decisions. This realization helps Rachel finally relax by showing her that she doesn't have to hold herself responsible for Beth's behavior in order to be a good, loving sister. Thus, Bailey and Olivia teach Rachel that a more hands-off approach is not only better for Beth but also healthier for herself.

❝ Beth has sought out mentors in places where others might not look, and, moreover, taken the time, and endured the pain, to weed out those drivers who are decent and kind and reflective from those who are indifferent or hostile. The ones I'm meeting are, I realize as I quickly do the math, only about a sixth of the whole bus company. That took Beth a huge amount of trial and error—and, yes, determination. I shake my head, amazed at how much I'd somehow missed, and then, with a surge of optimism, wonder if one out of six people in *any* profession or community would also be exceptionally thoughtful. How could I really know? Have *I* ever spent this much time exploring the worldviews of my colleagues at school or the bookstore? Do I have a clue about whether my neighbors feel committed to the Golden Rule?

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Bailey, Claude, Tim, Jacob, Estella, Rodolpho, Rick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

Rachel thinks about all the drivers she has met so far: Claude, Tim, Jacob, Estella, Rodolpho, Rick, and Bailey. They're all extraordinary people—each has taught her at least one unforgettable life lesson, and all are clearly positive influences on Beth. Rachel wonders if bus-driving just happens to attract saintly characters, but then she thinks about Beth's process of meeting and evaluating the new drivers. She is suddenly overcome with gratitude: she realizes that Beth has found a cross-section of the best people humanity has to offer and then given Rachel the opportunity to meet them. Even if Beth struggles to show love and empathy for Rachel in her day-to-day life, these relationships are a profound gift.

Then, Rachel's thinking takes a slightly different turn: she realizes that perhaps far more people are as "exceptionally thoughtful" as the drivers she has met, and that perhaps she has never realized this because she doesn't put the same kind of effort into her relationships as Beth. She decides that maybe she ought to. In summary, for Beth, riding the buses is really about finding the best people she possibly can and then spending all the time she can with them. Rachel admires Beth's determination and faith in human relationships—two traits that she doesn't share but hopes to develop.

21. August: The Loner Quotes

To Beth, every day is Independence Day. This was not true for the first half of her life, and for the next quarter it was more of a rebel war, with its own versions of boycotts (particularly at meals), Boston Tea Parties (I shudder to remember her efforts to overturn the order in her classroom), and a one-woman Minuteman regiment. Since she has lived on her own, though, each day her actions declare anew that all men are created equal, and have the inalienable right to life, liberty, and, especially, the pursuit of happiness. I love this about her, and, now that I have come to see her as proudly bearing the torch of self-determination, I regard her as courageous, a social pioneer.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Jack

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

When Beth and the bus driver Jack talk about how they both like to deal with their life problems on their own, Rachel muses that Beth's lifestyle embodies classic American values—most of all, independence. This may seem like a silly metaphor or irrelevant tangent, but in reality, Rachel uses it to make an important point about the way the public thinks and talks about disability. Usually, people with disabilities are an afterthought to the ideal of the American citizen—who is usually imagined as an independent white man who doesn't need anyone else's help in order to achieve his goals or provide for his family. Policies often focus on helping this kind of citizen while overlooking everyone else's needs.

But for people with disabilities, living free, independent lives actually *requires* receiving support from others. For Beth, there is no true autonomy without community, accommodation, and public services. Thus, to truly make all citizens equal and give them the "life, liberty, and [...] pursuit of happiness" that the Constitution guarantees them, the U.S. government has to provide adequate services to people with disabilities. Beth is a success story: her life shows how people with disabilities can find freedom and fulfillment, and the services she receives should be a model for how other cities, nations, and communities should care for their citizens who have disabilities. Thus, Rachel concludes that the principle of self-determination is really the greatest embodiment of fundamental American philosophical ideals. In turn, this means that American society's success in helping people with disabilities live fulfilling lives is the greatest measure of whether the nation is living up to its promise.

"I wish I had a 'Help Anyone, Anytime Book,' like Jack's."

"Why?"

What I want is a guide to being a good sister, to doing well by Beth, and I would leave it propped on my lap all the time. There would be instructions on how to adjust my guidance to her self-reliance, and how to find the difference between caring and controlling.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon, Beth (speaker), Jack

Related Themes:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

The bus driver Jack tells Rachel that he used to be a community social worker, and that he still uses the resource guide from his old job to help his passengers access the help that they need to deal with crises. (For instance, he uses the guide to direct a woman suffering from alcoholism to a rehabilitation program.) Rachel imagines how helpful it would be to have a similar guide for dealing with Beth. Then, she wouldn't have to constantly make difficult judgments about how to act in Beth's best interests, when to tolerate her misbehavior, and so on.

But no such guide exists for Rachel and Beth. This is because of a key difference between Beth's situation and Jack's passengers': Beth's disability creates endless moral dilemmas and grey areas. For instance, can Beth's family force her to get life-saving surgery that she doesn't want? When Beth rudely interrupts and insults other passengers, is she morally at fault, or is her behavior just a result of her disability? Unlike where to go for rehabilitation, these situations have no clear solutions, which means that there can never be foolproof guidelines for dealing with them. And it means that no matter how benevolent her intentions are, Rachel will always live with doubts—she will never be able to definitively say whether she's done the right thing for Beth or not. Instead, she must simply take comfort in the knowledge that she's doing her best.

26. September: Surgery Quotes

❝ There, in this quiet corner of the hospital, stroking her skin, I look into her eyes. They are so scratched and foggy, so hard to see inside. Yet in this moment, they are also stripped of all her defiance and foxiness and mischief. She looks at me with a fullness of trust that I seldom see.

And something happens: the ice in my heart starts to melt, and I feel a rush of love pour in. The sensation warms and surprises me, and I wonder if she sees astonishment in my eyes. She can't see much anyway and, besides, she's drifting off to sleep. But somehow I'm sure she knows.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Jacob

Related Themes:

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

Beth is going blind because her corneas are damaged, and her eyelashes are growing back into her eyes. When she goes for eye surgery, she's fortunate enough to have three people accompanying her: Rachel, the altruistic driver Jacob, and her medical caseworker Mary. While she's terrified of the surgery and half-jokingly comments that she wants to run away, these three people give her the information, support, and affection that she needs to go through with the surgery.

After Beth lays down on the gurney, receives her anesthesia, and falls asleep, Rachel stands over her and remembers how much she loves her. This has been easy for Rachel to forget—after all, Beth can be endlessly frustrating. But Rachel chooses to cope with these frustrations and work on her own patience precisely because of her profound love for her sister. She remembers that this love is what has driven her to spend this year visiting Beth, learning about her disability and her life choices, and she realizes that little in her life is as valuable as this feeling, or the connection she shares with Beth. In short, Beth teaches Rachel to love again.

27. September: Releasing the Rebel Quotes

❝ *Dad realizes they are lost.*

"I don't know where we are," he admits, squinting through the blackness.

"Will we get home?" Beth asks.

"Somehow. I'll get us there somehow."

She's quiet for a minute, then she looks at him. "At least we have each other," she says.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon, Beth , Rachel and Beth's Father (speaker), Rachel and Beth's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 260

Explanation and Analysis

One night, Beth and her father get lost on their way home. It's late at night, long before the era of cell phones or digital maps. So, it's unclear if they will find their way home, or how. They both start to worry, but they also stay calm. As usual, when in crisis, Beth acts as the voice of wisdom: she points out that the only thing that really matters is that they "have each other" as father and daughter, bound together by unconditional love.

Yet Beth's line is also full of irony, for two main reasons. First, Rachel and Beth's mother has just abandoned her, proving that the family *doesn't* always "have each other." And second, Beth has been trying her father's patience at the office where she works for him, and particularly on their long commutes. The rest of the family can no longer stand her, but she continues to act out because she knows that they will always care for her anyway. Thus, she's taking advantage of the fact that they'll always "have each other" in order to get away with acting selfishly. Throughout the book, Rachel struggles with the tension between these two truths: on the one hand, familial love is *supposed* to be permanent and unconditional. But on the other, throughout her own life, it often hasn't been. In a sense, Rachel's year of visits is her attempt to show herself, Beth, and the world that she and Beth *will* always "have each other."

28. October: The Hunk Quotes

❝ She goes on and on, and now the dark voice, which I thought I'd laid to rest last month, roars within me again. I squeeze my hands together. When I started riding the buses, I remember, I thought of the people who didn't like Beth as insensitive and narrow-minded. Now I find myself more sympathetic to their point of view. Yes, some of them are coarse and offensively vocal. But she *is* so loud. And she talks *all the time*. About *nothing*. I know many of us babble on about nothing, too, but she does it over and over and over—and over and over and *over*—and it's really eroding the limits of my endurance. Dad used to tell us he came to dread their car rides to work for precisely the same reasons. That was *twenty years ago*.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Rachel

and Beth's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

During her year of visits, the more time Rachel spends with Beth, the more she starts to doubt whether Beth will ever be capable of change. On the one hand, Rachel's research about disabilities has shown her that Beth absolutely *is* capable of learning to be a better person, if the circumstances are right. On the other, Rachel has seen absolutely no progress from Beth, and Beth's care team keeps reminding her that Beth's autonomy (or self-determination) is the most important goal. Thus, the reality is even worse than Rachel thought: Beth *can* change but is choosing not to, and Rachel can't do anything about it. If Beth hasn't changed in 20 years, she probably won't ever change, so everyone around her will have to deal with her frustrating behavior for the foreseeable future.

In addition to empathizing with all of the people around Beth, Rachel also starts to reconsider the very premise of her visits. She again reevaluates whether it's fair to expect Beth to grow, change, or finally reciprocate her effort—and, if not, why she's continuing to visit Beth in the first place. While she doesn't yet reach any definitive conclusions, she sees that the benefits of her visits seem to be diminishing over time. She fears that she and Beth have hit a limit in their relationship and won't be able to connect any further.

I think: I wish I were a saint.

I wish I were a magnanimous sister who could feel compassion for the way that Beth is re-creating a dysfunctional family environment on the buses.
I wish I had the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

I wish I could learn the language of Maybe It's Good Enough. Maybe it's good enough that she can memorize seventy drivers' schedules and stand up to racists and read. I wish I could be a realist who could accept Beth's level of development and not long for more.

I wish I were like acquaintances who think that people with mental retardation are "God's true angels." I don't want to think, "I wish she'd behave a *little* more appropriately today."
I wish I could *change*.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Cliff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

After Rachel and Beth get into an argument on Cliff's bus, Rachel runs to the back of the bus in frustration, leaving Beth alone up front. The sisters gaze at each other and think about their struggling relationship. Over the course of their year together, Rachel has become more and more frustrated with Beth's behavior, but she's also started to understand that it's unfair to expect Beth to change. Instead, Rachel starts to focus on how *she* can change in order to be a better, more patient, more understanding sister. She realizes that, just like Beth, she's also struggling to become a better person. Beth struggles to become more considerate, tolerant, and selfless toward everyone else, while Rachel struggles to become more patient and empathetic toward Beth. Thus, she realizes that, on some level, she's just as stubborn and difficult as Beth—and only a true saint would have the level of patience she desires. Ultimately, by admitting her own errors and forgiving herself, Rachel helps herself forgive Beth's shortcomings, too.

For a moment, as I stand halfway up the aisle in the now still bus, embarrassment courses through me. I realize how I keep turning to these drivers to help me steer my own life. But it has come to feel like a different world up here, with different rules, and, besides, I think, I am too desperate to remind myself that I should keep my mouth shut. I wait until I've calmed down, then slip into Beth's seat. I face him, as she always does, until he feels my eyes on him. He peers over at me.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Cliff

Related Themes:

Page Number: 269-270

Explanation and Analysis

While Beth briefly gets off the bus to go to the bathroom, Rachel takes the opportunity to chat with the driver—and Beth's latest crush—Cliff. Rachel is still deeply frustrated with Beth's refusal to change, and she knows that Beth will soon have to deal with Cliff rejecting her, so she asks Cliff how *he* deals with disappointment. As she approaches him,

she admits to herself that the longer she spends with Beth, the more lost she feels—and the more she relies on bus drivers to help guide her. For a moment, Rachel sits in Beth's seat—which is also a metaphor for her empathizing with Beth and taking on Beth's position as Cliff's disciple. While she certainly wishes that she had the wisdom she needs all on her own, it's still significant that she admits her ignorance and dependence on the drivers. It shows that she's finally willing to confront the uncertainty and vulnerability that she has been avoiding. After all, she recognizes that this is the only way to grow.

With a jolt, I know what scares me.

It's not just the same old crush with a new face, or the same old song with the same wrong words. It's not just the pattern she doesn't see, or care about, and therefore cannot or will not change.

It's that Beth seems to need a cataclysmic event for her to change in any way—an event like our mother's complete abdication of her responsibility to protect her own child, Juanita's rejection, or Rodolpho's abandonment. This seems true whether she's being called upon to develop resourcefulness, assertiveness, or just basic self-restraint. I look at her and feel a clutch in my throat. What will it take now?

Is this all there will ever be to her life?

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Cliff, Jesse, Rodolpho

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

As she watches Beth develop a crush on Cliff and then start relentlessly flirting with him, Rachel feels a growing sense of despair. Beth has acted out this same pattern numerous times before, and even though it ends in ruined relationships over and over, she still hasn't realized that she can and should change. Thinking back over Beth's life, Rachel admits to herself that only "cataclysmic event[s]" ever get her to change even slightly. And usually, these changes don't even stick.

Beth's resistance to change is a problem not only because of her frustrating behavior toward men, but also because of her other self-destructive habits. Most of all, Rachel is worried about Beth's health—which she increasingly neglects the more others encourage her to take it seriously. And she also wonders if Beth will ever find a new hobby and take on other, greater projects besides riding the buses. Rachel concludes that loving Beth requires learning to accept these profound, frustrating limitations, no matter how difficult it may be.

30. October: Come Home, Little Girl Quotes

I discover that [my mother] is not the cold-hearted, mayhem-loving monster I'd imagined, but a deeply unhappy and lonely woman who somehow got caught up with a violent con man, an event that fills her with shame. […] After Beth had been sent away, he'd almost beaten my mother to death—and only then, finally, had she fled, with fifty-seven cents in her hand.

I realize I need to learn forgiveness and compassion. Little by little, season after season, my days stop seeming so dark and my nights so scary.

I tell Laura how much better I feel, that my depression is lifting; I can even write again. I tell her that it may be the hardest thing she ever does in her life, but that if she can face it, she can do anything. She relents as she listens, and one day she too picks up the phone.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Rachel and Beth's Mother, Laura, Max, Beth , The Abusive Conman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

Years after her mother disappears with her abusive new husband, abandoning Laura, Rachel, and Max and subjecting Beth to severe cruelty, Rachel and Beth's mother resurfaces—she becomes a librarian in a town just a half-hour away from where the rest of the family lives. Yet Rachel and her siblings continue to resent their mother, and for a long time, they have little interest in contacting her.

Eventually, however, Rachel changes her mind and reaches out. She learns that her mother deeply regrets her actions and has failed to reach out to her children out of fear and despair, not malice. In fact, Rachel even manages to see the situation from her mother's perspective—although this by no means makes her forget the suffering that her mother has caused her. Still, she realizes that forgiving her mother is the first step to overcoming her memories of this suffering and lifting the weight that it continues to impose on her life and her other relationships. She recognizes that it's a long, gradual process, but she decides to take the first step. In addition to showing that the key to solving interpersonal problems is connection, forgiveness, and empathy—rather than withdrawal—this vignette also acts as a template for

Rachel's struggle to forgive Beth's misbehavior years later.

31. November: The Girlfriend Quotes

❝ [I] make out my reflection far too well, hauntingly blue and close. I cringe at the expression on my face.

Failure, it reads, and terror. The way my mother used to look when she trudged into the house after one of her dates. The way I used to feel when love withdrew. […] There is self-pity, too.

That old darkness rises within me. *Don't think about this*, it says. *Keep telling the world, No, I can't, I'm sorry. Keep shutting the door.*

But I do think about it. Beth is in stitches along with her friend right in front of me, and I realize with a jolt that for all her failures and terrors, I have never seen self-pity on her face. Not even a trace. Not once.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Rachel and Beth's Mother, Beth , Melanie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289-290

Explanation and Analysis

As Rachel and Beth ride through a stretch of countryside near the city where Beth lives, Beth and the bus driver Melanie joke about men, cracking each other up, while Rachel sits further back, gazing out the window and thinking about her own failed relationships. In this brief flash of insight, she realizes that her romantic life has failed because she is repeating her mother's errors: she is too frightened of being hurt to open up to others. She habitually "shut[s] the door" on her emotions instead of acknowledging and accepting them. And the longer she does so, the less time she will have left to find the relationship she not-so-secretly yearns for.

Sooner or later, Rachel concludes, she has to finally confront her true feelings and start building genuine emotional connections with others, no matter how much it scares her. Fortunately, she has a role model: Beth, who has built a wide community of friends and acquaintances by just shamelessly being herself. After this epiphany, she finally starts reaching out to the drivers she has met over her year so far and practicing the relationship-building skills that Beth has taught her.

32. November: The Eighteenth Hole Quotes

❝ *I sit up to pull the curtains closed. But as I peer up to the light, I remember Beth turning our attention to the moon over and over as we drove to our grandmother's apartment so long ago. I think of what she used to say: "Moon's following us!" Suddenly I realize why this image has stayed with me all these years. It's not because the moon's the big thing and we're just puny underneath and she had it all reversed. It's because no matter how far you drive, or how hard you hide, you can never leave the moon behind. Perhaps this is what she meant all along.*

[…] *Maybe I should actually go to see her this year. Maybe I'll call my editor and put him off. It's time I went to visit my sister.*

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 303

Explanation and Analysis

In this vignette, Rachel recalls the moment when she first resolved to visit Beth and ride the buses with her. Looking at the moonlight, she remembered Beth's funny childhood refrain—*"Moon's following us!"*—and realized that, just like the moon, her past and her family were always going to follow her, whether she liked it or not. After all, during this period, Rachel dedicated herself so completely to work that she let everything else fall by the wayside, including her relationships with her friends and family. But the moon showed her that she could choose to acknowledge and confront her family, or she could choose to ignore it, but it would always be there. This realization led her to finally reconnect with Beth. In addition to foreshadowing the way that Rachel gleans endless wisdom from Beth's unique way of viewing the world, this vignette also affirms her faith in the value of family and her belief that people's experiences and relationships always leave an enduring mark on them.

34. December: Finding the Twin Quotes

❝ I lean against my wall, moved and chastened. For fifteen minutes I watch the flurries turn to serious snow outside my window and listen to her, and think how hard this apology must be for her—and how hard all this is for me. I had always told myself that facing my feelings about my mother was the hardest thing I would ever have to do, but now, standing here after telling my sister that I hate her, and hating myself for hurting her so, I realize that being a good sister to Beth might be even more difficult. No one can be a good sister all the time. I can only try my best. Just because I am not a saint does not mean that I am a demon.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Rachel and Beth's Mother

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

After Rachel and Beth get into an explosive argument over a towel, Rachel returns home to Philadelphia, and then Beth starts writing her a series of apology letters. At first, Rachel ignores them—she feels that it's too little, too late. But after a few days, she realize that these letters show Beth doing something she has almost never done before: actually recognizing her faults and promising to change.

Rachel wonders if their fight has served as the kind of "cataclysmic event" that Beth has always needed to change. After all, Rachel made many mistakes of her own, and if she can recognize that she's trying as hard as she can, certainly she can see that the same is also true of Beth. Their effort to respect and help each other—not necessarily their success in doing so—is the real measure of their love. Thus, even though Rachel gave up all hope for Beth to change after their fight, ultimately, this fight was precisely what they needed to fully understand each other and repair their relationship.

36. January: Beyond the Limits of the Sky Quotes

There is just enough sun left for me to make out a silvery bus, moving like a fish, winding between the curbs. Maybe a bus where my sister sits. […] To the east, there's another, and another, and another. Each one its own private history class, or luncheonette, or quilting bee, or schoolroom, or comedy theater—yet each one linked, one person at a time, to all the others. Because I can see, as Rick points it out, how they glide along, stopping for riders—riders who might have been on that run last year and are now over here, and riders from over here who might be transferring to a bus over there—and how the journeys seem separate, yet are constantly and inextricably joined together. I step back and take in all the buses coasting and turning and stopping and going—the enormous web of the world.

Related Characters: Rachel Simon (speaker), Beth , Rick, Tim

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 333-334

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of the book, Rachel once again attends Beth's annual planning meeting. But afterwards, she decides to go on a drive with Rick instead of following Beth around on the buses. At sunset, Rick and Rachel go to a mountain on the outskirts of Beth's city, and from the viewpoint on top, they can see buses snaking their way through the streets. Rachel reflects on the significance of this sight, and of Beth's bus-riding lifestyle, one final time. Over her year visiting Beth, she has learned how buses connect people who might have little in common otherwise. And by riding these buses, Beth gets to take part in her city's varied and diverse life. In fact, *she* becomes a key node for her community, linking people together through her vast network of friendships, rivalries, and stories.

Beth and the bus drivers have also taught Rachel to see the beauty and emotion hidden in the small details of people's lives—the kind of details that are easy to overlook, but that astute bus drivers like Tim can notice. Rachel has tried to understand Beth, and Beth's community, by digging into these details and looking for the wisdom they hold. Ultimately, after doing this for a year and writing this book about her experience, Rachel has finally overcome her isolation and reconnected herself to "the enormous web of the world."

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.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Rachel Simon explains that, for privacy reasons, she has changed the names of everyone who appears in the book (besides herself and her sister Beth). She also notes that the term "mental retardation" is no longer considered acceptable, and that she no longer uses it today. However, in order to stay faithful to the story's time and place, Rachel Simon has decided not to edit this term out of her book.

Rachel Simon emphasizes that the disability justice movement looked very different in 1999, the year she chronicles in this book, as compared to today. Her book doesn't aim to provide an accurate, up-to-date introduction to this movement—rather, it intends to capture a particular time and place in the lives of her, her sister Beth, and Americans with developmental disabilities more generally. In fact, learning about the challenges that people with disabilities faced in the past, when terms like "mental retardation" were still ordinary and accepted, is a helpful step toward understanding how policy and public opinion can transform their lives in the future.

1. JANUARY: THE JOURNEY

One morning in January, Rachel Simon's sister Beth wakes her up and tells her to get dressed for the bus. Rachel is exhausted and wears all black, while Beth is full of energy and wears a brightly-colored **T-shirt and shorts**. They're less than a year apart in age, but their lives couldn't be more different, especially because Beth has a developmental disability. For the holidays, Rachel is visiting Beth in the mid-sized Pennsylvania city where she lives. Beth survives on a combination of government assistance and ingenuity. Since October 18, 1993, she has spent every day riding a dozen different buses around the city. She knows every bus route by heart and has friends spread out all over town.

In this opening passage, Rachel uses clothing to emphasize the vast differences between herself and Beth: Rachel is a conventional, burned-out professional, while Beth shamelessly embraces her individuality and finds joy in her everyday life on the buses. In turn, this vast difference shows how Rachel's decision to live a year with Beth requires radical empathy: she decides to totally discard her ordinary expectations and values for a year in order to try to understand the world from Beth's perspective. Of course, this is rooted in her sisterly love and her desire to bridge the gap between herself and Beth. Crucially, Rachel also presents herself and Beth as equals—she emphasizes that Beth's routine, emotional range, and social network are just as sophisticated and complex as anyone else's. Through this depiction, she fights the stereotype that people with developmental disabilities are incapable of living unique, fulfilling lives or making meaningful choices about how they want to live.

Beth guides Rachel down Main Street to McDonald's, where she buys a coffee, and then to the bus shelter. She boards her first bus with her portable radio and city bus pass, which is numbered 000001. The driver, Claude, gives Beth $1 for the coffee, and then she sits down across the aisle from him, like she always does. Rachel, who hasn't taken a bus in years, follows Beth inside. The bus takes off. Beth giddily tells Rachel about Claude's upcoming birthday, their habit of listening to loud music when there are no other passengers, and a fight with another passenger a few months before. The bus passes Beth's boyfriend Jesse, who is also intellectually disabled, and Claude calls out to him.

Rachel emphasizes two different dimensions of Beth's personality. On the one hand, she describes Beth's quirks—like her boundless energy, portable radio, and special seat—which are no doubt linked to her disability. On the other, she highlights Beth's well-defined place in the world around her: she has a clear routine, a cordial friendship with Claude, and a stable relationship with Jesse. These aspects of Beth's life don't fit with stereotypes about people with developmental disabilities, which generally suggest that they are not capable of living independently or participating meaningfully in communities of non-disabled people. In fact, Rachel's comments about her long lapse from public transportation suggest that Beth is actually far better integrated into her community than Rachel is into her own.

For the rest of the day, Rachel follows Beth on her buses. She knows all the drivers and helps them with their routes; she also helps other passengers, giving them directions and carrying their bags. Most drivers and passengers are nice to Beth, but some hate her. A few drivers refuse to pick her up, and some passengers insult her to her face. When she was little, these insults always fazed her—but they don't anymore. Now, Beth is self-confident, highly social, and full of energy. On the way to McDonald's, she even proudly yelled out, "I'm *diff*rent! I'm *diff*rent!"

Beth's friendships with the drivers show that her bus-riding isn't just an eccentric pastime—rather, it's her unique source of identity and links to the community. In other words, her unusual lifestyle doesn't separate her from other people, but rather connects *her to them. Moreover, her indifference to her foes and chant about being "*diff*rent" suggest that she is living precisely the way she wants. This demonstrates that people with disabilities can live satisfying, meaningful, joyful lives when they get to make their own choices and follow their own desires—even when non-disabled people might not fully understand them.*

Unlike Beth, Rachel has always wanted to become "a Somebody who would live a Big Life." But, during her winter with Beth, Rachel realizes that her successful writing and teaching career won't make her happy. She loves her job, but she has gotten used to working every day of the week, from 7 a.m. till after midnight, like a corporate workaholic. She hasn't had time for friends, leisure, or love since for four years, ever since she ended things with her boyfriend Sam. The breakup left her penniless and lonely, so she started working as much as possible.

Unlike Rachel, Beth is satisfied with a small life: she has a consistent routine and enough close, stable friends to keep her happy. In other words, while Rachel has sought happiness through work and struggles to take her relationships seriously enough, Beth has sought fulfillment and happiness through her relationships. Thus, as Rachel's goals and lifestyle reflect mainstream U.S. society's expectations, Beth's life offers an alternative vision of what a good life can look like—for everyone, not just people with disabilities.

During her workaholic phase, Rachel didn't see Beth for several years. Instead, they wrote **letters**: every week, Rachel sent Beth a card, and Beth sent Rachel at least a dozen short notes scrawled in magic marker, covered in stickers, and signed, "Cool Beth." They struggled to make conversation on the phone, but Beth always asked Rachel to visit. Rachel never did: she was too busy, too far away, and too embarrassed about Beth's eccentric bus-riding hobby. Rachel's friends didn't understand Beth's disability, and Rachel avoid talking about the buses with her. They practically became strangers to each other.

Rachel's undying dedication to her job also cut her off from her loved ones: after her breakup, she coped with her loneliness by turning inward and avoiding other people (including her family), rather than by seeking new connections. Meanwhile, her and Beth's letters show that their relationship depends on a constant struggle to communicate across a chasm created by Beth's disability. Of course, visiting Beth would be the ultimate way for Rachel to close this gap.

One winter, Rachel mentioned Beth to her editor, who suggested that she ride the buses with Beth for a day and write a story about it. She agreed. She marveled at how people treated Beth, what this reflected about disabled people's place in society, and how joyous, confident, and independent Beth had become. Her article was a wild success—but she couldn't take the time to celebrate, since she was too busy with other work. One night, she realized that she was essentially giving up on other people entirely. When she learned that Beth had asked for her to attend her annual disability care planning meeting, she half-reluctantly agreed to attend.

Visiting and riding with Beth was Rachel's way to try to finally repair their damaged relationship, while fighting her own worsening isolation. But it was also a transformational moment for her, because it showed her that Beth's life is full and vibrant—something to be proud of, not embarrassed about. Before her visit, Rachel had assumed that Beth and other people with disabilities want the same things as non-disabled people and live inferior, incomplete lives because they can't fully achieve those goals. But after visiting, she realized that Beth has totally different needs and goals from non-disabled people, and she has built a life that actually fulfills them. In fact, Beth's life seemed to be meeting her needs far better than Rachel's own.

Rachel attends Beth's meeting in January. As usual, Beth is **dressed in bright colors**, while Rachel wears all black. Rachel realizes that she has spent her own life learning to hide her quirks, while Beth has embraced them. At the meeting, Beth's aides—Vera, Amber, and Olivia—talk Rachel through Beth's finances, health, and personal life. She receives $527 monthly to cover her expenses. She's overweight, has high cholesterol, needs to see a dentist, and is losing her vision. The aides worry that she sometimes walks in the street during the winter, but she promises to stay safe.

When Rachel realizes that Beth gets to embrace her individuality, this is another hint that Beth's lifestyle might actually hold important truths about what it means to live well and find happiness. Beth's care meeting gives the reader a clear window into this lifestyle. Ultimately, her life has much in common with non-disabled people: she has to budget her money, make health decisions, and worry about her safety. Notably, Beth's aides aren't supposed to make decisions for her, but rather just to provide her with the support that she needs in order to live autonomously. As Rachel will explain later in the book, this is a result of the social service system's focus on self-determination. This principle also becomes the foundation for Rachel's own attitude toward Beth: she realizes that if she truly loves Beth, she has to respect Beth's decisions—no matter how incomprehensible she may find them.

Beth also talks about her relationships with Jesse, the bus drivers, and her family. Rachel notes that the family avoids visiting Beth—they struggle to connect with her, disapprove of her lifestyle, and don't trust her aides. But now, Rachel understands that the aides are just helping Beth live the life that she wants. They ask Beth about her hopes for the future—she wants to visit Disney World and see her niece and nephew, but she doesn't want to take classes or get a job. Everyone knows what the aides' report will say: "Beth does not wish to change anything."

Beth's family has largely failed to build consistent, loving relationships with her, but she has found a worthwhile substitute by forming deep connections with the people around her. During Beth's meeting, Rachel understands for the first time that the family is wrong to hold Beth's life to the same standards as non-disabled people's. Just as Beth has found a community to replace her family, she has found enriching daily activities to replace work. Even if her lifestyle poses some serious health risks, Beth still doesn't want to change because she's fundamentally happy with her day-to-day activities—if she had all the freedom in the world, she would likely still spend her time riding the buses.

But after the meeting, Rachel learns that Beth *does* want to change something. As she waits to catch a bus, Beth asks Rachel to keep riding with her—for a whole *year*. Rachel realizes that Beth is happier than she is and has many more close relationships. But she also can't imagine giving up a whole year of work. Beth says that Rachel doesn't need to come every day, and Rachel suddenly realizes, "*You need to do this, even if you don't know where it will take you.*" She says yes: she promises to visit and ride with Beth as often as she can for the next year. Beth's bus arrives; Rachel doesn't know where it's going, but she gets on after Beth anyway.

Rachel and the rest of her family have long hoped for Beth to change her lifestyle. However, Rachel ends up agreeing to spend a year riding the buses with Beth because she realizes that Beth has so much to teach her *about how to live well. She sees that Beth's vibrant, joyful life presents an alternative to her own unsatisfying, lonely life, and she desperately wants to change. Of course, when Rachel reexamines her assumptions about Beth's life, she is also giving her readers the opportunity to reexamine their own assumptions about how people with disabilities can and should live. Thus, Rachel and Beth's relationship also represents the broader relationship between people with disabilities and their non-disabled counterparts in society as a whole.*

2. JANUARY: THE TIME OF SNOWS AND SORROW

Rachel flashes back to Beth's infancy. When Beth is two months old, their mother tells the neighbor, Mrs. Stein, that she's worried. The doctors squeezed Beth's head with forceps during her delivery, and Beth isn't as vigilant or reactive as other babies. She just stares emptily into space—she barely moves and never cries. Mrs. Stein says not to worry, but Beth doesn't improve.

Throughout the book, Rachel intersperses stories from her year riding the buses with Beth with flashbacks to her and Beth's childhood. These flashbacks give context to Rachel and Beth's strained relationship with each other and their family as a whole. In particular, Beth's infancy shows that she has always been different—and that this difference has always made it challenging for her family to care for her.

The family doctor examines Beth several times but doesn't realize that something is wrong for many months. When Beth is seven months old, the Simons take her to a renowned Philadelphia children's hospital. After a month's worth of tests, the doctor confirms that Beth is developmentally disabled—but he doesn't know why, or how severely. The Simons are devastated.

While Rachel implies that Beth's disability may stem from the way her doctors squeezed her head during delivery, she also admits that the family will never get a definitive answer about why Beth didn't develop the same way as other children. She conveys the family's sense of powerlessness and confusion at realizing that they were totally alone in determining how to raise Beth: there was no clear formula to follow and no guarantee that Beth would ever live the fulfilling life that she has today.

3. FEBRUARY: HITTING THE ROAD

In the present, at 5:15 a.m., Beth dances around her apartment and wakes up Rachel, who is sleeping uncomfortably on her floor. Beth calls her case manager Olivia and leaves her a message about the day's weather—25 degrees—just like she does every morning. Then, she goes for a bath. Meanwhile, Rachel gets up and looks around Beth's eccentrically decorated apartment, which reminds her of the room they shared as teenagers. In fact, Beth hasn't changed much.

Beth is clearly delighted to be starting another day on the buses. The contrast between her energy and Rachel's sluggishness again suggests that her lifestyle is better suited to her needs and desires than Rachel's is to her own. Indeed, Beth's apartment decorations show how she has managed to build her own unique life and independent routine, something that society doesn't generally acknowledge is possible for people with serious disabilities. And Rachel's comment about living like teenagers again foreshadows that she will revisit her family's dark past through her time with Beth.

Rachel remembers that Jesse visits Beth on evenings and Sunday mornings, and he's as obsessed with bicycles as Beth is with buses. From the fifth-floor apartment, Rachel can see the miles of low-rise houses that make up her city. She has always wondered Beth felt when she first moved out to this apartment on her own.

Rachel's thoughts turn to Beth's connections to others: the courage she needed to confront the loneliness of living independently, her extraordinarily well-matched relationship with Jesse, and her place in the broader social fabric of her city. Clearly, even if Beth's intellectual life is less complex than Rachel's, her social life is far deeper and more satisfying. This again shows how much Rachel stands to learn from her time with Beth.

Rachel **dresses in black**, as usual, and fills her coat pockets with gear, ranging from tea bags to her journal. Meanwhile, Beth "dress[es] with nothing but style in mind," wearing bright green and purple. While Rachel sluggishly ties her shoes, Beth calls her a "*slow*poke" and downs a bagel and Diet Pepsi. Then, she runs out into the cold, dark winter morning to catch her first bus, with Rachel following behind.

Again, Rachel and Beth's clothes clearly represent the differences between their personalities and approaches to life. While Beth enthusiastically seizes the day, Rachel fills her pockets with objects that she thinks can help her deal with unforeseen challenges. This shows how she tries to preempt and control uncertainty, while Beth embraces it. In turn, this scene foreshadows that Beth will help Rachel overcome her restrained, uptight mindset.

4. FEBRUARY: THE PROFESSOR

At 6 a.m., Beth and Rachel are standing on a corner, watching buses drive past. Beth tells Rachel all about each bus driver. Then, their bus arrives. The driver is Tim, a good-humored, bookish 40-something whom Beth calls "Happy Timmy" and other bus drivers call the "Professor." He gleefully greets Beth, who sits at "her throne"—the single seat on his right, which gives her a view of the whole bus.

Beth's passionate monologues about the bus drivers' lives again show how her bus-riding vocation satisfies her needs for belonging, connection, and novelty. Specifically, it does so by embedding her in a broader network of people who know and care about her. Rachel describes Beth's seat as a "throne" in order to emphasize how, on the buses, she matters and knows exactly where she belongs.

Tim affectionately teases Beth about her habit of riding empty routes and knowledge about all the bus drivers. He even calls her "the town crier." When he says that the sunrise reminds him of Earth's long history, stretching back to the Precambrian period, Beth jokes about his taste for long words. They tell Rachel how an elderly woman once got angry with Beth for taking the best seat, and Tim tells Beth how figures like Eleanor Roosevelt and Mahatma Gandhi demonstrate the value of kindness.

Tim's teasing shows that he and Beth have developed a close friendship, while his nickname for her—"the town crier"—shows how her famous bus-riding has given her a prominent place in her local community. Meanwhile, with his thoughtful lectures about natural history and kindness, Tim defies Rachel's expectations about the kind of people who are likely to drive buses for a living. This shows Rachel that her prejudices have cut her off from other people, and that her assumptions about Beth's life were totally wrong. Bus-riding is far more enriching and satisfying than Rachel ever imagined.

Rachel notes that she usually simplifies her sentences for Beth, but she starts wondering if, like Tim, she should use her usual complicated vocabulary instead, which helps Beth learn. She calls Tim "personable," and Beth agrees: he's "cool," which is the highest compliment in "Beth-speak." Beth appreciates that Tim loves his job and always smiles.

Tim's complex, academic speeches lead Rachel to rethink her previous assumptions about Beth's intellectual capacities. He reminds her that she can help Beth learn and grow, and that it's entirely possible to translate between her own sophisticated vocabulary and Beth's "Beth-speak."

During a brief layover along his route, Tim tells Rachel about his past: he always loved learning and wanted to become a historian, archaeologist, or photographer. But he ended up dropping out of school and driving the bus instead, to support his family. He loves how his job gives him a window into the details of people's lives and lets him see how the city slowly changes over time. Rachel looks at the multicolored drawing of a face that Beth has just finished.

Tim helps Rachel see richness and depth in things she used to see as flat and uninteresting—including his and his passengers' lives. Of course, this echoes the way that Rachel has learned to see the richness and depth in Beth's life by riding the buses with her. In fact, this process of digging into others' stories and pulling out the most compelling parts is the core of Rachel's vocation as a writer (and, as she has learned, Tim's vocation as a bus driver).

Passengers start boarding the bus, and Tim greets each by name. Rachel tries to pay attention to the details: their faces and speech, the bus's sounds and ads. As Beth and Tim chat about different kinds of buses and an injured driver, Rachel starts to wonder whether the intellectual Tim can really be happy in such an ordinary job.

As the passengers board, Rachel momentarily tries to view the world from Tim's perspective. By paying attention to all sorts of details that she would otherwise take for granted, she begins to grasp how a job as mundane and repetitive as bus driving can become intellectually stimulating. While she doesn't entirely understand Tim's profession yet, she does gain respect for it, which helps her connect to him, Beth, and the other drivers she will meet over the following months.

Then, an elderly passenger named Norma tells Tim and Beth that today would be her anniversary. She and other passengers share memories of their youth, when the city was full of stores, factories, and theaters. Norma describes meeting her husband at the old park, and Rachel tries to imagine the scene. Meanwhile, a handsome man invites Rachel to go dancing with him. He asks where she's headed, and she explains that she's following her sister, Beth.

In addition to showing how rich and deep ordinary people's life stories are, Norma's memories point to the underlying socioeconomic conditions that have transformed Beth's formerly industrial Rust Belt town since the mid-20th century. Namely, deindustrialization has turned the formerly vibrant town into a husk of what it used to be. Economic decline has particularly threatened the communal spaces and institutions that used to tie the community together—like the stores, factories, and theaters that Norma describes. Buses are among the few such public spaces left, and this helps explain why Beth spends her days riding them.

The passengers disembark, until only Rachel, Beth, and Tim are left. While the bus waits for passengers at the mall, Tim tells Rachel that his job isn't about driving—it's about meeting people and hearing their stories. Just like history and archaeology, it's a way to learn about the past and see all of life's rich detail. At the end of the day, Rachel drives home to Philadelphia, and Beth sends her two **letters**: one thanking her for visiting and one explaining that, on their drive, Tim saw Jesse on his new bike. When she receives this letter, Rachel marvels at Tim's eye for detail and wonders where he learned it.

Meeting Tim has helped Rachel bridge the gap between herself and Beth. Because his temperament and interests are similar to Rachel's, but he lives his life on the buses alongside Beth, he shows Rachel how her world can coexist with Beth's on the buses. In fact, Tim's comments about the passengers he meets show why the buses are so special: they're the ultimate inclusive space, where absolutely everyone can belong. This helps explain why Beth is so drawn to them: she belongs on the buses just as much as anyone else, including the non-disabled people who have so often excluded her from their world.

5. FEBRUARY: FIGHTING

The book again flashes back to Rachel and Beth's childhoods. At Halloween, their mother has carefully made costumes for all four of her children, but five-year-old Beth refuses to wear her witch costume because it's a dress. She puts up a fight, and her mother just barely manages to get the dress on her. For the most part, Rachel and Beth are best friends as children—they're only 11 months apart, and they always play together.

Beth's refusal to wear the witch costume shows how, despite her disability, she has always been fiercely independent and insisted on making her own decisions. Similarly, Beth's close relationship with Rachel shows that when she was little, her disability didn't define her or prevent her from having an ordinary childhood.

But there are also scary times with Beth. Once, Beth accidentally poisons herself by drinking oil paint, and she has to go to the hospital. One day, as a baby, Beth suddenly stops breathing. Her mother, who is chronically depressed, panics—she's unsure what to do. She ultimately calls the doctor and saves Beth's life by sticking a spoon down her throat.

On the other hand, these crises show that Beth's disability did create significant challenges for her parents, who have always been particularly worried about her safety. This foreshadows their concerns about her bus-riding lifestyle when she grows up—and particularly how difficult it was for them when she decided to go out and live on her own.

6. MARCH: THE PILGRIM

On the bus one morning in March, the bus driver Jacob points Rachel ahead to a hill. He explains that, in the past, the old buses weren't powerful enough to climb the hill unless some people got out and walked. That made it easy to see who was selfless—it was whoever agreed to walk.

Just like Tim, Jacob will help Rachel appreciate a virtue she didn't fully understand before—in this case, charity. In turn, Tim's wisdom will help her make sense of her past, her isolation, and her relationship with Beth.

Rachel has returned to ride with Beth about ten days after her previous visit. Beth found her a safe place to park, and the winter is already fading. Jacob drives so smoothly that Rachel scarcely notices when they're moving and when they're stopped.

The slowly fading winter and Jacob's smooth, imperceptible braking both symbolize the cyclical, gradual nature of change. In turn, these details foreshadow the slow, steady progress that both Rachel and Beth make on their journeys through life during their year together.

Beth complains about Gus, a bus driver who's mean to her, but Jacob says that Gus is just grouchy because he's had a very hard life—just like another driver who just died, and was always mean to Beth. In fact, when Beth sent him **a card** in the hospital, he was delighted. Beth blushes when Jacob insists that she's a good person who loves everyone.

Jacob has taught Beth to dispel conflict through empathy. This works because people who mistreat others are often just acting out their own inner turmoil. This principle foreshadows the next scene and Rachel's reflections on her own family conflicts, which she realizes stem from their own trauma. Her decision to embrace Beth, like Beth's decision to embrace Gus, embodies the healing power of love.

Then, an elderly woman loudly complains that the bus just entered Zone 1, which Beth's bus pass doesn't cover. She insists that Beth should be thrown off the bus for "cheating the system." After a few minutes, Jacob tells Beth to show the woman her bus pass: it says "Zone 1." Later, after the woman leaves, Jacob tells Rachel that "nothing bothers Beth," even if some of the elderly passengers are mean to her.

The old woman's tirade demonstrates how people often take their personal frustrations and resentment out on Beth because her disability and eccentric, nonconformist lifestyle make her an easy target. Yet Beth's pass proves that she truly does belong on the bus. This affirms that the bus remains the ultimate inclusive space, where everyone is welcome and equal (including the elderly and disabled).

Beth plays with some kids on the bus—they sing and clap together, and the kids see that she's more fun and accepting than other grown-ups. Rachel envies Beth's ability to connect with children, and Jacob comments that Beth always knows who's trustworthy. But they disagree about how to deal with trouble: Beth believes in revenge (or "an eye for an eye"), while Jacob believes in mercy (or the Golden Rule). He jokes that while Beth annoys some drivers, she helps him learn to be more patient and selfless. Beth hears this and smiles as she plays with the kids.

Beth's immediate connection with the children demonstrates another unexpected advantage of her developmental disability. Yet she also clearly isn't as selfless or generous as Jacob. Indeed, the reader must analyze Jacob's comments about Beth through the lens of his worldview. He's not saying that Beth is a role model for patience and selflessness—instead, he's saying that he has to be patient and selfless in order to deal with her impatience *and* selfishness. *Through this comment, Jacob models for Rachel how to treat Beth with generosity and understanding—even when her behavior is harmful and inappropriate.*

Later, as they wait for a train to pass, Beth comments that Jacob once died. Jacob explains that he used to be a serious alcoholic. He got hepatitis B, and one day, he fell asleep on his couch and ended up in a three-week coma. He barely managed to get a liver transplant, and his heart briefly stopped during the procedure. When he woke up, he completely lost his memory, but everything around him suddenly looked unbelievably beautiful. He felt like he was in heaven, or a state of "total purity." Things started going right in his life. He started reading the Bible and working to improve himself.

Just like Tim, Jacob has learned his values through his life experiences. His story shows how such experiences—especially deep personal crises—often provide the best motivation for people to change. Yet throughout the rest of the book, as Rachel struggles to do something about her own loneliness and Beth's bad habits, she will also look for other, less painful routes to change. Namely, she will explore whether love, forgiveness, and support are enough to get people to change.

Jacob says that he is so grateful that someone donated their liver to him—which is the ultimate act of selflessness. The train passes, and he drives ahead; he tells Beth that his near-death experience is why he believes in the Golden Rule. But Beth says that she still isn't convinced—and that she needs to use the bathroom. Jacob promises that he'll convince her eventually, and he lets her and Rachel off the bus.

Beth's comments show that she doesn't yet value selflessness as much as Jacob. Yet Jacob's story shows that he only became selfless after someone else's selflessness saved his life. This conversation foreshadows Rachel's attempts to change Beth in the second half of the book. Namely, she will try to help Beth become more generous and patient by modeling generosity and patience for her.

7. MARCH: STREETWISE

Beth and Rachel walk down Main Street, hunting for a bathroom. This is often the hardest part of Beth's day. She rules out the bathrooms at city hall, where a naked drug addict once screamed at her, and a local fast food restaurant, where the manager won't let her use the bathroom even if she buys something. Rachel is furious when she hears this; she thinks about how disabled and homeless activists have sued to win equal treatment in such situations. Rachel also contemplates the changes in the formerly vibrant, industrial Pennsylvania city where Beth lives. She notices how recent Latinx and Asian immigrants have brought new culture to the city, while its Pennsylvania German roots remain.

Beth's search for a public restroom may seem like a trivial anecdote, but it actually speaks to her enduring struggle to find inclusion in public spaces—and, by extension, mainstream American society in general. Rachel thinks about this struggle from a legal perspective, which speaks to how the disability justice movement secured important protections for people like Beth in the second half of the 20th century. However, Beth is so used to being excluded that she no longer tries to change anyone's mind. In other words, she's less interested in theoretical considerations about where she should *be accepted and more worried about where she actually* is. *Finally, Rachel's comments about immigration show how Beth's city is slowly but surely becoming more inclusive.*

As Beth and Rachel walk down Main Street, Beth points out a group of prisoners sweeping the streets and tells Rachel about the restaurants and stores they pass. At last, Beth turns into an office building to use the bathroom. But Rachel spends too long changing in the bathroom, and they miss the next bus. Beth rants that Rachel is too slow and has to speed up. Just then, they run into Olivia on the street. Beth explains that Rachel made them miss the bus, and Olivia takes the opportunity to do her monthly check-in. She asks if Beth is happy with the services she's receiving (she says yes) and whether she's going to see the doctor soon (she says no).

Rachel is again surprised at Beth's savvy—she seems to know everyone and every place in the city. Following stereotypes about disabled people Rachel, her family, and likely many of her readers would have expected Beth *to be the slow one. But in reality, Beth is the expert on her city, and Rachel is the one struggling to keep up. Thus, Rachel deliberately turns stereotypes on their head in order to highlight all of the abilities that Beth* does *have. Indeed, in her chat with Olivia, Beth again affirms that she's living exactly how she wants to. Still, her refusal to see the doctor raises important questions about how far her right to live according to her own decisions can extend.*

Walking up Main Street, Rachel realizes that she doesn't meet Beth's definition of "cool." Then, Beth runs into a series of friends—mostly homeless people and other misfits—and acquaintances, like a "creepy" man who offers her a photo album and a rude man in a wheelchair who begs for money. Beth explains that people get two chances with her: "if they're nasty twice, then they're not my friends." Rachel realizes that Beth is far more streetwise than she is.

Beth seems to take care of herself and clearly recognize whom to engage with and whom to ignore. While she is kind and generous to strangers, she refuses to accept mistreatment, which puts Rachel at ease for the time being. Still, most of the people Beth knows live on the margins of society, which suggests that she does, too. This indicates that her disability still prevents her from finding full inclusion in her city's public life.

Rachel and Beth arrive at the corner where they'll catch the bus they've missed. Then, Beth tells Rachel that she and Jesse got into a bad fight with a homeless girl and her boyfriend on that corner. Rachel worries about Beth's safety, but Beth says that nothing will happen. Rachel can't believe that Beth could be so careless, but she also knows that Beth will become even more stubborn if she feels like Rachel is being "bossy." Instead of criticizing Beth, Rachel apologizes and just says that she wants to make sure that Beth stays safe. Their bus arrives, and Beth tells Rachel that she's happy to have her visiting. Rachel asks her if she really means it. Beth tells Rachel to worry less and "try being more like *me*."

Rachel seriously worries about her sister's safety, just as she has throughout her life. Beth is remarkably "streetwise," but she also seems to be putting herself in unnecessary danger that she doesn't fully understand. Rachel struggles to reconcile her worry for Beth with her sincere belief that Beth has a right to make her own decisions. In fact, this points to the underlying tension between well-being and self-determination that is central to this book's analysis of disability and inclusion. Whereas society generally accepts that non-disabled people have the right to make their own choices—including self-destructive ones—it's less clear that the same principle should apply to people with developmental disabilities like Beth's, because they may struggle to understand the consequences of their decisions.

8. MARCH: INTO OUT THERE

Rachel again flashes back to her and Beth's childhood. Rachel is eight and Beth is seven; they play a guessing game about place names with their siblings in the car. They're returning from their grandmother's house in New Jersey to their new house in Pennsylvania. Just after they moved there, their father left their mother, and now they visit their grandma every weekend. They love visiting, but Rachel can never sleep because of the sound of a nearby highway.

Rachel and Beth's parents' divorce is an important, transformative event in their childhood, but this vignette shows that they managed to keep up their spirits and enjoy themselves despite it—at least at first. Similarly, their frequent moves lend a sense of underlying instability to their childhoods. And just like their bus rides in adulthood, their car rides in childhood are important opportunities for them to bond because they mean spending long periods of time in close proximity with each other.

In their game, the kids start humming and guessing song melodies. When it's Beth's turn to hum, she only gives her siblings two notes: "*DUH duh.*" (It's "Hey Jude.") Their mother turns on the radio, and Ringo, their new dog, barks along to it while the kids sing. They get louder and louder, until their mother gets mad and turns off the radio. Beth looks up and repeats the same line she's been saying all winter: "*Look!* […] *Moon's following us!*" Everyone laughs, and the kids return to their places game.

Between her unguessable song hint and her sincere belief that the moon was pursuing the family, Beth's disability is evident by the time she reaches seven. But while her siblings recognize that she is different, this fact doesn't yet separate her from them, like it ultimately goes on to when they grow up. Thus, at this stage in her childhood, Beth's family clearly loves and understands her despite her disability.

Another time, the family plays bingo in the basement room that Rachel shares with her older sister Laura. The game helps Beth learn numbers and letters, which she needs to succeed in her special ed classes. When Beth yells "Bingo!," Ringo thinks she's calling him.

By bringing all their children together for a bingo game, Rachel and Beth's parents manage to specifically adapt to Beth's unique educational needs, without singling her out. This combination of adaptation and inclusion is an effective approach to accommodating people with disabilities in environments where they are a minority.

Rachel's mom and dad both tell their kids that they'll need to help Beth out and care for her when they grow older. They promise that they'll never hide her from the world or send her to an institution. And the kids also understand that they should never let Beth hear them say the words "mentally retarded."

Rachel and Beth's parents communicate frankly but lovingly about Beth's special needs with their other children. This shows that they are committed to helping Beth live as full and meaningful a life as non-disabled people, and they want their other children to commit to the same. Importantly, during Rachel and Beth's childhood (in the mid-20th century), most developmentally disabled people were *confined to institutions and deprived of their autonomy. Moreover, "mentally retarded" was an accepted scientific term and not yet a derogatory slur. By encouraging their children not to use the word, Rachel and Beth's parents were simply trying to prevent Beth from worrying about the fundamental difference between her abilities and other kids'.*

One day, Beth and Rachel hide from Ringo at the bottom of the stairs, because they're afraid of him. The babysitter tells them not to worry, and they nervously climb the stairs hand-in-hand. Rachel realizes that she likes making Beth feel safe.

By helping Beth up the stairs, Rachel learns that she can play an important role in helping Beth find safety, comfort, and inclusion—even though they're only a year apart in age. Of course, her decision to ride the buses with Beth is born of the same instinct. But this also shows why she's so anxious when she feels like she can't *protect Beth from certain dangers.*

Two years later, Rachel's family moves back to New Jersey. She writes her father an anonymous **letter** asking him to return to the family. Otherwise, she spends most of her spare time writing stories and plays. When her dad comes to visit, he takes the four children on a drive and asks about their lives. They go to a park and practice basketball. When Rachel mentions John Lennon leaving his wife for Yoko Ono, her dad comments that sometimes people can't stand to stay in their broken marriages. Later, Rachel throws away her letter.

Rachel clearly had an early knack for writing. Like her letters to Beth, her letter to her father is an attempt to make up for a vast physical and emotional distance—one that she struggles to bridge when she actually sees him. Similarly, Rachel's father's comment about broken marriages shows how difficult it is for the children to understand his *perspective on their family relationship. Ultimately, Rachel finds writing easier than speaking because writing gives her time, space, and privacy to think through her feelings.*

When their mother goes out on a date, the kids ask why she won't stay home with them instead—and why she can't just get back together with their father. They watch her leave with a handsome stranger.

Just like they struggle to understand why their father gave up on his marriage, Rachel and her siblings also don't understand why their mother wants another relationship at all. This gap in understanding leaves them feeling isolated and frustrated. In fact, it's the same kind of gap that separates Beth from her siblings in adulthood.

In sixth grade, a softball player named Chip tells Rachel and Laura that he has a secret. He leads them to a candy store and shows them how he steals a chocolate bar while the owner is on a phone. The girls come up with another scam to get Hanukkah presents: they go door to door and say they're raising funds to help "retarded people" like Beth. They make $50 in just two nights, then decide that what they're doing is wrong.

The girls feel guilty about their scam because they're using Beth's condition to their own benefit, but also because they're encouraging a patronizing kind of pity toward people with disabilities. Specifically, by presenting their sister as a charity case, they imply that that people like Beth must always be cared for and can never care for themselves—an assumption that Beth's adult lifestyle squarely disproves.


One night, while watching television on her mother's bed, Rachel notices her mother surreptitiously running her hand across her face. On another night, they catch Beth sleepwalking down the stairs and into the street. Rachel wonders if Beth is "*just doing what the rest of us secretly want: trying to run away?*"

Both of these memories show how Rachel's family coped with their issues by gradually disconnecting from one another. When Rachel's mother feels her face, this suggests that she has been deprived of touch and affection. And as Rachel explicitly points out, Beth's sleepwalking reminds her of how her family members wanted to solve their problems by running away from one another. This instinct—to withdraw from conflict rather than resolving it—becomes a constant in Rachel and her family members' lives. Eventually, it culminates in four years of utter isolation between Rachel's breakup with Sam and her year riding the buses with Beth.

9. APRIL: THE DREAMER

In the present, on a crisp spring morning, Beth and Rachel ride with Beth's favorite bus driver, the "exotically handsome" Rodolpho. Beth won't tell Rachel what she thinks about while she watches him drive. Rachel worries that she's wasting her time by sitting on the bus, but then she remembers that she has learned important lessons from both Tim and Jacob.

Rachel recognizes that she is learning important lessons from her days riding buses with Beth, but her old workaholic instincts continue to tell her that her time would be better spent otherwise. Thus, while Rachel has started to understand Beth's radically different approach to life and relationships, for the time being, she is still very much stuck in her own.


Rachel asks Rodolpho how he met Beth, and he explains that they met on the night bus. Beth would talk to him about her life, and while he was too focused on driving to reply, they still became friends. Rachel realizes that Rodolpho doesn't even know that Beth has a crush on him and constantly writes about him in her **letters**. In the past, he kicked Beth off his bus when she kept explicitly describing her sex life to him out loud. She desperately missed him—especially the poetry he would read to her. Eventually, he started letting her ride with him again, but only three trips per week.

Beth enjoys riding with Rodolpho for very different reasons than she enjoys riding with Tim and Jacob. Rather than trading wisdom or stories, their relationship is based around trading attention—Beth loves looking at Rodolpho and knowing that he's listening to her. This variety in Beth's relationships helps illustrate why she chooses to spend her life on the buses: it amounts to spending all day, every day with her best friends. Of course, she often doesn't understand the limits of normal social interaction—like when she goes on inappropriate monologues about her sex life—but fortunately, her driver friends help her identify and keep to those appropriate limits over time. In this sense, Rodolpho has helped Beth just as much as Tim or Jacob.

Rodolpho parks the bus by an airport and tells Rachel and Beth that he used to want to be a pilot. But he worked so hard to fund his dream that he never spent any time with his wife, so he ruined his marriage. After his divorce, he doesn't have the money for flying lessons. Now, he has found a new girlfriend, and he cares more about being happy with her than about flying. He lets Beth take a polaroid picture of him. Finally, Rachel asks him about her observation that the bus drivers all seem to be deep thinkers. He points out that bus drivers have all the time in the world to think about life and other people.

Rodolpho finally opens up to Rachel, which again shows how long bus rides help people build the trust and intimacy that are the foundation of close relationships. Rodolpho's life story is a testament to the importance of such relationships, and it parallels Rachel's own: she has dedicated herself so completely to work over the last several years that she has let her relationships fall by the wayside. And, like Rodolpho, she only truly finds happiness when she gives those relationships the attention they're due—specifically, by reconnecting with Beth.

10. APRIL: THE DRIVERS' ROOM

After they get off Rodolpho's bus at the terminal, Rachel and Beth run into Jacob. Beth goes to the drivers' private lounge to use the bathroom—besides them, she's the only person allowed inside. It's a spare room with lockers, vending machines, and metal tables. Beth introduces Rachel to several drivers and then starts collecting signatures for one of their **birthday cards**. Jacob tells Rachel that the drivers' room is full of drama, ranging from casual gossip to heated arguments about Beth. Some of the drivers can't stand her, while others defend her against their criticisms. Often, she gets in the middle of these arguments. Rachel suggests that she give the drivers more privacy, but she refuses—she says it's the drivers' fault they get into arguments.

Beth's special permissions at the drivers' lounge and role as signature collector show how she has found herself a well-defined (if controversial) place in the city's bus driver community. This gives Beth the same kind of companionship and sense of belonging that Rachel desperately yearns for in her own life. However, as Rachel points out, Beth never bothers to ask whether she should *be getting so close to the bus drivers, or whether they actually want her around. She seems to think that Beth is reaping the benefits from belonging in a community without taking any of the responsibility associated with it. This also raises the question of how the bus drivers would treat Beth—or whether they would tolerate her at all—if she didn't have an intellectual disability.*

Beth always watches out for new bus drivers and makes a point to ride with them on their first days. Six months ago, she met and befriended Henry, a gregarious new driver. But after a few months, he got tired of her constant presence. At the lounge one night, he told her that his boss, his passengers, and the other drivers were worried about how much time she spent on his bus. But she ignored his warnings. Eventually, Henry and Jacob got in a heated argument about her, and she noticed that Henry became cold and withdrawn.

Much like her involvement at the drivers' lounge, Beth's insistence on meeting and befriending all the new drivers proves that she's deeply dedicated to her adopted community of bus drivers, but it also shows her lack of consideration for other people. She easily crosses the line from companion to annoyance, as she pays no attention to the drivers' individual needs and preferences until they reach a breaking point and can no longer stand to have her around.

Beth is still hurt about her issues with Henry. Rachel tells Beth about the importance of setting boundaries, but Beth insists that she doesn't need to, and Henry will tell her when he has a problem. She talks about Henry on the phone with Jesse, who advises her to give him space. Then, when Beth sees Henry get off his bus at the driver's room, she isn't hurt anymore.

Rachel knows that Beth's refusal to look out for other people's needs will continue to cause her trouble in the future. Yet Rachel also realizes that she can't force Beth to recognize or change this pattern—instead, Beth will have to realize it on her own. And because of her developmental disability, this might require her to first make the same mistakes several times over.

11. APRIL: THE END OF PLAY

Rachel flashes back to her childhood. Beth wants her to keep putting the Donny Osmond song "One Bad Apple" on the record player, and to help her with a puzzle. She tries to teach Beth to put the needle on the record herself, but Beth sticks it into the record hard, nearly breaking it. However, after a few seconds, the record starts playing normally.

Beth's unnecessary force with the record player shows how her disability makes many ordinary activities challenging. But contrary to Rachel's expectations, this doesn't break the record player, which represents how Rachel often overestimates the obstacles that Beth's disability poses—and underestimates how well the world can adapt to her.

Rachel also likes listening to Beth sing, helping her decorate her room in their new house, and getting books from the library with her. But Rachel doesn't like how Beth ruins her school books, makes her help with puzzles, and forces her to listen to the same music. She can't stand to be associated with Beth at school—all the other students stare at the special ed kids, who walk through the halls in an uncomfortable silence. When Rachel and Beth see each other, Rachel wants to call out to her, but she says nothing.

Rachel begins to recognize the contradiction that will go on to define her relationship with Beth for decades. On the one hand, she can help Beth learn and overcome obstacles, but on the other, she feels that Beth is an obstacle to her and her family's own progress. Rachel and Beth's experience at school shows how social stigma further isolates people with disabilities—including from their loved ones. This stigma also demonstrates how remarkable it is that, as an adult, Beth manages to build a vibrant, loving community despite *this stigma.*

Rachel loves words: at night, she makes lists of synonyms in her notebook. But she also notices the words people use to talk about Beth—most of all, "*retard*." Whenever other kids use that word, Rachel tells them about Beth. It's a slur like any other.

Language might seem like an insignificant area for social activists to focus their energies. However, Rachel shows that changing language can actually be incredibly important, because language deeply shapes the way that mainstream culture perceives marginalized groups—and, by extension, those marginalized groups' chances to safely participate in mainstream culture. Indeed, the scientific term "mental retardation" fell out of favor in the late 1990s and early 2000s largely because the increasingly popular slur "retard" was making life more and more difficult for people labeled "retarded" (who are now identified as having developmental, intellectual, or cognitive disabilities).

As a teenager, Rachel makes plenty of her own friends, and she stops playing with Beth. Sometimes, she acts bossy on purpose, making Beth do chores for her. One day, Rachel turns on the news to see her favorite anchor, Geraldo Rivera, but he's reporting on the horrifying conditions in an institutional school.

Rachel succumbs to the social pressure to stigmatize and marginalize Beth despite knowing and loving her, which shows how strong that pressure is and how powerfully it can isolate people with disabilities. Indeed, the report on the institutional school (where the students likely had mental or physical disabilities) provides clear evidence of how this stigma has forced people like Beth to live in horrific, abusive conditions for centuries. Yet this also provides important context for understanding why Beth's relatively free, autonomous lifestyle (and the public support system that makes it possible) is so remarkable and inspirational.

Beth can't easily hang out with her own friends, since they live far away and have disabilities. Since Rachel doesn't want to spend time with Beth, she doesn't have anyone to play with. So instead, Beth decides to start publicly waiting for Rachel right when she gets off the school bus. One day, she even shoots Rachel with water pistols. Everyone on the bus laughs at her. That night, Rachel tells her mother, crying, and asks her to tell Beth to stop. But her mother refuses—she says Rachel shouldn't be ashamed of Beth. Rachel knows that her mom is right, but she still thinks that it's especially unfair that she has to deal with Beth.

After Rachel tries to hide her relationship with Beth because she fears the stigma associated with disability, Beth strikes back: she shows off their sisterhood as publicly as she possibly can. In retrospect, Rachel recognizes that this was a good thing, because it led her to recognize the destructive, unjust power of stigma (with her mother's help). Again, Rachel suggests that her parents' steadfast belief in Beth's right to live as well as any other person is one of the main reasons that Beth has managed to build such a joyful, autonomous life as an adult.

12. MAY: LUNCH WITH JESSE

Late one morning, Rachel asks Beth if she knows what love is. Beth says that she knows she loves Jesse, even though she can't explain why. When Rachel tells her friends about Beth's boyfriend, they usually respond with a combination of pity and surprise, and they want to know "how retarded" Jesse is. But to Rachel, Beth and Jesse are just Beth and Jesse—their IQs don't matter.

Rachel and Beth's conversation speaks to the key force at the heart of this book: the love that binds them together and convinces Rachel to immerse herself in Beth's world. Rachel emphasizes that Beth and Jesse are just as capable of love as anyone else. She does so to dispel the assumption that every aspect of disabled people's lives is somehow incomplete or inferior, compared to non-disabled people. This is the same assumption that leads Rachel's friends to ask the inappropriate question of "how retarded" Beth and Jesse are (or, in today's updated vocabulary, how severely disabled they are). Rachel suggests that ability, disability, and life experience can't be neatly measured or quantified on a single spectrum—even though IQ tests might try to do so.

Jesse is shy, probably because he grew up Black in a racist Southern town, and he's blind in one eye because, as a kid, he accidentally stepped on a pipe that hit him face. He spends his time riding his bike and sometimes doing small jobs, like mowing an old woman's lawn. He and Beth visit each other often, but they don't usually go out in public together because of the townspeople's racism. They tell Beth that "people should stick with their own kind," but Rachel can't imagine two people who fit the same "kind" more so than Beth and Jesse.

Rather than defining Jesse through his disability or IQ, like her friends are apt to, Rachel introduces him as a complete person with his own personality, interests, and history. Like Beth, he lives a relatively autonomous life, of a sort that would have been unthinkable for people with developmental disabilities a generation ago. Still, the racism that he and Beth face shows that their city remains deeply prejudiced—if its residents judge people by surface-level traits like race, there's no doubt that they also judge Beth and Jesse for their disabilities. Rachel says that Beth and Jesse are the same "kind" not simply because of their disabilities, but also because of their personalities and chemistry.

Rachel and Beth visit Jesse's apartment, where he's wearing a white martial arts uniform. He hesitates at first, but then he shakes Rachel's hand and lets her in. Jesse and Beth are as comfortable around each other as any couple. Jesse tells Rachel about earning his black belt in karate, and Rachel catches Beth tuning out and talking to herself. Then, Jesse shows off his remarkably agile tae kwon do punches and kicks. Rachel explains that Jesse used to practice so much that he would have visions of people doing martial arts around him. After his demonstration, he tells Rachel that martial arts is a way of aligning the mind, body, and spirit—like prayer.

Jesse's martial arts skill might surprise Rachel's readers—perhaps because they have unconsciously absorbed harmful stereotypes about disability. Specifically, many people assume that people with developmental disabilities must be inferior to non-disabled people at everything and therefore cannot truly excel at anything. But Jesse's skill shows that with practice and concentration, people with developmental disabilities can master complex skills just as well as non-disabled people. It may take them longer, but their disability is no barrier to success. This truth has important social implications, because it suggests that policies and social programs must focus on giving people with disabilities the support that they need to succeed, rather than simply assuming that they never will.

Before they leave for lunch, Jesse comments that he's afraid of how people will treat him in public. They go to an empty restaurant. At first, the waitress looks unhappy to see Beth, but she takes her and Jesse's orders respectfully. Rachel point out that it's very difficult for most people to decide how to treat developmentally disabled people in public—after all, for several generations, most of them spent their lives locked up at home or in institutions.

Jesse's fear shows how ableist prejudice makes it far more difficult for people with disabilities to fully participate in public, communal life. In fact, prejudice limits Jesse's opportunities far more than his actual disability does. For instance, while readers might attribute Jesse's shyness to his disability, in reality, it's a response to this prejudice. In fact, it's far easier to blame Jesse's disability for his shyness, because this casts the problem as unsolvable and alleviates everyone else of responsibility. Yet Rachel emphasizes that combatting anti-disability prejudice requires empathy not only for people with disabilities, but also for non-disabled people who do not yet understand disability.

Rachel notices a bald man glaring at Beth and Jesse from across the restaurant, and she starts trembling with anxiety. But Jesse notices and tells her not to worry—he and Beth get stares all the time, and the only thing they can do is to ignore them and treat people respectfully. He explains that people used to bully him terribly, and he developed a serious anger problem. But he took classes to work through it, and now he just enjoys his life. He concludes that the bald man just "don't know what's right and what's wrong."

Jesse's calm response to the staring man reminds the reader that Rachel is in the early stages of understanding truths that Beth and Jesse have already known for years. Specifically, they know that it's impossible to stop people from judging them for their disability, so all they can do is try to fight that prejudice through kindness and empathy. In fact, Jesse empathizes with the bald man by recognizing that his prejudice is rooted in ignorance, not evil.

After Rachel, Beth, and Jesse finish eating, Beth goes to the bathroom, and Rachel asks Jesse what *he* thinks love means. He says that love means caring enough about someone to be willing to do anything for them. He says that he loves Beth's sense of humor and the way they cheer each other up when they're feeling sad. Rachel remembers how she used to feel about Sam, and Jesse jokes, "Now I got *you* stumped." A few days later, Beth sends Rachel a **letter** with a list of things she loves about Jesse.

Unlike Beth, who struggles to articulate her feelings about love, Jesse offers a clear, concise definition that even surprises Rachel. Indeed, she's "stumped" by his definition because it leads her to think through her own relationship issues and deep commitment to helping her sister. In this way, Jesse again defies stereotypes: based on his comments, his relationship with Beth looks remarkably like any other. And his wisdom about life and love, like his martial arts skills, far exceeds that of most non-disabled people.

Shortly after meeting Jesse, Beth showed Rachel a naked picture of him; the day after, she called their brother Max to reveal that she and Jesse had done "*evrythiiiing*." Rachel's family has always worried about how Beth would have sex safely, since she isn't diligent enough to consistently take birth control. She loves babies and has always talked about wanting one—but the family agrees that she's not responsible enough to raise a child. For a week after Beth first had sex with Jesse, everyone in the family took turns calling her, explaining the difficulties of motherhood and her options for contraception. Beth decided that she didn't want a baby but refused all contraceptive methods except one: sterilization.

Beth and Jesse's relationship may be healthy and mutually supportive, but their sex life presents yet another thorny ethical dilemma. If they don't have safe sex, they might have a child they're not prepared to car for; but forcing them to use protection would take away their autonomy to make their own health decisions. Beth's family addresses this dilemma in the best way they can: by giving Beth as much support and information as possible, so that she can make an informed decision for herself. This is a model for how society can balance the concerns of safety and autonomy through policies to accommodate people with disabilities.

Rachel accompanied Beth to all of her medical appointments. She knew that she was doing her sister and family a great service, but she also felt like she was doing something terrible by making it impossible for Beth to have children. Rachel notices that, due to her own difficult childhood and her lifetime helping parent Beth, she hasn't decided if she wants children, either. The morning of Beth's surgery, the doctor re-explained the procedure, Beth signed a consent form, and Rachel and Jesse sat nervously in the waiting room. The procedure went smoothly. A decade later, Beth and Jesse are still together, but the subject of Beth's surgery still makes Rachel uneasy.

Rachel recognizes that while helping Beth is necessary and morally good, the costs of doing so will always be hard to bear. In particular, Beth's sterilization means that, in one crucial respect, her disability will prevent her from living the same kind of life as non-disabled people. Similarly, Beth's procedure also reminds Rachel about the dark history of countries like the U.S. forcibly sterilizing women with intellectual disabilities. And it brings up her own personal struggles with love, romance, and family, which largely stem from her own difficult childhood.

13. MAY: MATCHMAKER

Beth decides to help Rachel find a husband. As she puts it in one of her **letters**, "*I wAnt to HavE a driver as a BrothEr in law.*" Rachel tells Beth no, because she isn't interested in a relationship. But secretly, she is. One evening, she hears one of Sam's favorite songs playing in the supermarket and realizes how much she misses him. She worries that she'll never find love, and she has stopped dating because she's terrified of being hurt. Beth agrees not to try to set any of the drivers up with Rachel, but she still constantly tells them that Rachel is single.

Beth's stable, loving relationship with Jesse starkly contrasts with Rachel's isolation and fear of intimacy. Rachel recognizes that she needs to overcome this fear, and her chapters about the past show that she knows it stems from her childhood. Moreover, she seems to understand that her year with Beth is an important first step toward addressing this fear. Not only is Beth a great role model for romantic fearlessness, but by spending time with Beth, Rachel also learns to recognize her loneliness and accept being vulnerable with the people she loves.

One night, Rachel calls a driver named Rick to interview him for an article about Beth and the buses. He's charming, unpretentious, and funny. After the interview, he asks Rachel out for dinner—she thanks him but says that she's too busy. A few weeks later, he writes her a **letter** with the same invitation, but she turns him down again and implies that she already has "some romantic drama" going on. On the phone, Beth says she didn't know that Rachel had a boyfriend—but she promises not to pry, or to keep trying to set her up with Rick.

Beth is clearly orchestrating Rick and Rachel's courtship from behind the scenes, and they are clearly well-matched for each other. But it's less clear whether Rachel turns down Rick's invitations out of genuine disinterest or simply because of the lifelong fear of intimacy that she has just described. In the following chapters, she will both delve deeper into this fear and start to resolve it.

14. MAY: THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

As teenagers, Rachel and her siblings go to a diner with their father and argue about what to put on the jukebox. Now that they're older, they're spending much less time together—and their mother is busy dating and working. They see their father every few months, and Rachel yearns to connect with him and work through her teenage angst. But at the diner, she doesn't say anything. Instead, she thinks about watching her mother date a series of mediocre men and pictures the look of fear and exhaustion on her face after her failed dates.

Rachel's previous flashback chapters showed that her early childhood was relatively stable and enriching, but this one makes it clear that her family relationships began to fray as she grew into adolescence. Moreover, the distance she feels from her father as a teenager is remarkably similar to the distance she goes on to feel from Beth as an adult. In fact, this suggests that her decision to ride the buses with Beth is really about far more than just repairing their relationship: it's also about Rachel relearning to connect with, trust, and love others in the first place. Similarly, her despair about her mother's dating life helps the reader understand her adult ambivalence about dating men like Rick after her breakup with Sam.

Rachel believes that, once people find happiness, they stay there and never let go of it. The best way to find it is through love. Rachel dated a boy last summer, but she constantly feared that he'd break up with her—and he did. She's afraid of turning into her mother.

Rachel's teenage fantasies about perfect love help her cope with her parents' divorce and unhappiness. But they also set her up for failure, because they lead her to put unrealistic expectations on her relationships. Indeed, it's possible to attribute her adulthood to date after her breakup with Sam as evidence that she still doesn't know how to accept any form of love that falls short of her impossible ideal.

In January, Rachel's mother tells the children that a new man has asked her out—but he's a hard-drinking ex-convict, and she isn't planning to meet him. Then, three days later, Rachel finds this man smoking and drinking at the dinner table, and her mom says that he's moving in with the family. Rachel runs upstairs to write a **letter** on the typewriter her father gave her.

While Rachel and her siblings find their mother's dating life completely incomprehensible, readers can easily see that her despair and loneliness contributed to her poor romantic choices. Of course, Rachel's mother's poor choices help explain why Rachel refuses to enter into relationships and instead suffers through loneliness and isolation as an adult.

15. JUNE: THE EARTH MOTHER

In the present, Rachel and Beth run from one bus to another. Out of breath, they sit down and greet the driver, Estella. She looks wise, composed, and attractive. She talks to a passenger named Josie, who gets off the bus while explaining how her husband got sick and ended up in the hospital. Meanwhile, Beth talks over her, explaining that a driver named Keith has started being nice to her. Rachel silently wishes that Beth would stop talking.

Rachel's frustrations with Beth continue to mount: Beth is completely oblivious to the fact that Josie's issues are far more serious and pressing than her own. Just like Rachel's worries about Beth's health, these concerns raise a difficult moral conundrum. On the one hand, since Beth's disability contributes to her ignorance about other people's needs, it would be unfair to expect Beth to fully respect others. On the other, Beth is capable of learning to treat others better, and her refusal to do so upsets Rachel.

Estella drives on and explains that her job requires dealing with lots of other people's stress. Beth goes on talking about Keith, and Estella tells her not to worry. Rachel realizes that Estella helps everyone this way, by simply listening to their concerns. In fact, a block later, a man gifts Estella a plate of his wife's roast chicken as a thank-you for being a "great sounding board."

Like Tim and Jacob, Estella finds a greater moral and social purpose in driving, which connects her to a wide cross-section of her community. She is an excellent listener, largely because she understands how it's possible to help people by simply acting as a "sounding board." Rachel obviously wishes that Beth would learn from Estella, but she can also apply Estella's wisdom to become more patient with Beth.

One night in May, Rachel asked Beth if they could start riding at 7 a.m. instead of 5:30 the next morning, so she could have time to pack her things. Beth refused, and at 5 a.m., she woke Rachel up and insisted on going to ride the buses. She reluctantly came back to help Rachel pack at 6:15, and then they set off again at 7:00. But all day, Beth avoided talking to Rachel. In the evening, she left the bus early, without saying goodbye. Rachel asks, "Did being a good sister mean having no needs of my own?"

This anecdote again reflects Beth's total ignorance about other people's needs—including her sister's. While Beth resents having to change even a minor detail in her routine, she never appreciates how Rachel has committed to consistently interrupting her routine for an entire year in order to reconnect with Beth. Just like her health crises and love life, Beth's selfishness raises the difficult moral question of how responsible she truly is for her behavior—and whether it's reasonable to ask her to change.

Meanwhile, on Estella's bus, a young woman is talking about her boss has sexually harassing her. She wants to quit her job. Estella tells Rachel that when people have serious problems like this, they often see bus drivers like her before anyone else. Rachel realizes that this is why bus drivers have to act like healers, helping their passengers cope with suffering.

Estella's comments again show that public transit connects people not just geographically, but also socially and emotionally. In fact, the way that Americans turn to bus drivers for comfort suggests that such communal ties are hard to come by in the contemporary U.S.—it seems that Rachel is far from the only person who lives with an overwhelming sense of loneliness and despair.

Next, Estella tells Rachel about her own hard life. As a teenager, she got married to run away from her abusive stepfather. Then, she got divorced, had several children, and moved through a series of failed relationships and unfulfilling jobs. Eventually, she became a truck driver, which let her have interesting adventures all across the U.S. She went to therapy, stopped dating abusive men, and finally built up her self-esteem.

Estella's difficult life helps explain how she manages to find so much empathy for her passengers. While she lived through even more personal turmoil than Rachel, their underlying issues appear to be similar: both of them struggle to find meaning in life through their relationships and work. So, the fact that Estella overcame her issues by learning to love herself offers hope that Rachel will be able to do the same.

Estella's experience is the basis for her advice to passengers: she knows that everyone can always change their lives for the better, as long as they admit "that [they] might have to lose to win." Rachel admits that she's struggling to accept her own insecurities—she can't stop thinking about Sam and wondering if they should try to get back together. One day, she calls him, but she can't find the courage to speak, so she hangs up.

Like Jacob, Tim, and Rodolpho, Estella has learned her particular virtues because of her own trials in life, and she uses her powerful social position as a driver to pass on these virtues to others. Her central message is that people have to accept risks and vulnerability in order to gain the benefits of relationships and love. Rachel immediately sees how this speaks to her own situation—in fact, she has even more to learn from Estella than Beth does.

As Rachel listens to the bus passengers' conversations, she feels her fears and frustrations briefly melt away. Then, a woman boards and asks if her ex has ridden the bus—he still harasses her whenever they ride at the same time. Beth explains that he already got off, and Estella offers to help set him up with someone else, but the woman says she wouldn't want anyone else to have to deal with him.

Rachel's feeling of comfort and camaraderie suggests that Estella's bus serves is a valuable public space. But the woman who worries about her ex shows that there's also a downside to public spaces—they aren't always safe or inclusive unless the people who run them deliberately make them that way. (This is true for people with disabilities as much as it is for women.) This passenger's concerns echo Rachel's own fear of failed relationships and foreshadow the series of conflicts that she recounts in the next few flashback chapters.

All the passengers are women, and they all start talking about men and relationships. Rachel wonders if this is the kind of communal life that Americans used to have in the past, and she realizes that she doesn't want to go back to her lonely writer's life in her empty apartment. But at just the same moment, Beth tells her it's time to get off, and they descend catch their next bus.

The women's conversation clearly shows Rachel why public space is so valuable: it gives people the opportunity to share stories, make connections, and empathize with one another. In other words, buses are an antidote to loneliness—and they also give Rachel the context she needs to truly see how she has chosen loneliness over community.

16. JUNE: DISABILITIES

Rachel asks Beth where they are—Beth doesn't know what street they're on, but only the corner ahead. Rachel admits that six months into her year riding the buses, her "older, more disgruntled feelings about Beth" have started to come out again. She struggles with Beth's selfishness, stubbornness, and refusal to learn new concepts. Beth is also totally indifferent to other people's needs, including Rachel's. But she can be kind, generous, and self-aware. Rachel wonders how much of this is due to Beth's disability, and how much of it is just who she is.

Rachel isn't proud to reach a breaking point with Beth, but she also recognizes that her capacity for empathy, compassion, and patience is far from limitless. She wants to learn more about Beth's disability so that she can answer the difficult questions that continue to gnaw at her: can Beth change? To what extent? Is it fair to expect her to do so? And, most importantly, is it possible to draw a line between her disability and her personality at all?

During one of their monthly phone calls, Rachel asks Olivia what her job has taught her about people with intellectual disabilities. Olivia explains that, during her training, she learned that it takes longer for people like Beth to process information. She's frustrated by how other people condescend to people like Beth but says that Beth is "a joy to work with." After the call, Rachel decides that she still needs to understand more about Beth's condition. Her family didn't talk about it much when she was growing up.

Rachel envies Olivia's tact at dealing with Beth's flaws, and she recognizes that this is the result of Olivia's professional training. Rachel and Beth's parents always avoided talking about Beth's disability because they didn't want anyone to single Beth out. But this had an unintended consequence, too: because they never learned to understand Beth's differences, Rachel and her siblings never learned how to accommodate them.

During Rachel's next visit, Beth spends all day on the buses, talking nonstop about her fights with other drivers. An old man complains to Rachel, and later, a woman on the street yells at her, saying that she has to control her sister. In the evening, Rachel asks Beth to talk a little more quietly on the bus, and Beth yells to everyone that she doesn't think she's talking too loudly.

The old man and woman believe that Rachel is responsible for Beth, like a parent for their child. This is because they assume that Beth cannot truly be responsible for decisions. In contrast, Rachel's conversations with Olivia and experiences with Beth have shown her that Beth can make her own decisions and face the consequences—even if she usually does so by ignoring them.

Before bed, Beth proudly declares that, tomorrow, she's going to yell at a girl who recently criticized her on the bus. Rachel asks Beth why she can't be kinder, but Beth insists that it doesn't matter. Rachel tells Beth to keep her criticisms of others to herself and apologize when she hurts people, but Beth says that she doesn't believe in apologizing. Rachel insists that "other people have feelings," and Beth replies, "I don't *know*." Exasperated, Rachel runs into Beth's bedroom and contemplates stopping her visits. But she has promised to keep coming for a year.

Beth's plan to get revenge over a minor slight suggests that she totally lacks empathy, and her defensive response ("I don't know*") demonstrates that she has no interest in changing. Whereas Jesse copes with others' harmful behavior by recognizing that it comes from ignorance, Beth does so by brushing off attacks and then striking back with a vengeance. This is all the more troubling because, as Rachel has learned, successfully dealing with Beth requires a great deal of empathy. Thus, Rachel and Beth's relationship consistently requires Rachel to give far more than she receives in return.*


Once again, Rachel asks herself, "How much is Beth, and how much is Beth's brain?" She starts researching on the internet. She learns that about three percent of Americans have developmental disabilities, and "mental age" is a technical term in IQ testing—it doesn't mean that disabled people are stuck at a child's level of development. Rachel learns to say "[person] with mental retardation," not "mentally retarded [person]." Some groups are even moving past the term "retardation" and using the terms cognitive, intellectual, and developmental disability instead.

Rachel discovers that while the concepts of IQ and "mental age" tend to dominate conversations about developmental disability, they actually describe a relatively small aspect of what makes Beth different from other people. Such conversations tend to imply that people with developmental disabilities will inevitably struggle with all *ordinary adult skills because of their lower scores on IQ tests, but in reality, IQ only captures people's ability to perform a very specific kind of analytical thinking. (It also happens to be the main criterion for categorizing different levels of developmental disability.) Next, Rachel's research into terminology shows her that the words we use to talk about people with disabilities make a significant difference in their lives. This is because words carry assumptions. For instance, "disabled person" defines people through their disabilities, while "person with a disability" emphasizes that disability is just one of many aspects of their personality. Similarly, the terms "retarded" and "mental retardation" have long been considered obsolete and offensive because they have become associated with the slur derived from them. Readers should remember that Rachel is describing her research from 1999, and as she notes in her Author's Note, these terms should now be retired.*

Rachel next learns that many different conditions can cause developmental disability, but the cause is often unknown—including in most "mild" cases, like Beth's. From a psychology textbook, Rachel learns that people in the "mild" category generally score like 8- to 11-year-olds on IQ tests, have adolescent-level social skills, and struggle to understand that their actions have consequences. She thinks that this perfectly captures Beth. The textbook goes on to explain that people with more severe intellectual disabilities often can't read and write, fully control their movements, or live on their own.

Rachel's family was long devastated to never learn why Beth was born with a developmental disability, but Rachel's internet research shows her that this lack of explanation is the norm, not the exception. It also helps her clearly identify which aspects of Beth's behavior and personality can be clearly attributed to her disability. And perhaps most importantly, it reminds her that the fact that people with developmental disabilities score like children on IQ tests doesn't mean that they should actually be treated like children—especially when it comes to their moral responsibility for their actions. Finally, readers might wonder why Rachel didn't look up disability on the internet any sooner, but it's helpful to remember that she wrote this book in 1999—only a year after Google was created.

Rachel learns that to be classified as intellectually disabled, someone must have an IQ below 75 and serious issues, starting before age 18, with at least two key daily skills—such as communication, self-care, social abilities, and health and safety. She realizes that Beth struggles with practically *all* of these skills, and she clearly meets the other criteria, too. Rachel concludes that, in the future, she can't expect Beth to understand her advice immediately, and she must learn to respond to Beth's limitations with sympathy rather than frustration. She wonders why it took her so many years to finally do this research. She may never clearly figure out "how much is Beth and how much is Beth's brain," but she can finally accept that Beth will journey through life at her own, slower pace.

Rachel concludes that while she can never find a clear dividing line between Beth's personality ends and her disability begins, she can learn to set more reasonable expectations for Beth. She learns that Beth can change and become a better person, but only if she receives plenty of time, support, and encouragement along the way. Thus, Beth's failure to change so far doesn't mean that she never will—instead, it means that Rachel is doing exactly what she needs to if she wants to help Beth change further down the line. Her final thought in this chapter reframes developmental disability in a significant way: it's not an inherent limit on what people can ever accomplish or become, but rather a different rate of learning and growth. Thus, people like Beth can truly do anything that non-disabled people can—it will generally just take them longer. The destination is no different, just the journey needed to get there.

17. JUNE: GOODBYE

Rachel flashes back to the past: shortly after Rachel and Beth's mother starts dating the ex-con, he makes the children move out. Max and Rachel carry a trunk of Rachel's things down the stairs. Laura and Max will move in with their father, and Rachel will go to boarding school. Everyone assumes that Beth will stay at home—Beth knows that her siblings are leaving but doesn't fully understand why. Rachel brings her trunk outside to her dad's car, then hugs Beth goodbye and promises to see her soon. Beth is speechless. Rachel, Max, and their dad drive off, waving goodbye to Beth.

This vignette helps explain why Rachel frequently withdraws from her loved ones and struggles to form close relationships as an adult. First, she felt like her father abandoned her after her parents' divorce; now, her mother actually abandons her and her siblings. Worst of all, she's separated from Beth for the first time, so she can no longer serve as Beth's protector. Since Rachel came of age without stable, loving relationships with her parents, it makes sense that she still fears intimacy as an adult.

18. JULY: THE OPTIMIST

Back in the present, in the early afternoon, the silly, portly, sleep-deprived driver Bailey parks his bus in front of Kmart and yawns. He and Beth joke about how many times he's yawned, and then he spills coffee on his shirt and jokes about it to the whole bus. Beth calls him "Crazy Bailey" because "he's *fun*." While he opens the bus's roof hatch to let in fresh air, Beth explains that he's so tired because his teenagers keep causing mischief. Like most drivers, he works four hours in the morning and four in the afternoon, and he loves the schedule.

Beth's friendship with "Crazy Bailey" is clearly more lighthearted than her relationships with other drivers. After all, like every other driver, Bailey takes a unique, personalized approach to his vocation. While drivers like Tim, Jacob, and Estella use wisdom and empathy to create inclusive communities and enrich their passengers' lives, Bailey does the same through humor.

After an elderly woman yells "Get a job!" in Beth's face, Bailey suggests that Beth help him make sure that his kids get to school in the morning, while he and his wife are both out working. She agrees, so she starts riding to his house in the mornings, knocking on his kids' bedroom doors, and waking them up for the bus. Of course, Bailey devised this scheme for Beth as much as for his children.

While rude and intolerant, the old woman's comments do speak to Beth's family and friends' real concerns about her decision not to work. Bailey's scheme is generous and thoughtful, and it shows how people with developmental disabilities can contribute to society if opportunities are tailored specifically for them. Nevertheless, it's not clear that other similar opportunities exist for Beth.

Beth has always struggled to keep jobs, as she frequently gets distracted, bullied, or bored. He government assistance check goes down when she works, so she has stopped trying. But this means she also hasn't found the friendship, skills, or sense of purpose that can come with work. Rachel has long tried to convince Beth to volunteer or get a job, but she has always refused. As a result, Rachel thinks that Beth isn't fulfilling her potential.

Beth's work situation raises yet another difficult ethical question, because she's capable *of working—but she has no incentive to do so and prefers not to. Readers may or may not agree with Rachel's belief that work is inherently good, but it's clear that Beth would contribute more to her community if she actively worked to better it. Moreover, while forcing Beth to work would no doubt violate her autonomy, almost everyone else in society has to work, and so Rachel feels that Beth is taking advantage of the system by refusing to do so.*

The disability experts Rachel contacts give her mixed responses about Beth's unemployment. Some point out that many people with Beth's kind of developmental disabilities can and do work, while others suggest that Beth would struggle to find and keep a job at all. Rachel tries to find Beth work at a supermarket, an animal shelter, or even the bus company—but she doesn't want any of it. Bailey tries, too—he wants to identify and build on Beth's strengths, just like he does with his own children. But she doesn't want to participate.

The experts Rachel contacts debate the extent to which people with developmental disabilities can adapt to a work culture designed for non-disabled people. But this question would not be so troubling if there were opportunities specifically tailored to the needs and abilities of people like Beth. Nevertheless, Beth's behavior again shows that nobody else will make her change—she has to choose to change.

Meanwhile, Olivia keeps reminding Rachel that Beth's treatment plan must be organized around her own preferences. This principle comes from the self-determination movement, which argues that people with intellectual disabilities should have the same rights and freedoms as everyone else, unless they're a threat to themselves or others. Practically, this means letting them live how they want, even if it conflicts with what treatment providers think is best for them. Yet the professionals Rachel meets have conflicting views whether and how they should help their clients make the choices that are best for them.

Self-determination is the central principle in Rachel's analysis of disability and accommodation. In reality, self-determination just amounts to saying that people with disabilities should have the same kind of autonomy over their lives as people who don't have disabilities. Thus, self-determination doesn't want to give people with disabilities a special status—instead, it gives them special support *in order to help them reach the same status as everyone else. The self-determination principle explains why Beth's team lets her make decisions that her family considers wrong for her, like refusing to work: the team prizes Beth's autonomy over other people's ideas about what is best for her. It's also important to note that this model is dramatically different from the system that governed disability care in the U.S. for many generations, under which families and the government made all key decisions for people like Beth.*

In a traffic jam, Bailey remains totally calm and patient, because he knows he can't do anything to control the situation. Rachel wonders whether she can find the same patience to deal with Beth. Bailey explains how he stays positive through a story: when locked in a room filled with toys, a pessimistic boy complains. But when locked in a room filled with horse poop, an optimistic boy plays and celebrates because "there's got to be a pony in here somewhere." Bailey tells Rachel to "just look for the pony."

Rachel admires Bailey's attitude in large part because, according to the research she conducted in the last chapter, people with developmental disabilities grow best when their loved ones treat them with patience, calm, and optimism. Thus, Bailey is a role model for Rachel because he shows her how to treat Beth better. "Just look for the pony" is really just Bailey's way of saying that Rachel must identify and celebrate Beth's victories, rather than constantly worrying about her imperfections.

Rachel realizes that Beth is "the embodiment of self-determination"—she makes her own decisions in life and gets to leave an impact on the world. This helps Rachel relax. She marvels that Beth has found such incredible, wise bus drivers—and she realizes that Beth's secret was putting in the effort to get to know all of them and figure out who was the best. In contrast, Rachel has never put this kind of effort into relationships with the people around her. She realizes how much she is growing from her time with Beth.

Rachel, Bailey, and the rest of Beth's family and friends aren't happy about Beth's lifestyle. But after taking the principle of self-determination into account, Rachel realizes that her own opinions don't really matter. Just as she has no right to tell her non-disabled friends and relatives how to live their lives, she ultimately has to respect Beth's autonomous decisions. In fact, by taking this new perspective—or trying to understand Beth's choices instead of trying to change them—Rachel learns important lessons about herself.

19. JULY: BREAK SHOT

Beth keeps writing Rachel **letters** about Rick, the bus driver who asked her to dinner. One day, at last, they take his bus. He's very attractive, but Rachel refuses to fall for Beth's "cunning little trap." Rick tells her about his interest in art history, independent movies, and crossword puzzles. He asks Rachel for with help with a puzzle, and even though she says that she's no good at crosswords, she helps him solve several clues. Then, Beth brings up Rick's date invitation, and he asks if Rachel likes theater and playing pool. Another passenger helps solve one of Rick's crossword clues.

Rachel is ambivalent about Beth's invitation: while she does want to find love, she neither wants to give Beth control of her romantic life nor accept the emotional risks that come with dating. Still, she is far more open to Rick than she would have been at the beginning of the year, which shows how her journey with Beth has started to help her overcome her fears and isolation. After all, the fate of Rachel's love life will be the ultimate test of what she has learned through her year with Beth. So far, she and Rick are clearly well-matched: they share many interests and immediately get along.

20. JULY: GONE

When Rachel and Beth are teenagers, their mom marries her ex-con boyfriend. They go on their honeymoon and leave Beth and Ringo at home. Then, Beth's babysitter stops coming. Rachel's grandmother flies Beth out to meet her mother and stepdad on their honeymoon—but she won't tell the rest of the family where they are. So, Beth essentially disappears.

Rachel and Beth's adolescence takes yet another turn for the worse. These experiences should help contextualize Rachel's distance from her family and fear of relationships as an adult. While Beth eventually manages to live independently as an adult, she is by no means capable of doing the same as a teenager. And when Beth leaves, Rachel's worst fears are realized: she no longer has the power to save Beth from the dangers of the world.

21. AUGUST: THE LONER

In the present, while waiting for a bus, Rachel and Beth overhear a white mother and daughter criticize a mixed-race family, calling them "disgusting" and "a disgrace." They start to say the N-word, but Beth objects—she tells the mother and daughter that "what you're saying iz *wrong*. Iz not *nice*." Then, she and Rachel board Jack's bus. Jack is tough and world-weary, but he also has a carefree grin.

Despite her lack of empathy for others, Beth can clearly tell the difference between right and wrong—and she's fearless enough to stand up for her values. In particular, she recognizes that different forms of prejudice, discrimination, and inclusion are linked: it's in her interests to fight racism not only because she's in an interracial relationship, but also because people who support racial inclusivity are more likely to support disability justice, too.

As the bus drives through a diverse neighborhood of immigrants, Beth tells Jack about the altercation with the mother and daughter. Rachel and Jack agree that Beth did a great thing by speaking up—Jack compares her to himself, because he's also independent-minded. Jack explains that, after his parents died, he grew up with his grandmother. At just six years old, he started working on a truck, which made him independent and open-minded. He met immigrants from all around the world and learned to cook—he talks about his chicken pot pie recipe, which Rachel reproduces in the book.

The city's ethnic diversity further shows why disability justice has such high stakes: it's part of a much larger fight to make U.S. society more inclusive and egalitarian than it has been in the past. In historically homogenous, industrial, conservative regions like Beth's corner of Pennsylvania, people like Beth and Jack can make a real difference. On a different note, Rachel's decision to include Jack's recipe in the book shows that she takes his passion and artistry seriously. This is an extension of the same empathy and concern that drives her to learn about all the other drivers' lives and stories.

Jack tells Beth that she helped the mother and daughter, even if they didn't actually listen to her. He explains how, one time, a woman with a drinking problem boarded his bus and said that people were following her. Jack had trained as a community service counselor, so he directed the woman to the appropriate detox program. It worked: the woman quit drinking. Jack remarks that he loves helping others but likes to face his own problems on his own. Beth says that she's the same way.

Jack embodies the way that drivers serve as essential connectors and resources for the community, because their jobs are public-facing and their buses are designed to serve as many people as possible. Indeed, the fact that the woman came to him for help suggests that such community resources are no longer widely available in the U.S.—which speaks to the urgent need to rebuild them. In fact, despite his role, Jack also suffers from the increasing loneliness and isolation of life in the modern U.S.

Rachel states that Beth's life embodies American democratic values—especially independence. Beth makes her own decisions, regardless of what other people think is best for her. For instance, when Rachel and Vera drive Beth to the supermarket, she insists on only buying $50 worth of food, even though she knows she'll have to return in a few days. Vera no longer helps Beth shop or tries to convince her to eat healthier food, because she doesn't listen. In the past, Vera oversaw group homes, but now, her job is to help people with developmental disabilities achieve self-determination. Beth asks for less help from Vera than the agency thinks she needs, but it's her choice. When Beth returns to the car with her unhealthy groceries, Vera calls Beth "the most independent person I know" and says that this makes her job easy.

By linking Beth's lifestyle to the American national spirit, Rachel again turns stereotypes about people with developmental disabilities on their head. Indeed, she also implies that the way the U.S. treats people with disabilities shows whether it lives up to its own deepest values. Vera respects Beth's autonomy—or supports the principle of self-determination—by letting Beth make her own decisions about issues like shopping and caretaking, even when a different decision would obviously be healthier or more practical for her. In Rachel's eyes, this shows that the system is succeeding.

On the bus, Jack comments that "independence […] can have its drawbacks," like loneliness. For instance, he has been single for 22 years because he hasn't met anyone as independent as him. He keeps thinking about a girl from high school; he imagines how his life would be if he married her and became a chef. He says that people should follow their dreams and hold onto the people they love. He brings out a container and offers Rachel his red beet eggs. Again, she includes Jack's recipe in the book.

Rachel's romantic life, like Jack's, consists mostly of fantasy and fear. In fact, Jack's comments accurately describe Rachel's feelings about her own romantic life: she's profoundly lonely because she avoids seeking out love, and she avoids seeking out love because she's afraid of intimacy and losing her independence. Instead, both Jack and Rachel express love and connection through other channels—Jack through his cooking and Rachel through her writing.

Beth finally goes to an eye doctor, who finds that she has two rare conditions, which have left her nearly blind. Rachel is frustrated at Beth's refusal to cooperate with doctors and care for her health. The eye doctor recommends surgery, but it's up to Beth. Fortunately, she agrees to the procedure.

The principle of self-determination says that Beth should make her own medical choices. But Rachel is still uneasy about the idea that Beth should be able to harm herself, especially when she doesn't fully understand the consequences of her medical decisions. This again shows how important support and accommodation services are, in order to give people with developmental disabilities the context they need in order to make wise decisions.

On Jack's bus, Beth tells Rachel that she wishes Jack could meet the girl he loved in high school. Rachel tells Beth that she wishes she had the resource guide that Jack got while training as a counselor. She really means that she wishes she had "a guide to being a good sister" to Beth, but instead, she says that the book could help her get Beth new eyes. Beth asks if they could be purple. Rachel wonders how Beth would be without her disability, and what her own life would be like. She turns to Beth and promises to try to help her find purple eyes. The chapter ends with Jack's recipe for his grandmother's chocolate mayonnaise cake.

Rachel fantasizes about having the "guide to being a good sister" because she knows that the moral dilemmas she and Beth face have serious consequences but no right answers. For instance, as she contemplates Beth's eye problems, she struggles to choose the right balance between protecting Beth's health and respecting Beth's (often misguided) wishes. Rachel is trying as hard as she can to help Beth—which is the most anyone can do—but she will never definitively know if she made the best decision.

22. AUGUST: NOWHERE

The book flashes back to Rachel's boarding school, after Beth's disappearance. Rachel and her friends speculate about where Beth could be, and Rachel imagines her homeless, or worse. Rachel stops sleeping and starts withdrawing from her classes and peers. Two months in, she's struggling to stay positive and forgetting how Beth looks and sounds.

Rachel isn't just worried about Beth—she also feels intensely guilty about being unable to take care of Beth, which she has always viewed as her responsibility. In fact, she feels that she has abandoned her sister, much as her mother has abandoned her.

23. AUGUST: BE NOT AFRAID

In the present, Rachel and Beth go to the Jersey Shore with Jacob, the bus driver, and his family. Rachel was surprised at Jacob's invitation, and even though she doesn't like the beach and hates taking days off from work, she reluctantly agreed to go. At first, she and Beth refused to **wear bathing suits**, but Jacob eventually convinced them. Beth plays catch with Jacob's wife, Carol, and their daughter, Grace.

Jacob, the recovered alcoholic bus driver who taught Rachel about the importance of selflessness and generosity, lives out his values by treating Beth and Rachel like family. This trip is further evidence that Beth's bus-riding has enabled her to build the kind of close, loving connections that Rachel secretly yearns for.

Meanwhile, Jacob and Rachel talk. They have already been trading emails about Beth, buses, and the "Big Things" in life. Jacob tells Rachel about his struggles to act selflessly and put aside his perfectionism. When Beth comes over and says she's worried for her eye surgery, Jacob tells her about his liver transplant.

Jacob and Rachel deepen their friendship, which shows that riding the buses is helping Rachel form connections in much the same way as it has helped Beth. Still, while Jacob and Beth open up about their fears and worries, Rachel isn't quite ready to do the same.

Then, the whole group does family activities on the boardwalk. After lunch, Rachel doesn't want to swim, but everyone else convinces her. She feels exposed in her bathing suit, but she steps into the cold ocean water with Beth. They play catch with Jacob, but Beth runs back to the shore. Rachel goes deeper and deeper, until she can't handle the cold and runs back, too.

Rachel's willingness to swim represents how riding the buses with Beth has taught her to take more risks by making her more comfortable with her own vulnerability. Yet her quick sprint back to the shore demonstrates that she hasn't completely overcome her fears yet—she still has more to learn.

24. AUGUST: INSIDE THE TEARS

The book flashes back: at boarding school, three months into Beth's disappearance, Rachel gets a phone call during class. One of her father's friends explains that Beth will be flying from Albuquerque to New York right away. Rachel has no idea why. After the call, she faints. At night, her dad stops by the school with Max and Beth. She runs to hug Beth, who is smiling but "filthy beyond words."

In high school, Beth returns to Rachel's life just as abruptly as she disappeared. While her return is a great relief, it also proves to Rachel that she won't always be able to protect her sister from harm, no matter how much she tries. After all, Beth's "filthy" state makes it clear that she has suffered serious harm during her time with her mother and stepdad.

In the car, Beth explains that she was actually in Las Vegas. Rachel and Beth's new stepfather was drinking nonstop, beating their mom, and forcing her and Beth to move from hotel to hotel. He's convinced that the KGB and CIA are after him. He sold the car and made Beth and her mom travel around on buses. The whole time, Beth was looking for a way out. She eventually escaped from her Las Vegas hotel room and called Laura from a payphone. Her stepdad attacked her and held her at gunpoint all night, and then her mother sent her home for her own safety. Beth breaks into tears while telling this story, and Max, Rachel, and their father do the same when they hear it.

Beth's story confirms many of Rachel's worst fears: her paranoid, violent stepdad terrorized her and her mother, and because they didn't know where she was, the rest of her family couldn't do anything to protect her. However, surprisingly, Beth doesn't seem to be as affected by her childhood trauma as Rachel is in adulthood. That said, readers might wonder whether her attachment to buses has something to do with this period in her life, during which buses provided one of her few routes to safety.

Rachel, Beth, Max, and Laura all move in with their father. They try to figure out why their mother has "gone off the deep end," and they suspect that she is actually enjoying her new life's insane adventures. They avoid mentioning her name and try to forget about her. While Rachel secretly **writes to her friends** about what happened, Max and Laura play cards and talk about moving on, and Beth watches TV, stares into space, and sleeps 12 hours a day. Beth's hair has been falling out, too.

Rachel feels profoundly disappointed by her mother's abandonment, which feels like the ultimate betrayal of love and trust. This is the foundation of her issues with commitment and vulnerability as an adult. It's telling that, as a teenager, she copes with these issues through writing—just as she has done as an adult, by writing this book. Meanwhile, while Beth experienced far more severe trauma, she processes it very differently. And this passage strongly implies that because Beth processes her trauma nonverbally, her siblings will never fully understand how she feels or what she thinks about her experience.

25. SEPTEMBER: THE JESTER

In the present, while parked at a stop for a few minutes, the zany bus driver Bert asks if it's anyone's birthday. The kids on the bus laugh, and Bert points to a young man named Domingo, who says that his birthday is coming up. Bert sings a goofy rendition of "Happy Birthday to You," and everyone applauds. Bert tells Rachel that this is his creative way to make his passengers smile.

Like Bailey, Bert uses humor to entertain and connect his passengers. As a result of his efforts, his passengers momentarily turn from a disconnected cluster of individuals into a unified band of fellow travelers. This is similar to how the women on Estella's bus all start talking about relationships at the same time—in both cases, the bus driver's expertise at connecting people creates a special, communal experience for the passengers. However, Bert and Estella do it in different ways: Bert by talking and Estella by patiently listening.

Bert drove buses in New York for three decades, until he retired to Pennsylvania. Then, he got bored, so he decided to start driving part-time. He complains that the local passengers are "rude and crude," especially to Beth. There are "people like Beth on every bus" in New York, Bert says, and everyone tolerates one another. But crazy things also happen—like the time a naked, mud-covered woman got on his bus at 2 a.m. in Staten Island. Another time, there was a woman wearing nothing but a bandanna. Bert declares that driving in New York taught him to find creative solutions to any problem. This reminds Rachel about how, as children, she and Beth used to play with the spider webs under their house.

Bert's decision to keep driving after retirement shows that he truly loves his job. And his stories from New York present a version of the U.S. that's very different from Pennsylvania—one that is more unpredictable, more varied, and more tolerant of difference. He clearly wishes that people treated Beth in Pennsylvania like they would in New York, but he also seems to believe that the best way for people to become more tolerant is simply by exposing themselves to more difference. Finally, like all the other drivers Rachel has met, Bert offers her a potential solution to her troubles. Namely, his emphasis on creatively solving problems speaks to Rachel's doubts about how she should treat Beth, given that she has no "guide to being a good sister" that she can follow.

Bert starts talking to the audience in rhymes. He compliments an elderly woman, promises a little girl that the tooth fairy will visit her, and sings "Over the River and Through the Wood." For the rest of the day, every time the bus reaches a stop, Bert tells Beth and Rachel a New York story. When kids threw bricks at his bus on Halloween, he learned that "the power to observe is the power to learn." He also explains that, now that he's older, he has compassion for elderly people who struggle to cross the street. Rachel writes down Bert's wisdom in her journal, and the other passengers make fun of her for it.

Bert's jolly riddles, songs, and stories again make it clear that he loves his job—and that he passes on his enjoyment to his passengers. He may not help these passengers solve their deepest problems, like Jacob and Estella do, but he certainly takes their minds off those problems for the duration of their ride. Meanwhile, his comments about "the power to observe" recall Tim's ideas about the importance of details from the very beginning of the book. Of course, as a writer, Rachel's job is to translate her observations into meaningful lessons—thus, when she notes down Bert's ideas, she's clearly implementing them, too.

The bus passes Jesse, who is riding his bike to the highway. This surprises Rachel, but Bert explains that everyone is used to seeing him. At the next stop, Bert talks about how a man once got on his bus between stops and beat up a passenger. Bert realized that he shouldn't have picked the man up. He concludes that it's important to improvise—like Jesse riding his bike on the highway. Then, Bert explains how kids try to climb out of the bus's roof hatch on school trips, so drivers have to repeatedly tap on the breaks to prevent them from standing up.

Surely enough, right after Bert talks about the link between observation and learning, he demonstrates this link by turning Jesse's bike ride into a teachable moment. Meanwhile, his anecdote about improvisation again underlines Rachel's struggle to become more spontaneous, like Beth. After all, while she tends to rigidly plan and control her life, she knows that this approach won't improve her relationship with Beth or help her overcome her fear of dating.

Everywhere he's driven, Bert concludes, people are bored and depressed—but comedy and singing can make their day. Before driving off, he sings one more song: "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Beth and Rachel run off the bus. Bert gives Beth a thumbs-up and tells her to "do the right thing." That evening, Rachel reminds Beth about how she used to love being tickled—and then Rachel tickles Beth for a half hour. Rachel feels totally comfortable with Beth, and the critical voice in her head has faded away.

Like Estella and Bailey, Bert knows that buses, the humblest of public spaces, can help fight Americans' generalized sense of isolation and despair—so long as drivers take the opportunity to engage and connect with their riders. Rachel and Beth's tickle session shows that they're applying Bert's lessons about spontaneity and playfulness to consciously fight their isolation. And when Rachel's critical voice starts to fade, this shows that Bert was right: she must build a better relationship with Beth by embracing uncertainty and improvisation, rather than continuing to seek control.

26. SEPTEMBER: SURGERY

Jacob sings along to the stereo as he drives his car, with Beth in the passenger seat and Rachel in the back. He turns the volume up and down while he sings, and he asks Beth and Rachel to join in—and sing "louder!" They're heading to the hospital for Beth's surgery. Last night, Rachel went to Beth's apartment to make sure everything went smoothly. And when Beth asked, Jacob readily agreed to take her to the hospital. Beth is afraid of surgery, but with Jacob driving and singing, she has forgotten her fears.

Jacob once again affirms that his commitment to Rachel and Beth's well-being goes far beyond his job: just like he brought them to the beach with his family, he accompanies them on the most stressful day of their year together. This is a prime example of the kind of friendship, love, and support that can help people with disabilities make (and follow through with) better personal decisions.

Rather than giving Beth a corneal transplant, which might not work, the doctor will remove the eyelashes that are growing into her eyes. She's supposed to spend the following two days at home, icing her eyes, but she wants to keep riding buses instead. Rachel knows she can neither force Beth to follow the recovery procedures nor totally honor her wishes, so she tries her best to remind Beth of the consequences. Rachel is as grateful for Jacob's support as Beth is. In fact, rather than just dropping them off outside the hospital, Jacob follows them inside.

While Jacob clearly knows how to support Beth and help her make healthy decisions, Rachel worries that she won't manage to do the same for Beth. Thus, she comes to view Beth's recovery as a test of their sisterhood. Once again, she is running into the limits of self-determination: Beth's right to make her own decisions may lead her to put herself in serious danger, because she struggles to understand the consequences of her actions due to her disability.

Beth's medical caseworker, a nurse named Mary, helps her with the paperwork. Rachel sees that Mary's other client, an elderly woman with intellectual disabilities, is all alone. She wonders whether the woman has family and what her life has been like. Beth dutifully follows the medical staff's advice and asks for Rachel to stay with her at every step of her procedure. Right before she goes in for surgery, Beth declares that she needs to go to the bathroom and is planning to run away—but Rachel can tell that she's not serious. Beth is reluctant to lie down on her gurney and turn over to receive her anesthesia shot, but she eventually agrees.

Mary's job further shows that there's no contradiction between self-determination and providing support services for people with disabilities—on the contrary, such services are often necessary in order to help people like Beth truly make autonomous, well-informed decisions. Yet the other elderly woman shows why this kind of formal support isn't enough on its own: people with developmental disabilities also need connections to loved ones, friends, and broader community networks in order to truly thrive. After all, it's Rachel's company—not Mary's—that convinces Beth to go through with the surgery.

Rachel follows Beth as the nurse wheels her away to surgery, and she notices that Beth's eyes look blurry and scratched-up. As Beth falls asleep, Rachel feels overwhelmed with love for her. Olivia later tells Rachel that she wouldn't have forced Beth to go through with the surgery if she really decided to run away. But Rachel feels conflicted: she wants to respect Beth's wishes, but she knows how important the surgery is.

Rachel still struggles to fully accept the principle of self-determination. Unlike Olivia, whose job requires her to prioritize Beth's autonomy no matter what and accept the consequences, Rachel knows that she will feel responsible if she lets Beth make poor decisions. Thus, when she gazes over at Beth's damaged eyes, she asks herself which is really a greater expression of her love: respecting Beth's autonomy, or violating that autonomy in order to save Beth from a danger that her disability prevents her from fully understanding.

After the surgery, Beth agrees to follow the doctor's orders. Jacob spends the whole day with her and Rachel. Rodolpho and Rick visit, and after Rachel goes home, Beth finishes her post-op treatment at Jacob's house. Olivia tells Rachel that "this is how it's supposed to work"—self-determination is supposed to help people with developmental disabilities form a community that will care for them. Rachel marvels at how lucky Beth has been to find such a community, but she wonders what happened to the other, older woman in the waiting room.

In previous chapters, Rachel has introduced the core members of Beth's bus-driving community one by one. Here, she shows how they come together to support Beth when she needs them. Again, Olivia emphasizes that autonomy and connection are complements, not opposites: self-determination doesn't mean living a solitary or totally self-sufficient life, but rather accepting the help and resources necessary to live in line with one's values and desires. Finally, Rachel's concern for the older woman shows that she recognizes how many people with developmental disabilities aren't lucky enough to have the kind of love, community, and effective services that enable Beth to live an autonomous, fulfilling life. She encourages her readers to think of what they can do to help the people who fall through the cracks. Of course, the solution is to build better political and social systems, so that all people with developmental disabilities have a chance to thrive like Beth.

27. SEPTEMBER: RELEASING THE REBEL

When Rachel is 17, Beth has just moved back in with their father, and the three of them go to a department store to buy Beth clothes. But Beth doesn't know her own size, and their father knows nothing about women's clothes. At the fitting room, he calls for help, then sends Rachel to find a store employee, and then finally gives up and takes Beth inside himself.

This anecdote illustrates the sense of isolation and alienation that plagues Beth and Rachel after their mother abandons them, forcing them to go live with their father. After all, their father has scarcely been present in their life for the last decade, and he is not well-equipped to parent them—never mind to adapt to Beth's unique needs.

While her siblings are still angry at their mother, Beth doesn't seem to care anymore. She goes on with her life, plays with Ringo, and even befriends a girl named Juanita—who happens to be four years old. Beth's siblings know that this friendship won't last. In fact, that same summer, Juanita and her older brother turn on Beth and start screaming names at her: "stupid, a baby, a freak." Beth says nothing all day. Eventually, she starts to rebel: she teases her siblings, refuses to eat fruits and vegetables, and starts telling bald-faced lies. Rachel struggles to square her love for Beth's originality with her frustration about Beth's "escalating self-centeredness and manipulativeness."

When it comes to coping with trauma, Beth's disability turns out to be a superpower: it enables her to easily forget and move on, unlike her siblings, who spend years struggling to understand their mother's erratic behavior. But arguably, Beth's own erratic behavior may have been a response to her traumatic experiences with her mother. Finally, Beth's ill-fated friendship with Juanita shows that her disability will present her with plenty of other interpersonal challenges as she comes of age.

Beth acts just as badly at school, and after a year, her father pulls her out. Instead, he finds her a job at the mail correspondence school that he runs, but he can't stand her babbling on the two-hour drive. She learns to sort and deliver papers—but then she starts making serious mistakes, and the other siblings have to double-check her work. Eventually, they realize that she's doing it on purpose, because she prefers not to work. She starts spending all her time with the man who prints the school's pamphlets—she idolizes him and talks about him nonstop.

It's significant that Beth's teenage issues are the same ones that continue to plague her relationship with Rachel in adulthood. She still struggles to treat other people with respects, talks incessantly, avoids working, and obsesses over men. Most troublingly of all to Rachel, Beth gets away with all of this in part because she knows that she can use her disability as an excuse. This creates a difficult dilemma for her family: how can they determine when Beth sincerely doesn't know better, and when she's faking it?

Meanwhile, at home, Beth loudly insists on getting everything her way. Her dad nicknames her "the Sheriff," and she loves it—she starts calling herself "the Sheriff" and using it as a justification for doing whatever she wants. She also becomes obsessed with a young salesman who works for the company. One day, after fighting with her brother Max, she disappears into the winter day without a coat. Her dad finds her three miles away, trying to walk from Pennsylvania to find the salesman in Queens, where he lives. He picks her up in the car—and "the Sheriff" immediately demands to change the music.

Beth's erratic behavior starts to create serious issues for her family and present serious dangers to herself. She takes advantage of her father's goodwill, because she knows that he is obligated to care for her no matter what. Yet it becomes increasingly clear that he will need more assistance—preferably professional assistance—to adequately take care of her. Thus, Beth's rebellion is only another phase of the serious family conflicts that Rachel had to endure in her childhood.

Other times in the car, Beth tells her dad about her time with her mother and stepfather in Las Vegas. But she never talks about the other "bewildering turn of events" that happens to the family: shortly after the kids move in with their father, he stumbles on their mother's name in the newspaper and learns that she's living just a half-hour away. She's single again and working as a librarian, but she hasn't bothered to contact her children. After learning about this, Laura, Max, and Rachel are furious for years. But Beth seems to forget. One night, when she and her dad get lost on their way home, she declares that, even if they don't make it home, "at least we have each other."

When Rachel's mother moves nearby, this troubles the family even more because it strongly suggests that she is choosing *to have no contact with her kids, when she easily could—rather than her abusive husband* forcing *her to avoid them, as they assumed. Beth's comment that "at least we have each other" might seem ironic, given how much she has tested her father's patience, but it also illustrates the value of truly unconditional family relationships.*

28. OCTOBER: THE HUNK

In the present, while they wait in the bus shelter, Beth tells Rachel about Cliff, a new driver who races cars in his spare time. He's her new favorite, even more than Rodolpho, because he has a Mustang, treats Beth well, and is "*fine*-looking." But Rachel thinks about all of the men Beth has had crushes on. She always obsesses over them, which drives them away.

Rachel acknowledges that it's challenging for her and most of the people she knows to think of Beth as a romantic and sexual being. But she also emphasizes that this is a key part of taking Beth seriously as an autonomous person with the same rights and dignity as everyone else. Beth's interest in Cliff raises many of the same thorny questions as her relationship with Jesse and her earlier crush on Rodolpho. For instance, should a different standard for appropriate and inappropriate behavior be applied to Beth? And when she crosses the line, to what extent is she responsible for her behavior? What should others do when Beth starts to fixate on a driver who will likely never reciprocate her feelings?

The bus drivers have also started to run out of patience—especially Claude, who has started telling Beth that she ought to get a job. Beth talked about Claude's comments with Cliff, then told Claude that Cliff doesn't think she should have to work. Beth and Claude don't talk anymore. The Halloween song "The Monster Mash" comes on in the bus shelter, and Beth sings along, as always. She pulls out a Mountain Dew for Cliff and gets on his bus. Suddenly, Rachel is scared: she sees the past repeating itself.

Rachel and the bus drivers are frustrated about Beth's seeming inability to change. While Rachel's internet research taught her that people with developmental disabilities can change, if they get significant time and support, Rachel wonders whether Beth will ever reach this stage. Specifically, she worries that Beth will continue to mistreat and alienate people because she will never get around to acknowledging their rights or feelings.

Chatty, good-looking Cliff tells Rachel about the "grudge" races he drives in on Saturdays. They're like drag races, held on the local racetrack. Beth tells Rachel about Cliff's green Mustang, and Cliff jokes about Beth flirting with him. Beth replies that she's already with Jesse, and just trying to set Cliff up with Olivia. Rachel remembers that Beth is doing the same thing with her and Rick. Beth prattles on about Mountain Dew, her conflicts with the driver Albert, and the drivers' lounge. The critical voice in Rachel's head screams, "*Damn it Beth, shut up!*"

Rachel can already see the past repeating itself: Beth is obliviously blathering on about things that her audience plainly doesn't care about. She hasn't become any more considerate or respectful, despite everyone else's best efforts to help her change. This leads Rachel to worry that all her dedication, effort, and patience have been for nothing—which, in turn, tries her patience even further. In other words, she starts to lose faith in her ability to ever help Beth.

Cliff explains that his mother used to race cars and his grandfather was a mechanic, so he grew up with a love of driving, which eventually led him to his bus-driving job. Beth cuts off his story to talk about how drivers and passengers are mean to her. Rachel tries and fails to keep Beth on topic, and she starts to understand why so many people can find Beth intolerable: "She *is* so loud. And she talks *all the time*. About *nothing*. […] Over and over and *over*." In fact, Rachel and Beth's dad started to hate driving to work with Beth for the same reason.

Cliff loves driving buses for very different reasons from all of the other drivers whom Rachel has met so far. For the rest, their primary motivation is serving or connecting with others, and actually operating the vehicle is secondary. But for Cliff, it's the other way around. Needless to say, Rachel finds Cliff's story far more interesting than Beth's—and her frustrations continue to mount. She wonders how to balance her empathy for Beth with her empathy for all the people who have to deal with Beth on a day-to-day basis. Unfortunately, as with most of her dilemmas, there's still no clear answer—Rachel still doesn't have the "guide to being a good sister."

Cliff tells Beth to chill out—she stops talking for a second, then starts up again. Rachel is furious and nearly screams at Beth, but she catches herself and walks to the back of the bus instead. She wishes that she could more easily accept Beth's faults and lower her expectations for Beth. Rachel and Beth stare at each other across the bus, both filled with pain. Jesse compares Beth's brain to a clock that nobody else can reset, and Rachel thinks the metaphor is apt.

Cliff and Rachel respond to Beth's worst traits in opposite ways, but neither of them gets her to recognize those traits—never mind to change. Rachel recognizes that she needs to change, too, but she understandably finds it frustrating that she must put in all the effort to build a connection with Beth, while Beth puts in little to no effort in return. Jesse's metaphor reminds Rachel of the inconvenient reality that Beth will only change when she's ready to do so.

When Beth leaves the bus to use the bathroom, Rachel takes Beth's seat. She's embarrassed to rely so much on life advice from bus drivers, but she talks to Cliff anyway. She asks how he deals with not getting something he wants. He mentions taking up bowling instead of sports in high school because of scoliosis, and he declares looking for alternatives is the only way to deal with disappointment. Meanwhile, Beth sprints past a family of five Halloween-costumed kids and boards the bus.

While Rachel isn't proud to ask Cliff for advice, the fact that she's willing to do so at all shows how far she has come since the beginning of the book—when she was far more afraid of admitting her vulnerability, especially to strangers. In fact, this is due to Beth's influence: Beth has helped Rachel become more spontaneous and shown her how much wisdom and life experience the drivers have to offer. Cliff turns out to be no exception: his anecdote shows Rachel that, rather than giving up on helping Beth, she should stay patient and look for other, more creative ways to help.

Rachel gives Beth her seat, and then she realizes what she really fears: Beth has only ever changed after "cataclysmic event[s]," and Rachel worries that Beth will never change again. Rachel also realizes how her solitary writer's life has changed since she started riding the buses. She resolves to stop being "a clock that nobody can reset."

Rachel calms down and starts to view the situation in a more objective, balanced way. She realizes that her frustration with Beth ultimately stems from her sisterly love: she doesn't want Beth to have to go through anything "cataclysmic" because she refuses to change. Rachel also realizes that Beth isn't so different from most other people—her problems are just more pronounced. In fact, if Rachel isn't willing to change, she can't fairly expect Beth to change, either.

29. OCTOBER: THE PRICE OF BEING HUMAN

For their first date, Rick takes Rachel out to a golf course on a rainy Sunday. It's closed, but Rick wants to go anyway. Rachel is relieved to see that they can carry on a conversation naturally. On their drive, Rick tells Rachel how he used to drive more luxurious intercity buses, but couldn't stand the loneliness that came with such long distances. Rick leads Rachel through the parking lot to the closed gate, which they easily climb over. Rick tells Rachel that, like Beth, she's sweet, generous, a bit innocent, and open-hearted. Rachel suggests that these qualities also get her and Beth hurt, but Rick calls this "the price you pay to be more human."

Rachel and Rick's date shows that Rachel is finally taking the lessons she has learned from Beth to heart: she is opening herself up to other people and romantic possibilities, even if this requires her to accept vulnerability along the way. Of course, Rick's comment about "the price [Rachel and Beth] pay to be more human" shows that he understands this vulnerability and respects the courage that it requires. His story about loneliness on long bus rides shows that he, like Beth, values the sense of grounded community that comes from the city bus. And his decision to tell this story suggests that he's also making an effort to sincerely open up to Rachel.

Rick and Rachel stop on a bridge over a stream and discuss romance, family, and the frustrating work of loving Beth. In the evening, they eat Indian food—which Rick hasn't tried before but ends up loving. On their drive back, Rick points out places he's lived, worked, and driven buses in the region. He and Rachel discuss self-determination, family, and the way bus drivers are viewed as important professionals in Japan. Rick drops Rachel off at Beth's apartment, and Rachel realizes that she doesn't have the pass that she needs to get in the building. She calls Beth, who comes downstairs half-asleep and lets her in. Rachel feels like she has "finally taken a step [forward]."

While Rachel and Rick's connection began with their mutual care for Beth, it has clearly grown. In fact, it has become deeper than any new relationship that Rachel has formed in the last several years, which highlights just how lonely and isolated she has been. It's unclear whether their connection will endure or lead to a relationship, but it does clearly affirm that Rachel has made the right choice by embracing her vulnerability and deliberately seeking out others for the first time in many years.

30. OCTOBER: COME HOME, LITTLE GIRL

In Rachel's senior year of college, she finally goes to a therapist, explains that she lives in a constant state of panic and anxiety, and tells the story of her family. The therapist tells her that she should contact her mother if she wants to improve. She feels like she can't, but the therapist says that she should just write down her mother's work number, so that she can call when she's ready. Rachel angrily walks out, but a few months later, she finds the number.

Rachel's therapy appointment shows how her fractured relationships with her parents have psychologically affected her for a very long time. In particular, they are the root of her struggle with relationships and fear of intimacy. Her resistance to the therapist's recommendation reveals this fear: because Rachel's mother hurt her by withdrawing, Rachel believes that reconnecting with her mother would amount to forgiving someone who does not deserve forgiveness, and then open her up to being hurt again.

Later, at her first job, Rachel sees a newspaper ad for an Osmonds concert and decides to take Beth. At the concert, Beth is delighted and sings along to every song, while Rachel notices how the whole Osmond family performs together in harmony. Meanwhile, the family dog Ringo is getting older. One day, he starts coughing up blood and dies.

Rachel and Beth's life goes on without their mother. Rachel again takes on a maternal role in her relationship with Beth, taking over responsibility for Beth's happiness and well-being. Of course, she continues to act on this same instinct when she visits Beth on the buses in adulthood, but her year of visits eventually enables her to put this instinct behind her.

Rachel returns to her dreadful job as a paralegal. She feels depressed, creatively stunted, and paralyzed with fear. She also keeps thinking about her mother, remembering how she played games with the kids, taught them to write, and kissed them good night. Rachel wonders if her hatred for her mother has faded. After a major legal case, Rachel realizes that it's time to call her mother. She pulls out the phone number for the library where her mother works, calls, and asks for the reference desk. Her mother picks up. When Rachel identifies herself, her mother starts crying and says, "Thank God!" She also asks to meet.

It's telling that Rachel finally decides to contact her mother when other elements of her life start to go poorly. In particular, her draining job helps her understand that people often make bad decisions because of their life circumstances, and not because of malice. This realization helps her empathize with her mother, whom she suspects abandoned her children for this same reason. As a result, Rachel finally decides to address her interpersonal conflicts by embracing others, not withdrawing from them. And just like her date with Rick, her conversation with her mother is a success.

During the following year, Rachel and her mother start to meet. Rachel learns that her mother is lonely and full of shame about her relationship with the abusive conman. After Beth left Las Vegas, he nearly beat Rachel's mother to death—and then she escaped, too. Rachel decides that she "need[s] to learn forgiveness and compassion." As she does, she gradually feels better—and even starts writing again. Rachel and her siblings learn that their mother has suffered from depression virtually all her life, and was devastated by the divorce with their father. She never contacted her children because she was terrified that they would reject her. Eventually, even Beth reconnects with her mother.

Rachel learns to forgive her mother by understanding the circumstances that drove her mother's hurtful decisions. In fact, Rachel sees that her mother withdrew from the family for the same reason as she withdrew from her mother—because of a fear of vulnerability and abandonment. This created a vicious cycle: Rachel and Beth's mother abandoned them because of her own fear of intimacy, and this instilled the same fear in them, which led them to withdraw from relationships in their own lives. While Rachel has identified the cycle and reconnected with her mother, her history of failed relationships shows that she still hasn't fully managed to end this cycle. Still, she has learned to gradually fight the cycle through forgiveness, connection, and reconciliation—something that she also hopes Beth will learn to do in her daily life.

31. NOVEMBER: THE GIRLFRIEND

In the present, Beth and the driver Melanie chat about Ricky Martin and the Backstreet Boys, cracking up like teenaged girls on the otherwise empty bus. Melanie is married and has kids, but she still enjoys these chats with Beth. On a long stretch of rural highway, they talk about Will Smith and the song "It's Raining Men" while Rachel sits pensively behind them. She remembers playing with her own friends as a teenager and realizes that friendship is the most important ingredient of a happy life.

Beth's friendship with Melanie is totally unlike her relationships with the other drivers: it's based on the kind of lighthearted jokes that Rachel has always seen Beth make but has seldom seen her share with anyone else. Meanwhile, Rachel's internal monologue makes it clear that she yearns for the same kind of close friendship that Beth and Melanie share, which she essentially lost after her breakup with Sam.

While Beth and Melanie talk about Cliff's looks, Rachel gazes at her own reflection in the window. She sees failure, terror, and self-pity written on her face. Realizing that she's never seen Beth express self-pity, Rachel decides to try to overcome her own. When Rodolpho tells Rachel that he's interested in trying out another career, Rachel suggests acting, and she helps him rehearse for an audition at the local community theater. When Jacob befriends a passenger with advanced cancer, Rachel accompanies him to see her at the hospital. On her bus, Melanie tells Rachel and Beth about a friend who died in a car accident. She says that friendship is so important: people should "give while [they] can."

In this moment of crisis, Rachel finally recognizes the root of her problems and resolves to take action. Specifically, just like Beth only changes because of "cataclysmic event[s]," Rachel only decides to change because she sees the terrifying consequences of failing to do so: going down the same ill-fated path as her mother. She decides to prioritize her relationships, so she starts giving back to the people who have helped her so much over the past year, in whatever way she can. She takes active steps to form reciprocal, caring relationships with the other drivers, just like she already has with Rick.

Over the following weeks, other bus drivers start asking Rachel about their problems, like failing marriages, career choices, and going back to school. Meanwhile, Rachel keeps seeing Rick. They trust each other and love spending time together, but Rachel doesn't want to take things further yet because she still isn't totally over her breakup with Sam. She wonders if "we are all Beths, boarding other people's life journeys, or letting them hop aboard ours."

Rachel learns firsthand how connection begets connection: when she reaches out to help a few people, word naturally spreads, and before she knows it, she finds herself as a core figure in a broader community. Moreover, by opening up to herself and exploring her feelings with Rick, she finally admits the real reason she has been avoiding love and romance for the last four years: she still misses Sam. Finally, with her comment that "we are all Beths," Rachel summarizes how riding the buses has taught her to value relationships and community above all else.

32. NOVEMBER: THE EIGHTEENTH HOLE

By the time Rachel and her siblings are in their twenties, Rachel is writing a book, Laura is succeeding in advertising, and Max is in law school. But Beth spends all of her time watching television in her father's basement. The whole family worries about what she should do. Rachel and Beth's father has moved to rural Pennsylvania with his new wife, a professor, and there's nothing for Beth to do there—unless she can ride the bus downtown on her own. But everyone thinks this would be too dangerous. Beth's father's company shut down, so Beth doesn't have a job anymore. Her father also doesn't think that it would be right to send her to a group home.

Beth's developmental disability separates her from her siblings and affects her life path more and more as she grows up. Eventually, by the time she's a young adult, it's clear that her life will not look like her siblings', and that she will need special accommodations in order to succeed. Of course, it's unclear what success even means for someone like Beth, which is why her early twenties presented such a challenging dilemma for her and her family. Ultimately, the self-determination principle is important precisely because it resolves this dilemma by giving people with disabilities control over their own lives.

Meanwhile, Rachel and Beth's mother marries a kind, generous factory worker, who helps her work through her fears about Beth. She's primarily worried about Beth's obesity and terrible diet. Then, she and her husband both lose their jobs, and they move away to North Carolina.

Rachel and Beth's mother shows how people can overcome even the worst fear and trauma by building supportive, loving connections with others. In fact, her healing process closely resembles the way Rachel heals over the course of this book by connecting with Beth and the bus drivers.

Rachel and Beth's father signs Beth up for a social services program called a "sheltered workshop." Soon, she gets a job. But then, things take a turn for the worse. Beth starts lying about breaking things in the house, stealing money from her stepmother, and sneaking out of the house to meet friends. The workshop's leaders complain that she is causing serious trouble. She enjoys causing mischief, and she knows that because of her disability, others don't hold her totally responsible for it. Her siblings all feel lost when dealing with her. None of them wants to be stuck supporting her, but all of them feel guilty that they're unable to.

Beth's job and workshop offer an alternative to her old lifestyle of watching TV at home. This is an example of how people with disabilities can flourish and contribute to society if they are able to participate in activities specifically adapted to their needs. However, Beth's case also shows that not all people with disabilities will benefit from the same kinds of services. Thus, the government must provide a wide range of viable work and lifestyle alternatives to people with disabilities, so that they can choose. This again demonstrates why self-determination is so important: people with disabilities must have the right to choose which services they truly want and need.

Rachel and Beth's father eventually asks Rachel, Laura, and Max to each care for Beth one weekend per month. Rachel wants to, but she tells her father that she can't. He admits that her siblings also said no, and Rachel realizes that she has profoundly let down her family. Eventually, Rachel and Beth's father finds Beth a place in a group home. But Beth doesn't like it—especially because she has to share her apartment. When Rachel visits, she feels a mix of pity, guilt, and relief. On their way out for ice cream, one of Beth's roommates "accidentally" slams into Beth's foot with the vacuum. Beth barely enjoys her ice cream or the round of mini golf they play afterward.

Rachel's sense of responsibility toward Beth conflicts with her own needs—Rachel knows that no matter what she chooses to do, she will have to sacrifice something deeply important to her. Thus, just like during her year riding the buses with Beth, she feels guilty because there is no "guide to being a good sister." The group home is one possible solution to her family's need to balance their own well-being with Beth's, but Rachel clearly sees that it is far from the best solution. In particular, Beth doesn't want to live a segregated life, surrounded by other people with similar disabilities—instead, she wants to participate in a broader, more diverse community.

During her first three years in the group home, Beth eventually learns to take the bus to her workshop, makes some friends (including Jesse), and starts to talk in a different dialect, like the other people in her program. But in her fourth year, she quits her workshop and starts spending almost all her time watching TV. She no longer talks about anything else or takes an interest in her family members' lives. She stops seeing her mom and dad, and Rachel feels her critical "dark voice" latching onto all of Beth's failures and imperfections.

The group home certainly helps Beth grow and develop some skills, but she loses motivation once she starts to feel that there is no alternative to living there. At that point, she withdraws from other people and the world, much like Rachel after her breakup or their mother after her abusive relationship with the conman. Thus, it's clear that Beth needs a change in her life, so that she can build genuine relationships with other people and find a sense of purpose beyond her TV screen.

The next year, when Beth is 32, she decides that she wants to live alone. The family worries about her safety, but she insists anyway. Jesse and the social services agency help her move into an apartment, and she immediately sells most of her furniture.

Beth's decision forces her family to confront the challenges of self-determination for the first time. Just like Rachel throughout her year with Beth, the family struggles to weigh Beth's happiness and autonomy against her safety.

While Rachel and Sam face deep relationship issues and break up, Rachel starts falling out of touch with Beth. Max reports that Beth has started riding buses, and Rachel and Beth start trading **letters**. Max visits Beth every month with his family, while Laura visits once a year, and Beth's mother even less. Their relationships are all awkward and full of conflict. Beth and her dad live in the same city, and he often sees her riding the bus right past his house, but she never gets off.

As everyone in Rachel's family builds their own individual lives, they start withdrawing from one another. In fact, they simply repeat the same pattern that Rachel and Beth's mother followed after her abusive relationship, and that Beth followed during her time in the group home. Clearly, someone in the family needs to break this cycle by making a sincere effort to reconnect with everyone else.

One night, Rachel tosses and turns in bed as she struggles to come up with an idea for a magazine article. Then, she sees the full moon out her window and remembers how Beth always said, "Moon's following us!" This reminds her that some things are impossible to leave behind. She decides to visit Beth.

This scene shows how Rachel decides to take the decisive step in bringing her family back together. She identifies the deeper wisdom in Beth's longtime refrain about the moon. Of course, when she mentions the things that she can't leave behind, she's really talking about her family, their troubled history, and her relationship with Beth.

33. DECEMBER: SWANS AND WITCHES

Rachel takes Beth for a makeover, a holiday gift from Bailey and Rick, at "the most patient—and purple—salon in town." Bailey hopes that it will lift Beth's self-esteem, but Beth isn't excited for it, since it will mean taking an afternoon off from the buses. While Beth refuses to let the beauticians wax her face, she agrees to a haircut, new hair color, new lipstick, and manicure. Olivia visits and compliments Beth, who doesn't seem interested. Rachel thinks that Beth will probably reverse the makeover and go back to her old style in less than a day.

Rachel, Bailey, and Rick don't expect to change Beth's appearance or life forever through her makeover. However, they do hope that it will help her see that she can choose to live her life differently, if she wants to. But yet again, she rejects the possibility of change and affirms that she's living exactly the life she wants. Even if Beth's loved ones find her stubbornness frustrating, they know that Beth will ultimately make her own decisions, and they support those decisions for the sake of Beth's self-determination.

While Beth tells Olivia to go out with Cliff, Olivia does her monthly check-in, asking Beth if she's happy with the services she's receiving. Olivia takes a photo of Beth with Rachel, but Beth doesn't smile—she doesn't want to look glamorous. Her mood improves as soon as she gets back on the buses, and all afternoon, she's "almost silly with happiness." In particular, she's excited for the holidays: she has written **cards** and bought gifts for her family and all the bus drivers. She gives Rachel her gift, but Rachel says that she wants to wait and open it later.

The makeover does little to change Beth's mind—she has already found her look, community, and vocation in life, and she intends to stick to her choices. Meanwhile, her eager gift-giving is a reminder of how deeply she values her wide network of friends and acquaintances. Even if she lacks empathy for them when they most need it, she still clearly does care about them in her own unique way.

At night, Rachel is delighted that everything is going so well with Beth, and that they haven't had any arguments. In the morning, Beth doesn't even go to the living room and wake up Rachel, like usual. Rachel finds Beth in her bedroom, writing **thank-you cards**, with her hair back to its old style. Rachel thanks Beth for the extra bit of sleep and compliments her for writing the thank-yous. But Beth rudely replies that she had no other choice but to write the cards, because Rachel was in the living room. Beth also says that she only let Rachel keep sleeping because Jacob told her she had to. Rachel asks what's wrong, and Beth says she doesn't know.

Beth makes a concerted effort to treat Rachel more respectfully, but she also clearly resents having to do so. This is both a clear sign of progress and an indication of how hard it will be for her to genuinely change. On the one hand, Beth is finally taking concrete steps toward change, but on the other, she expects to be rewarded and accommodated during the process—which shows that she doesn't understand that she's actually supposed to change for the sake of others. *In other words, she acts as though she's being* forced *to change, rather than choosing it herself.*

Rachel asks Beth for a towel, so that she can take a shower, and Beth replies, "I can't *stop* you." Then, Rachel's "dark voice" clicks on—she's so frustrated to have spent a year trying to understand Beth, only to have this kind of childish conflict *again*. Controlling the "dark voice," Rachel calmly tells Beth that her comment wasn't kind, and that it's customary for hosts to offer their guests certain amenities like towels. Rachel asks for a towel again, but Beth gives her the same response. Rachel blurts out, "I hate you," and runs to the shower. After she gets out, she apologizes and admits that she doesn't hate *Beth*, just Beth's rude behavior. But Rachel also says that Beth doesn't seem to want her visiting, so maybe she should stop.

Rachel and Beth's argument over the towel speaks strikes at the most fundamental issues in their relationship. Namely, Rachel still needs more patience in order to cope with Beth, while Beth still simply doesn't understand that her behavior affects other people, who have rights and feelings just like her own. In fact, even after Rachel explains the general principle behind her request—that hosts have certain obligations to their guests—Beth continues to view her request as an unfair demand. Rachel starts to seriously question whether her love for Beth is strong enough to overcome this impasse, and whether anything *will ever make Beth take other people into account.*

Rachel and Beth visit Max, but they barely talk all day. Rachel realizes that this is how her time with Beth will end. It's time to return to ordinary life—Rachel feels "free at last" but also more confident and social than before. When her neighbors all light candles on the street outside her apartment, for instance, she joins them for the first time.

Rachel realizes that she may have hit the limit of her ability to help and connect with Beth. But it's impossible for her to know what's truly responsible for this limit—it could be Beth's disability, Rachel's own impatience, or their relationship as sisters. Thus, Rachel prepares to end her yearlong journey full of new wisdom and confidence but unfortunately no closer to Beth.

34. DECEMBER: FINDING THE TWIN

A few days after their fight, Beth starts sending Rachel apology **letters** and leaving her voicemail messages. At first, Rachel doesn't respond. But after two days, she decides that it's selfish and unfair to give Beth the silent treatment. She admits that her "dark voice" will always be there, and she must learn to manage it if she wants to save her relationship with Beth. When Rachel goes inside, the phone rings. It's Beth, apologizing and promising that she is "really trying to *change*." Rachel knows that Beth finds apologies difficult, and Rachel hates herself for the way she treated Beth. At the end of the call, she agrees to keep visiting. Then, she runs out to her car and gets Beth's present to her: a scrapbook.

Rachel and Beth's fight has served as the "cataclysmic event" that Beth needed in order to finally recognize that she needs to change. Rachel is still furious, but she's also secretly relieved that this fight didn't affect anyone else—particularly anyone with less sympathy and patience for Beth than she has. Meanwhile, Beth's phone call and her gift to Rachel mark a monumental step in Beth's personal growth. Specifically, these gestures show that Beth is finally moving beyond her stubborn, egotistical perspective to make genuinely selfless gestures toward her sister. Of course, the scrapbook itself represents the memories that Rachel and Beth will share from their year riding the buses, which is finally coming to a close.

35. DECEMBER: IZ GONNA BE ALL RIGHT

The book flashes back to when Rachel is driving to ride the buses with Beth for the very first time. She passes a familiar stretch of highway—years before, she was driving here with Sam and Beth when smoke started coming out of her car. They pulled over, got out, and ran to a patch of grass a safe distance away. While Sam returned to the car to wait and see what would happen, Beth and Rachel sat on the grass, leaning on one another. "*Iz gonna be all right*," said Beth.

*In this scene, like when she told her father "at least we have each other" when they got lost on their way home, Beth ends up serving as the voice of reason during a crisis. In this way, Beth's disability is really like a superpower: it allows her to see basic truths that other people overlook precisely when they most need them. Of course, Rachel uses this chapter's brief anecdote to symbolize her reconciliation with Beth after their fight. "*Iz gonna be all right*" is a way of saying that Rachel and Beth will always work through their problems together—even if they grow distant at times, their love will reunite them. Nothing can ever destroy their sisterly bond.*

36. JANUARY: BEYOND THE LIMITS OF THE SKY

In the present, Rachel drives to Beth's yearly care planning meeting. She leaves early so that she can take her time on the way, as she passes all the places she visited during her year riding the buses. She sees Jesse on his bike, and they stop to chat in a parking lot. Jesse is training for several big summer races, and he reports that Beth is happier after undoing her makeover. Rachel offers to give Jesse some of the photos that Olivia took, but Jesse says no—pictures of Beth always remind him of when Beth first moved into her apartment and was terribly lonely. "You're a good man," says Rachel, and Jesse replies that he tries his best in life. They say goodbye, and Rachel drives downtown.

Rachel's year will end where it began: at the annual meeting where Beth and her aides reflect on the year behind them and plan for the year ahead. Knowing that it's her last scheduled visit to Beth, Rachel also takes the time to reflect on the people she has met, the places she has seen, and the troubles that she has overcome in the last year. Clearly, she has grown from her experience even more than Beth has. And Jesse—the other most important figure in Beth's life—is a fitting person for her to meet first. While Beth now lives autonomously and makes her own decisions, Rachel still very much feels like she's passing responsibility for Beth's safety and happiness into Jesse's hands—and also that there's perhaps nobody better suited for the job.

Rachel realizes that she's never seen Beth's melancholy side—but Jesse clearly has. Yet it makes sense that Beth would hide this from her big sister. After all, sisterhood both unites and divides them. As she drives through downtown, Rachel remembers all the times that she has stopped with Beth there—and then she sees Beth at the bus stop. Rachel rolls down her window, but Beth is too busy singing and dancing to her radio to even notice.

Rachel's reflections on Beth's personality again remind her that no matter how much she loves and wants to help Beth, Beth's fate is ultimately in her own hands. After all, during her year of visits, Rachel has really only briefly dropped into Beth's independent, autonomous life. Beth's wild song and dance represent this independence, and Rachel is both disillusioned and relieved to see that Beth simply doesn't need her.

The meeting is in Beth's apartment, and Vera is absent because she recently had a stroke. Rachel worries about what will happen to Vera—and what will happen to Beth once her caregivers move on or retire. Rachel decides that, between herself and the bus drivers, they'll manage to take care of Beth. Then, she starts to wonder what will happen if she dies before Beth. She doesn't know if someone else in the family will be willing and able to take over. Even if there's nobody left at all, Rachel decides, Beth will adjust—like she always has, her whole life.

While Beth can clearly flourish without Rachel around, she still needs a community and support services in order to live a full, autonomous life. As Rachel points out here, these services aren't a one-and-done accomplishment—instead, they require a continuous investment of time and public resources over people's lifetimes. This is another reason that public policy is so crucial to determining whether people with disabilities manage to fulfill their potential.

The meeting covers Beth's finances and health, and this makes Rachel start worrying again. Beth is taking even worse care of herself than she did before. For instance, she doesn't want to pick up prescriptions, and she forgets to use her eyedrops. Throughout the whole meeting, Beth glances at the clock—she's eager to get back to the buses. Rachel wonders if Beth's "love of life" is the only thing that will ever convince her to care for her health. Meanwhile, the caregivers debate how much they can control Beth's spending while preserving her right to self-determination. None of them fully knows how to apply the rules, and Rachel admits that she also still struggles with the idea of self-determination.

Rachel still agrees with self-determination in theory, but even after spending a whole year working Beth and her care team, she continues to worry about the principle in practice. Since Beth struggles to understand the connection between her actions today and her health in the future, she ends up sacrificing her health (and her future autonomy) for the sake of her whims in the present. Of course, Beth's team also understands this: they emphasize that self-determination is a guiding norm, not a formula. Self-determination doesn't create a pre-approved list of acceptable decisions and behaviors for people like Beth—instead, Beth's team has to apply the principle to each individual situation.

The meeting ends just like the year before: Beth hopes to visit Disney World with Jesse and see her niece and nephew, but she isn't interested in classes, organizations, or a job. Beth gets up and ends the meeting; she has to catch Melanie's bus. Everyone takes the elevator downstairs, and Rachel thanks Beth's caregivers.

The end of Beth's meeting makes it even clearer that regardless of Rachel's worries, Beth will continue to live her own happy, autonomous, self-determined life. Beth's time with Rachel has certainly helped her decide to try to change some things about her life, but her vocation just isn't one of them.

Rachel follows Beth to the curb and asks whose bus they're going to ride, but Beth tells her that her year of riding is over. Rachel asks if Beth doesn't want her to ride, and as usual, Beth replies, "I don't *kno-oh*." Rachel feels a complicated mix of emotions. Then, Melanie's bus approaches. Beth invites Rachel to join her, but Rachel decides not to. Beth boards and tells Rachel, "You're *wee-ard*." Rachel replies, "so are you," and then the bus leaves. Rachel stands on the corner, watching it drive into the distance.

Beth and Rachel both know that it's time for them to separate, but both also want to continue riding together. This shows that despite all their conflicts and frustrations, they have successfully rebuilt their relationship and reached a place of mutual understanding. When they both point out the other's weirdness, they are accepting that some of their differences might never be reconciled. But they're also affirming that they respect each other's right to make their own decisions in life, even if they don't necessarily understand these decisions.

Then, Rachel gets into her own car and drives to Rick's house. He's home, and he's delighted to see her. They drive around the city and talk for hours, laughing and enjoying themselves. In the afternoon, he takes her up to the top of a mountain, where they get an expansive view over the whole city. In the distance, Rachel sees several buses driving through the streets. She remarks that each one contains its own miniature world, but they're all connected together.

Rachel's visit to Rick puts both a literal and a symbolic end to her year of visiting Beth—thus, in this closing scene, Rachel and Beth follow their own separate paths forward in life. But Rachel doesn't just go back to her old, lonely life as a writer—instead, she takes the lessons she has learned from her time with Beth with her. Indeed, the very fact that she chooses to see Rick shows that she has changed. Similarly, her remark about the endless network of miniature worlds in the city shows how her time with Beth has taught her to see the beauty, value, and dignity hidden in people's everyday lives—even in places as mundane and unexpected as public buses.

37. A YEAR AND A HALF LATER: THE MIRACLE MAKER

On a special afternoon in May, Rachel finds an **old card** that she had stuck behind the glass of her mirror. It's a congratulations note from Beth, Jesse, and several bus drivers. Rachel thinks about everything that has changed since her year riding the buses with Beth. For instance, Tim had another child, Rodolpho joined the police force, and Cliff became a mechanic. Rachel has continued to support Beth through the ups and downs in her life, like a recent surgery. So have Jesse, Olivia, Vera, and the drivers.

While Rachel and Beth have returned to their separate routines, the connection they built through riding the buses together clearly lives on. In fact, Rachel's life seems to have changed much more than Beth's because of their year together. She's still plugged into Beth's "traveling community," which shows that the lessons she learned in the previous chapters about the importance of relationships have stuck.

Most of all, Rachel herself has changed: through her companionship with Beth and her friendship with Rick, she discovered the courage to start dating again. This May afternoon is special because it's Rachel's wedding day—and she's marrying Sam. She called him 10 months before, and they feel like their new courtship is "a miracle." Rachel hears a bus driving by, and she realizes that, thanks to Beth, she's not afraid of love anymore.

This closing passage encapsulates how Rachel's year with Beth has transformed her. Beth taught Rachel to become more open, spontaneous, and fearless, while the bus drivers helped her accept the emotional risks that come with all relationships. In addition, by loving Beth, Rachel became more patient, generous, and willing to make sacrifices for others. Thus, loving Beth taught Rachel how to love again in general, and her marriage shows that her process of emotional rebirth is finally complete.

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