The Color of Water

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES MCBRIDE

James McBride was born to his mother Ruth McBride-Jordan just months after his father, Andrew McBride, died of lung cancer. The eighth of twelve children, McBride spent a lively but poor childhood in Brooklyn and Queens with his siblings, mother, and stepfather. McBride attended Oberlin College where he studied communications, and then Columbia University where he received a journalism degree. Although in his early professional career McBride struggle to navigate his love of writing and his love of music, he eventually found a balance between journalism and his work as a saxophonist and composer. He's written five books and two screenplays to date, and has written for *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington Post*, *Rolling Stone*, and *National Geographic*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The book spans almost seventy years, beginning in the 1920s when McBride's mother's family immigrated to the United States, part of a larger pattern of Jewish and Eastern European migration that began in the late 1800s and continued until 1924, when the United States instituted harsh immigration quotas. Ruth McBride-Jordan's childhood is deeply influenced by the scarcity of the Great Depression, as well as pervasive anti-Jewish sentiments, which were most prevalent in Germany in the early to mid 20th century, but existed in America as well. The Great Migration of African Americans from the rural south to Northern cities, which lasted from the 1910s to the 1970s, helps explain the demographics of the Brooklyn and Queens neighborhoods in which James McBride grows up, as does "white flight," or the mass exodus of wealthier white people from cities in the 1960s and 70s. This book also takes place against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, which gained traction in the 1950s and led to the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and the legalization of interracial marriage in 1967.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although James McBride's family history is unique, readers looking for other contemporary memoirs exploring their writer's racial history can try Alex Hayley's *Roots*, an exploration of his family genealogy tracing back to 18th century Africa. *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls, *The Liar's Club* by Mary Karr, and *We The Animals* by Justin Torres chronicle tumultuous childhoods and complex family dynamics like those in McBride's twelve-child household. Related fiction includes Jesmyn Ward's *Sing Unburried Sing*, which navigates between the past and present as it tells the story of a mixed-race boy coming of age on a road trip to the north, and Toni Morrison's intergenerational epic *Song of Solomon*. McBride has also written numerous other books, including his short story collection, *Five Carat Soul*, and the National Book Award winning historical fiction novel *The Good Lord Bird*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother
- **When Written:** 1982-1996
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1996
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Eastern United States
- **Climax:** Ruth's decision to leave Virginia for New York for good
- **Antagonist:** Poverty, racism, anti-Semitism, Ruth's father
- **Point of View:** First person (both James McBride and Ruth McBride-Jordan)

EXTRA CREDIT

Chronicles of Brooklyn. James McBride worked with acclaimed filmmaker Spike Lee on the 2012 film, "Red Hook Summer." The two co-wrote the film, which is the sixth in Lee's "Chronicles of Brooklyn" series, a portrayal of life in the neighborhood in which both Lee and McBride grew up.

Famous Friends. McBride is an occasional member of the band the "Rock Bottom Remainders," a musical group made up of writers and creators. His band mates have included Stephen King (*It*, *The Shining*, *The Green Mile*), Amy Tan (*The Joy Luck Club*), and Barbara Kingsolver (*The Poisonwood Bible*, *The Bean Trees*).

PLOT SUMMARY

The Color of Water takes place on two parallel timelines. In the first timeline, which spans the early 20th century up until 1957, Ruth, James McBride's mother, tells the story of her family's immigration to America, her childhood, and her early adulthood in New York City. In the second timeline, told in alternating chapters, James tells his own life story, beginning in 1957, and ending with the book's release in 1996.

Following the narrative chronologically, the book begins in Poland where Ruth's Orthodox Jewish parents meet and marry. They immigrate to the United States, where her father, Tateh, works as a traveling rabbi before settling down and opening his own general store in Suffolk, Virginia. Tateh and Mameh, Ruth's mother, have three children, Ruth (born Ruchel, which is Americanized to Rachel), Gladys (who goes by Dee-Dee), and Sam. Although Mameh is loving and devoted, Tateh is cruel, emotionally abusing his entire family and sexually abusing Ruth.

Ruth's childhood is difficult. At home she must deal with her demanding father and work in his store, while in Suffolk she must deal with an apathetic or openly anti-Semitic public. She has only one friend, Frances, but Ruth doesn't feel comfortable confiding in her. As a teenager Ruth falls in love and becomes pregnant by a local black boy named Peter. Her mother sends her to New York City where she gets an abortion, and Ruth is devastated to return home only to discover that Peter has impregnated a black girl and is marrying her. Ruth is upset at Peter, but she is more upset at a Southern culture that would not let her marry someone she loved because he was of a different race.

After she graduates high school Ruth moves to New York City, where she meets and falls in love with her first husband, changes her name from Rachel to Ruth, and converts to Christianity. Andrew Dennis McBride is a black man, and Ruth chooses to marry him instead of remaining with her white family, who disapprove of her interracial relationship. Ruth and Dennis have eight children together (the youngest being the author James) before Dennis dies suddenly of lung cancer. Ruth has lost the love of her life and at first has difficulty going on, but she eventually marries an older man named Hunter Jordan, who raises her children as his own, adding four more to make an even dozen.

James remembers a chaotic but generally happy childhood. He never met his biological father, but sees Hunter as his Dad. However, Hunter dies when James is fourteen, and the whole family begins to fall apart. Ruth is too upset to function, and James represses his feelings with drugs, alcohol, and petty crime. Ruth is unable to reform him, so she sends her son to Louisville, Kentucky, where he spends a summer hanging out with drunks on a Corner, realizing in the process that if he cannot get his act together he will end up in jail or dead. James does his best to make up for his lost years, and eventually goes on to study at Oberlin and Columbia University. He works alternately as a journalist and a musician, eventually quitting his job at a national newspaper to write a book on his white mother's life and his family history.

The final chapters of the book chronicle James' uncovering of Ruth's past. Although she had actively blocked her former self from her mind, James helps her reconcile young Jewish Rachel with mother of twelve Ruth, reconnecting her with old friends, her old hometown, and her old self.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

James McBride – The author and one of the narrators of *The Color of Water*. James is Ruth McBride-Jordan's eighth child, son of Andrew Dennis McBride Sr., and stepson of Hunter Jordan Sr. James is a writer, as well as musician, and values his family, God, and music above all else. James was born and raised in New York City with his eleven siblings, spending his early years in Red Hook, Brooklyn and Queens. As a mixed-race child put alternately into all-black or all-white environments, James struggled with his racial identity. He understood that his father was black, but for a long time only knew that his mother was different from the black mothers of his friends, not understanding her racial and cultural background. Although James was a straight-A student for much of his childhood, after the death of his father he began to act out, doing drugs, drinking, and committing petty theft during a three-year rebellious period. Like his mother, James's instinct in times of emotional turmoil is to ignore or run from the problem. Always a thoughtful, intelligent, and inquisitive child, James went to college at Oberlin and then received a journalism degree from Colombia University. In his twenties a Mother's Day profile he wrote spun out into a full-length book project, which allowed him to interview his mother and discover her colorful past and his own mixed heritage.

Ruth McBride-Jordan – One of the narrators of *The Color of Water* and James McBride's mother. She had twelve children born to two husbands, Andrew Dennis McBride Sr. and Hunter Jordan Sr. More than anything else in her life, Ruth values her children and her relationship to God. A white woman who married two black men and gave birth to twelve mixed-race children, Ruth dislikes discussing race, but nevertheless values open-mindedness and condemns bigotry. Ruth has dealt with significant trauma over the course of her life, and deals with painful emotions by locking them away in her mind and doing her best to forget about them. She was born as Ruchel Dwajra Zylska in Poland in 1921, and immigrated to the United States with her mother, father, and older brother in 1923. Her name was Americanized to Rachel Deborah Shilsky, and for the first twenty years of her life she was known as Rachel, only changing her name to the less Jewish sounding Ruth when she left home for the last time. Ruth grew up in Suffolk, Virginia, where her father Tateh was a business owner and rabbi. Her family life was tumultuous, as her father was abusive and her mother Mameh, disabled by polio as a younger woman, was unable to defend her three children. Ruth faced abuse within her family, but also anti-Semitism from the predominantly white protestant community in her Southern town. She never felt loved or cared for, and didn't feel like she belonged anywhere. Ruth eventually left her family and moved to New York City, where she met and married her first husband, Dennis. Although

she remained in touch with her birth family for a while, after her final visit in her early twenties she was entirely disowned, and her relatives sat shiva and treated her as though she had died. For much of her adult life, Ruth's past self, Rachel, was dead to her as well. She had reinvented herself as a light-skinned Christian black woman, and it wasn't until James began to pry into her history for his book that her twelve children began to understand who she really was and where she had come from.

Andrew Dennis McBride Sr. – James McBride's biological father and Ruth's first husband. He had one daughter, Jack, from a previous relationship, and eight children by Ruth. He went by Dennis instead of Andrew. His parent's only child, Dennis moved to New York to pursue a career in music. He played the violin well and could sing, but was unable to make any money. He settled for a job in Aunt Mary's leather factory, which is how he met Ruth. A devoted Christian, Dennis studied for and received a divinity degree and became a preacher late in life. Together with Ruth he founded the New Brown Memorial Church in Red Hook.

Hunter Jordan Sr. – James McBride's stepfather and Ruth's second husband. Hunter was half black and half Native American. He lead a rich life before marrying Ruth, living in Virginia, Chicago, and Detroit, and running an illegal distillery out of his Brooklyn apartment. He treated Ruth's eight children by Andrew McBride as his own, and was looked up to as "Daddy" by the youngest. He was an old-school man, always well dressed, and uninterested in small talk or discussing issues of race.

Mameh / Hudis Shilsky – Ruth's mother, whose full name is Hudis Shilsky. She was born in 1896 in Poland to a wealthy Orthodox Jewish family. Polio paralyzed half of her body, and left her in poor health for the rest of her life. She never learned to speak English, and instead relied on Ruth to translate for her during her decades in America. She was in many ways the perfect, devoted Jewish wife, cooking and cleaning for her husband, but Tateh neither loved nor respected her, and their marriage was deeply troubled.

Tateh / Fishel Shilsky – Ruth's father, whose full name is Fishel Shilsky. He was born in Russia but crossed the border to Poland to marry Mameh before immigrating to the United States. He was an Orthodox rabbi and a shopkeeper, but more than anything he was a cruel, greedy man. Tateh molested Ruth and verbally abused her siblings and his wife. He cared more about his own wealth and wellbeing than anyone else's, and seemed to value his family because of the free labor they provided. He was also a racist, and although he sold goods to the black community in Suffolk he despised his black customers, and disowned Ruth for marrying a black man.

Gladys "Dee-Dee" Shilsky – Ruth's younger sister. The smartest of her siblings and the best performing in school, Ruth believed Dee-Dee to be their father's favorite. Of all her siblings, Dee-Dee was the only one born in the United States. She was emotionally closed off, but opened up to Ruth to ask her to stay in Suffolk with the family instead of returning to New York City, a promise Ruth broke, destroying her relationship with Dee-Dee forever.

Peter – Ruth's first love, a young black man who Ruth met in her father's store. It's unclear if Peter was truly as kind and loving as Ruth remembers him, or if Ruth was so starved for affection that she saw him as perfect. Ruth eventually became pregnant by Peter, and traveled to New York for an abortion. When she returned, she was upset to learn that he'd gotten another girl pregnant, and was planning on marrying her.

Frances Moody – Ruth's only childhood friend from Suffolk. Frances wasn't Jewish, but unlike many people in the community, she didn't care what religion Ruth was. She was gentle, quiet, and kind, and did her best to make Ruth feel welcome in her house and in her town. The two reconnect decades later when James takes his mother back to Suffolk.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sam Shilksy – Ruth's older brother. Tateh was harder on Sam than on his daughters, and as a result Sam ran away from home earlier than either of his sisters, moving to Chicago and then joining the Army in World War II, where he was killed.

Bubeh – Mameh's mother. She was elderly and diabetic. She was also the only one in Mameh's family who was kind to Ruth and treated her as a person instead of an obligation or burden.

Zaydeh – Mameh's father, who died when Ruth was a young a girl.

Andrew Dennis McBride Jr. – James's oldest sibling. Goes by Dennis.

Rosetta McBride – James's second oldest sibling, and his oldest sister.

William "Billy" McBride – James's third oldest sibling.

David McBride – James's older brother.

Helen McBride-Richter – James's older sister.

Richard McBride – James's older brother. Goes by Richie.

Dorothy "Dotty" McBride-Wesley – James's older sister.

Kathy Jordan – James's younger sister.

Judy Jordan – James's younger sister.

Hunter Jordan Jr. – The third youngest of James's siblings.

Henry Jordan – The second youngest of James's siblings.

Ruth Jordan — The youngest of James's siblings.

Jacqueline "Jack" Jordan — Andrew Dennis McBride's daughter from a relationship prior to his marriage to Ruth. The wife of Big Richard.

Big Richard — Jack's husband.

Rev. Owens – The minister at the local church during James's childhood. Rev. Owens had difficulty reading, and gave stuttering sermons. He was also a barber, and cut many of Ruth's children's hair.

Walter – One of Hunter Jordan's brothers.

Garland – One of Hunter Jordan's brothers.

Henry – One of Hunter Jordan's brothers.

Clemy – One of Hunter Jordan's cousins who lived down in Richmond.

Rodney – A childhood friend of James.

Pete – A childhood friend of James.

Aunt Laura – Mameh's sister. She and her husband Paul owned apartment buildings in the Bronx and Harlem. She was the richest of all her siblings.

Paul Schiffman –Aunt Laura's husband, and Ruth's uncle.

Aunt Bernadette – Mameh's sister.

Aunt Mary – Mameh's sister. She owned a leather factory where Ruth worked some summers, and where Ruth eventually met her first husband, Dennis. Mary was mean to Ruth, but ran her business efficiently, which Ruth sees as a forgivable root cause of her cruelty.

Uncle Isaac – Aunt Mary's husband. A shoemaker.

Aunt Rhonda – Mameh's sister. She was separated from the family, and no longer speaks to her sister Berndadette, although Ruth never discovers why.

Aunt Betsy – Mameh's youngest sister.

Beanie – One of James's friends as a teenager. Together they drank, smoked, snatched purses, and robbed trains.

Marvin – One of James's friends as a teenager. Together they drank, smoked, snatched purses, and robbed trains.

Chink – One of James's friends as a teenager. Together they drank, smoked, snatched purses, and robbed trains.

Pig – One of James's friends as a teenager. Together they drank, smoked, snatched purses, and robbed trains.

Bucky – One of James's friends as a teenager. Together they drank, smoked, snatched purses, and robbed trains.

Joe – One of James's friends as a teenager. Together they drank, smoked, snatched purses, and robbed trains.

Chicken Man — An alcoholic who lived in Louisville, Kentucky, and spent most of his day on the Corner outside the liquor store. James befriended him during his summers in Louisville. Although he was often intoxicated, when sober Chicken Man offered James helpful life advice.

Pike — A good friend of Big Richard. He and James stole car batteries together during James's summers in Kentucky.

Nash McBride — Andrew McBride's father.

Etta McBride — Andrew McBride's mother.

Mr. Stein — A man Ruth's Aunt Mary had an affair with.

Rocky — A barbershop owner and a pimp who hired Ruth as a manicurist before beginning to groom her for prostitution.

Hal Schiff — A music teacher who organized the American Youth Jazz Band in which James participated.

C. Lawler Rodgers — James's music teacher at Du Pont High School.

David H. Dawson — An older white man who sponsored James's American Youth Jazz Band trip. He and his wife Ann Fox Dawson employed James one summer.

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Pearl — A black woman who worked for the Dawson family.

Curtis Ware — A family friend of Dennis. Husband of Minnie Ware.

Minnie Ware — A family friend of Dennis. Wife of Curtis Ware.

Aunt Candis — Dennis's aunt.

Eddie Thompson — An older black man from Suffolk who remembered Ruth and her family when James visited the town in the 1980s and 90s.

Rev. Abner Brown — The reverend at the Metropolitan Baptist Church who married Ruth and Dennis, and helped Ruth convert to Christianity. The New Brown Memorial Church's namesake.

Linwood Bob — James's cousin who closely resembled James's father, Andrew Dennis McBride.

Karone — Formerly "Karen." A model James briefly dated.

Stephanie — James McBride's wife.

Halina Wind – A Jewish woman who in 1942 fled her Polish hometown and spent fourteen months hiding from Nazis in the sewers of a neighboring city. Her son David Lee Preston and James became best friends in their thirties.

David Lee Preston – A Jewish man who befriended James at the *Wilmington News Journal* where they both work. The story of his mother Halina's escape from Nazi occupied Poland helped inspire James to dig more deeply into his mother's family history.

Rondee – David Lee Preston's wife.

The Sheffer Family – A Jewish family in Suffolk that helps James on his journey to uncover Ruth's past.

The Jaffe Family – A Jewish family in Suffolk that helps James on his journey to uncover Ruth's past.

Helen Weintraub – A Jewish woman from Suffolk who helps James on his journey to uncover Ruth's past.

TERMS

Black Panthers – Black Panthers were members of the Black Panther Party, a group that began as a neighborhood patrol protecting black citizens from police, before growing into a national movement with a ten-point plan for black liberation. These points included demands for employment and housing, an exemption from the draft, an end to police brutality, and a release of all African Americans from prison.

Black Power – A term for racial pride among African Americans, initially used in conjunction with the Civil Rights Movement. However, in contrast to the Civil Rights Movement the Black Power Movement started to shift its focus towards racial segregation and black superiority, whereas Civil Rights was interested in equal rights and integration.

Kosher – Jewish dietary law. There are varying levels of strictness for those who keep kosher, with Orthodox Jews observing the strictest laws. Keeping kosher always requires abstaining from certain foods like pork and shellfish. The law also includes rules about keeping separate dishware for milk and meat, as well as rules regarding how to properly slaughter and prepare meat.

Ku Klux Klan – A Southern hate group (which has since spread through the country) that formed in the aftermath of the Civil War. The Klan is a white supremacist organization which intimidates and attacks groups it opposes. The Klan is most famous for its treatment of Black Americans, but it also actively opposes Jewish people, Catholic people, and immigrants.

Mulatto – An antiquated, often-offensive term for a person of mixed race, generally someone with one white and one black parent. Although this term was originally descriptive, it is now usually considered a slur. The archetype of the "tragic mulatto" is a fictional character that is unable to live a full happy life because he or she feels torn between two worlds and two races.

Rabbi – The simplest definition of a rabbi is a Jewish person who teaches the Torah. These teaching duties can also be expanded to include preaching to congregations and serving as the keeper of the synagogue. In Orthodox Judaism rabbis are always male, but in reformed congregations they can be female as well.

Sabbath – *Shabbat* in Jewish tradition: the day of rest. In Christianity, this day is Sunday, but in Judaism it is Friday at sundown to Saturday at sundown. On the Sabbath Orthodox Jews are not allowed to do any work, a category of behavior which includes using electricity, driving, and lighting fires.

Shiva – A Jewish mourning tradition. Following a funeral, the person's immediate family sits and mourns for seven days, either in their home or that of a close relative. Traditions vary by family and denomination, but generally the family does not work or celebrate during this week, they cover all mirrors, and they sit on the ground or on low stools. In this book, **Ruth**'s family sits shiva symbolically, to demonstrate that she is as good as dead to them.

Yom Kippur – Arguably the most important Jewish holiday, Yom Kippur is the "Day of Atonement," on which Jewish people fast and atone for their behavior in the previous year. Together with Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), which falls seven days earlier, Yom Kippur bookends the High Holy Days.

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.

RACE AND RACISM

Almost every scene in *The Color of Water* takes place against a backdrop of anti-Black racism in America. Much of the book occurs during the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights Movement, a time where black Americans were regarded as second-class citizens and policed through a series of racist laws and restrictive social norms. This affects the opportunities, self-esteem, and even human rights of the central black characters, but also affects characters like Ruth, who is white but lives in close proximity to blackness, and as a result must deal with bigotry from those who do not understand why a white woman would marry a black man and raise a mixed-race family. The text critiques racist attitudes, but also explores the internalized racism of some of its black characters, and the ways in which black and white people can overcome strict racial boundaries through love and friendship.

Blackness is a source of pride for Ruth's children, but also a source of trauma and confusion. James's older siblings are invested in the Black Power Movement, many having their own private revolutions, some even going so far as to paint local statues in the red, green, and black of Black liberation. But their visible blackness also makes them targets at school, where their white teachers round down their scores, and in the streets, where they are arrested at astounding rates. James's brother Richie, a college student home for the summer, is arrested because he has a lot of money in his pocket and the police assume that because he is black and carrying cash he must be a drug dealer. Although he is guilty of nothing but walking down the street at the wrong time, Richie must go to court. Another brother, David, who is a doctoral student at Colombia at the time, is arrested in Delaware for an illegal U-turn. These encounters enrage Ruth, and convince her children that with the exception of their mother, white people are at best unreliable and at worst actively dangerous.

Ruth also deals with anti-black racism in her love life, as she attempts to date and marry black men. Her first relationship with a boy named Peter ends with an abortion, because she knows she cannot marry him and the town will not accept them (and Peter could even be killed if their relationship was made public). Ruth's relationship with her first husband is then so offensive to her family that they entirely cut her out of their lives. Her father explicitly tells her that if she marries a black man there's no point in ever coming home again. When Ruth eventually does marry Dennis, her family sits shiva and acts as though she has literally died. Unfortunately, her mixed-race marriage garners negative attention from people of all races. A group of white men try to kill her and Dennis with bottles when they're out on the street one night, and a black woman punches Ruth in the face because she disapproves of Ruth and Dennis's relationship. Although white fear of black people is the most dangerous type of racial policing in the book, many people, both black and white, strictly monitor the boundaries of their race and see interracial relationships as threatening.

Still, though she is surrounded by racist and segregationist attitudes for much of her life, Ruth is not racist, and sees no reason why she should not marry and befriend people across racial lines if she loves them. Over the course of his life James, too, realizes that although it has traditionally been safer for him to affiliate more with other black people, just because a person is white doesn't mean they will discriminate against him. In high school he spends summers working for a white couple to pay off a scholarship, and he recognizes that they are genuinely interested in helping him learn, grow, and succeed musically and academically.

If *The Color of Water* is trying to say one single thing about race, its thesis is that race in America is complicated. Although racist attitudes are prevalent, and have the potential to literally end the lives of the book's black protagonists, cultural racism can be combatted on a personal level. James and Ruth have many loving, fulfilling relationships across racial lines, and Ruth raises twelve successful, self-confident mixed-race children, their existence a rebuke to the racists she encountered in her early life who couldn't fathom a white woman marrying a black man, and their success a testament to their own drive and intellect in the face of great discrimination.

OTHERNESS AND BELONGING

James and Ruth spend much of their lives feeling as though they do not belong to their immediate communities. Ruth is an outsider both in her white, Christian southern town, as well as in her birth religion of Judaism. For his part, James presents as black, but as a child senses he is not exactly like the other black children in his neighborhood. Both mother and son are constantly seeking out spaces that will give them a sense of belonging, and the project of writing *The Color of Water* is a book-length attempt to discover where each of them has come from, and as a result to become more confident in their outsider identities.

Ruth doesn't feel like a part of her white, Christian Suffolk community because she is Jewish and an immigrant. While Ruth looks white, whiteness in Suffolk more narrowly includes a subset of the population which has light skin but is also Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, an exclusive group that denies Ruth and her family the privileges and comforts generally associated with whiteness in America. As a child, Ruth's Judaism overrides much of her white privilege, and she feels like an outsider in her own hometown. She describes growing up and feeling like nobody likes her, people in the town mock her for speaking Yiddish, and even within the Jewish community she feels ostracized because her family does business with black people. Although her father's status as a rabbi should help her feel a sense of belonging, the fact that he does business with the black community shifts their social status, tainting it by association with an even more targeted minority. Further, Ruth feels disconnected from Judaism itself because she associates it with her father Tateh, who is cruel, harsh, and abusive.

As a person of mixed race, James is unsure how to be both black and white at once, and struggles to fit in for much of his youth and early adulthood. James never fully feels like he belongs to a single group of people. He feels alienated from his classmates at his predominantly white schools, but also notices that he's different from his black neighbors because of his white mother. In his neighborhoods James feels like an outsider because he registers that he is somehow not as black as his friends, but in his white schools he still feels like a "token" black person, because even though he is mixed-race, he is significantly darker than all of his classmates and he experiences anti-black racism at multiple levels. As he gets older and realizes his mother is not just light-skinned but white, James describes "something inside me, an ache I had, like a constant itch that got bigger and bigger as I grew, that told me. It was my blood, you might say, and however the notion got there, it bothered me greatly." He wants nothing more than to belong to a single group, and doesn't realize until his late thirties that he is allowed membership in more than one race and more than one culture, and he does not have to pick and choose.

James and his siblings also grow up during the Black Power era, and while Black Power is alluring, James cannot fully buy into its platform because he fears for his white mother. For example, James idolizes Black Panthers in the abstract, but lashes out at the son of one when he sees the Black Panther standing next to his mother, because he worries Ruth will be killed for her whiteness. As an adult in the newsroom, James is similarly torn between feeling black and white. He resents white men who he feels dominate the conversation and employ racist hiring practices, but he doesn't entirely identify with the black reporters either.

As an adult, James is happy to find out about his Jewish heritage. As a child he feels a certain connection with Jewish people, a connection which is solidified when he visits his mother's home in Suffolk. Although James doesn't feel fully Jewish, he feels a kinship with the Southern Jews in Virginia. He describes the Jewish people he meets there as welcoming him "as if I were one of them, which in an odd way I suppose I was." More than the religion itself, James appreciates that through it he is able to feel as though he belongs to a community.

James and Ruth spend their lives searching for a sense of belonging, and the book itself is a manifestation of this search. Ruth does not feel as though she belongs in her hometown or in her birth religion, and so does he best to distance herself from a world that does not welcome her. James, who feels unstable in his blackness, searches for a racial identity that feels right, and that feels expansive enough to hold him and his family history—his mixed-race siblings, his black father, and his white Jewish mother.

FAMILY

Family is usually a source of love and comfort, but it can also be a source of great pain. In *The Color of Water*, family means not just one's biological relations, but also a large web of friends and loved ones. Ruth's immediate family is made up of her siblings, her mother and father, and a network of aunts and uncles. Although they offer her the most basic life necessities—food, water, a place to sleep—Ruth does not feel loved or cared for by many of her blood relations. In contrast, Ruth values her assembled families, which are made up of friends, members of her church, and her husbands and their relatives who give her the love she lacked as a child. The book suggests that family at its core is about compromise and sacrifice, and the willingness to give up some personal comfort to help another in need.

Ruth's parents do not provide her with a nurturing and loving home. Her desire to leave Virginia and move to New York is partially inspired by how difficult life is with her abusive father and powerless mother. Ruth's father Tateh sexually abuses her as a child. As a result, she is terrified of him, but has no way to defend herself. He works Ruth and her siblings every day of the week, seeing them as employees to exploit more than he sees them as family. Although Mameh demonstrates her love for Ruth by keeping Ruth's pregnancy secret and silently blessing her final move to New York City, her father makes it clear he does not love or respect her at all. Ruth is therefore forced to find a new, better family, who will love her unequivocally. As a teenager and young adult, Ruth eventually decides that her obligation to her biological family is less important than her obligation to herself and her own happiness. After living in New York for a few years she briefly returns to Suffolk, but although her sister begs her to stay, Ruth knows that she cannot. Ruth, who spent her childhood "starving for love and affection," eventually seeks out a community of people who can, emotionally, give her what she needs.

After Ruth leaves home her family cuts her out of their lives. They literally shit shiva for her, which designates her as good as dead. To make up for the family she has lost, Ruth constructs a new, primarily black family. Her husband Andrew Dennis McBride and her mixed-race children become her new immediate family, and she also finds community in her church and in her neighborhoods. The one downside of having an expansive web of people she cares about means Ruth has even more people in her life she can potentially lose. Ruth treats her friends as she would her sisters or brothers, and so is almost as affected by the deaths of nonrelatives as she is by the deaths of her husbands. Still, a greater community means more support in times of trouble. After Dennis dies, Ruth returns home to find her mailbox full of checks and money from other families in her Red Hook housing complex. Although they are not related, these men and women who live nearby see Ruth and her family as part of their community, someone to be looked out for. They care about her wellbeing and the wellbeing of her children.

For James, family is the one constant, stable aspect of his life. His mother, eleven siblings, and stepfather are his whole world. Although technically four of his siblings are his half-brothers and half-sisters, and Hunter Jordan is his stepfather, he loves everyone just the same. For the combined McBride-Jordan family, what matters is that they share the same mother and that they love one another. There are hierarchies in the family based on the ages of the children, but there are no divisions based on who each child's father is. When James and his siblings are in trouble, their family is a safe, stable place to return to, and their mother's wellbeing is a constant worry that helps steer them back onto the path she has envisioned for them—one free of crime and misbehavior, and ideally one full of academic success.

In *The Color of Water*, true family is defined by love. James, his siblings, and his stepfather are all family because they love one another. In contrast, Ruth's father does not act as a family member should. He is selfish and cruel, and does not work to ensure a good life for his children. In addition to love, family is defined by sacrifice. Ruth's mother, who did truly love her, moved to the United States for her children. Ruth's grandmother also was always kind to Ruth and made herself available when Ruth needed to talk. Ruth, in turn, worked hard and did everything she could to ensure the best lives possible for her children, passing on the more positive aspects of what family means to James and his siblings.

MEMORY AND IDENTITY

Ruth McBride-Jordan sees her former self, Rachel Shilsky, as an entirely separate person. She uses her memories to divide her life in half, and attempts to

erase the earlier version of herself. Rachel Shilsky only exists in memories, and because Ruth chooses not to access these memories, Rachel essentially ceases to exist and Ruth continues on without a past. However, Ruth isn't the only one affected by her memories. Cultural memory and familial history are important for the identity formation of children, and Ruth denies her sons and daughters a key piece of their racial puzzle. James and his siblings are therefore left knowing only about their black heritage, all the while sensing that there is a hidden aspect of themselves yet to be revealed. James's identity is deeply informed by his lack of knowledge of his mother's past, and then rewritten as he uncovers her experiences with whiteness and Judaism. Suspecting but not knowing half of his racial makeup, the first thirty years of his life are partially defined by identity crises fueled largely by his half-filled-in family tree, and the years after are defined by an attempt to reconcile the two new halves of himself.

Ruth's memories dictate her identity. She chooses not to revisit her time as Rachel, a Jewish child and young adult, and as a result Rachel becomes another woman, dead to her. This allows her to pick and choose who she wants to be, but it has the side effect of denying her children the ability to feel whole. James notes that Ruth has spent decades running and "moving as if her life depended on it," and even as a child Ruth finds that running outside helped clear her mind, so it follows that she would run from her past, mentally and geographically, to escape the trauma of her youth. Ruth explains that her past self, "Rachel Shilsky is dead as far as I'm concerned. She had to die in order for me, the rest of me, to live." As a child, James has conversations with his mother where he attempts to find out about her past. She actively lies to him, telling her children she is a light-skinned black woman, only revealing that she's "dead" to her family and that her family may as well be dead, too.

Ruth represses her memory to protect herself, whether it's the memories of her husbands after they die or her life as Rachel. Although she is eventually able to think back to her childhood to help James write *The Color of Water*, in her day-to-day life she focuses on happy memories, the present, and the future. After the death of his father, James describes his mother's memory as "like a minefield, each recollection a potential booby trap, a Bouncing Betty—the old land mines the Viet Cong used in the Vietnam War that never went off when you stepped on them but blew you to hell the moment you pulled your foot away." James praises his mother's ability to navigate incredibly difficult and stressful situations, but notes that afterwards she "wipes her memory instantly and with purpose; it's a way of preserving herself. That's how she moves. Her survival instincts are incredible, her dances with fire always fun to watch."

At the end of her life, Ruth becomes more interested in preserving her memories. After a life defined by casting off old experiences and identities when they became too painful, Ruth is finally ready to record the present and begin to revisit the past. In her late sixties and seventies Ruth gets a camera and begins to document her life, using it to catch "all of her important moments." James suspects this is because she knows "that each memory is too important to lose, having lost so many before." The book itself is then an exploration of memories Ruth has repressed, memories of a girl and woman she no longer believes herself to be. Although Ruth is not interested in the book project at first, she eventually agrees to interviews, and even reconnects with old friends through James's investigations. James recognizes that his mother has changed in the forty years since she left Virginia and converted to Christianity. Where Ruth once was too close to the past to face it, she's finally ready to look back, and see her life in full.

Memories function both communally and individually. Private memories, in Ruth's case, can have an effect both on her individual life and the lives of her children. Memory is a type of self-knowledge, and so James's access to his mother's past allows him to better understand himself. Without knowing anything about their mother's past, it's difficult for Ruth's children to figure out how they fit into the world racially and culturally. In one way, then, Ruth's revealed memories give her children a sense of freedom and self-knowledge, even though for Ruth herself shedding her memories was a crucial part of her escape from a painful past. In her old age, however, Ruth has largely extricated herself from this past, and is ready to revisit her old self and share her life with her son.

RELIGION

Religion in *The Color of Water* provides the protagonists with a framework within which they are able to develop individual identities and organize their morals and values. Regardless of denomination, whether it is Orthodox Judaism or Lutheranism, religion informs the behaviors of its devotees, and by extension how they view themselves. This is clearest in Ruth's conversation from Judaism to Christianity, a change with represents not just a crisis of faith, but a complete reinvention of herself. Finding religion is frequently a metaphor for discovering a deeper personal truth; as James becomes more religious in his adulthood, he is suddenly granted insights into his mother's faith and her motivations. Similarly, James's investigations into Judaism allow him to understand his mother's past, and, by extension, his own family history.

Religion is deeply personal, and not every character experiences it in the same way. For Ruth, Judaism was oppressive and loveless, whereas Christianity gave her access to community, freedom, and divine love for the first time. Her Christian faith provided her with a support system, both holy and earthly, that helped her through her darkest times. Ruth associates Judaism with her unhappy upbringing, and the discrimination she faced as a child in her small Southern town. For James, however, Judaism is a way for him to connect with

his mother, and with the half of his family he never knew he had.

Ruth found Judaism to have "too many rules to follow, too many forbiddens and 'you can'ts' and 'you mustn'ts,'" without enough love. Although this is not the universal Jewish experience, Ruth's specific family and circumstances made Judaism unappealing for her. As an adult, James learns that because his mother was Jewish, he is technically Jewish too. Researching for his book, he feels a kinship with many of the Jewish people he encounters in Suffolk. Unlike many white people he's encountered in his life, James finds Jewish people "truly warm and welcoming" and appreciates that they treat him like a part of their community. For the first time in his life, James feels an affinity with nonrelatives who are technically white, and he appreciates how the Southern Jews of Suffolk "seemed to believe that its covenants went beyond the color of one's skin."

Ruth's conversion to Christianity coincides with her reinvention of herself from Rachel Shilsky to Ruth McBride. She is reborn through Christianity, and finds that this religion provides her with everything she's always wanted: love and community, a sense of belonging, and a reason to live. Ruth's Christian principles keep her moving forwards, even in the face of tragedy. As a child James doesn't understand his mother's faith, but knows secondhand that the Church and God make her happy, in a way nothing else in her life seems to. Church, and specifically the New Brown Memorial Baptist Church, which Ruth and Andrew Dennis McBride founded, keeps Ruth from falling apart and binds her family together through a shared religious community. Ruth continues to visit the church even when she no longer lives in the neighborhood, and it represents a constant in her life and family—a church founded by herself and her husband, in which her son eventually marries his wife. The New Brown Memorial Church then also allows James and his siblings to connect to each other, to God, to their mother, and to their deceased father.

Religion also functions as a framework through which James and his siblings can navigate their racial identities. The book's title references a central thematic question of the work: what color are the McBride-Jordan children, what color is a spirit, and what color is God? Ruth explains that a spirit has no color, and God has no color. Instead, they are "the color of water," which is colorless. James, confused about race in general and specifically where he falls on the spectrum, asks his mother if God is black or white, and "Does he like black or white people better?" His mother explains that God is colorless, and loves people of all colors equally. Later, their local preacher Rev. Owens tries to tell James and his siblings that that "Jesus is all colors," which confuses James's little brother, who has noticed that Jesus is always painted as white. As children, James and his siblings believe that if Jesus is truly all colors, he should be painted that way. Jesus's whiteness is alienating for mixed-race children, who are in desperate need of idols who either transcend or blur racial boundaries, instead of reinforcing the hierarchy they already see enacted in the wider world, where white people are the most respected and most powerful. While as children religion is not useful for James and his siblings, the reader can see how Ruth is able to transcend questions of her own racial identity by committing herself to a community united by faith as opposed to skin color.

Religion can offer both comfort and anguish. It isn't an absolute good in any character's life, but instead a way for them to navigate the world. For Ruth and James (in his adulthood), their Christian faith is a guiding light in their lives. It also serves as a way for them to relate to each other, their community, and the late Andrew McBride. Religious communities allow disparate people to come together, as Ruth discovers after her conversion, and as James discovers when he investigates Ruth's Jewish past. Crucially, religion also provides a framework for the characters to understand complex issues, and as James and his siblings try to understand where they fit in the world, they use the language of God and Jesus to determine what "color" they are.

SYMBOLS

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

RUTH'S BICYCLE

James sees Ruth's bicycle as "typif[ing] her whole existence." Ruth marches to the beat of her own drummer, and doesn't care what people will think of her — a white middle-aged woman riding a bicycle in a black neighborhood. In most areas of her life, Ruth is an outsider, but acts as though she belongs. In her black neighborhood, she comfortably raises her mixed family, and in her black church, she happily attends every Sunday. As long as they aren't attacking her or her children, she doesn't seem to care what people think of her, and her bicycle is an apt representation of this fact.

The bicycle is also a way for Ruth to escape her circumstances. All her life she's liked to run to clear her head and to escape. As a child she would literally run around Suffolk to temporarily escape Tateh's abuse, and when she graduated high school she ran away to New York City to try and start a new, free life. After the death of her first husband she was able to keep herself busy enough that she never fully mourned, but after the death of Hunter, she enters a deep depression. Unable to move to a new city or start a new life because of her massive family, getting out of the house and riding her bicycle is as close to running from her sadness as Ruth can get. Riding the bicycle helps her stay in a state of constant motion, which gives her less time to think about her unwelcome emotions.

THE BOY IN THE MIRROR

As a child, James creates an imaginary world for himself. Instead of looking into a mirror and seeing his reflection as himself, he imagines that the boy looking back at him is a happier, freer version of himself. For much of his life James struggles to uncover his unique racial identity, but the boy in the mirror is free from racial confusion. Whereas it take James years to understand who he is and where he has come from, the boy in the mirror "didn't seem to have an ache. He was free. He was never hungry…and his mother wasn't white." The boy in the mirror represents everything James wants to be, and wants to have. The boy in the mirror is the perfect version of himself, free from poverty, free from racism, and free from confusion about his mixed-race heritage. James often mentions an ache in his chest, which is a physical response to his search for meaning and belonging. The boy in the mirror doesn't have that ache — he represents a version of James who fully understands himself, and fully fits into the world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead edition of *The Color of Water* published in 2006.

Chapter 1 Quotes

I was born an Orthodox Jew on April 1, 1921, April Fool's Day, in Poland. I don't remember the name of the town where I was born, but I do remember my Jewish name: Ruchel Dwarja Zylska. My parents got rid of that name when we came to America and changed it to Rachel Deborah Shilsky, and I got rid of *that* name when I was nineteen and never used it again after I left Virginia for good in 1941. Rachel Shilsky is dead as far as I'm concerned. She had to die in order for me, the rest of me, to live.

Related Characters: Ruth McBride-Jordan (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in the second paragraph of the first chapter. It is the first time Ruth introduces herself, and in just a few sentences she covers the three distinct eras of her life. In each era she has had a different name, which has corresponded to a different racial and religious identity.

Ruchel, which sounds both Jewish and European, was Ruth's birth name. When her family immigrated, her name was Americanized to Rachel, and although she was still an observant Orthodox Jew, she had shed her identity as a foreigner. Each name change is marked by a forgetting, and so when she assumes Ruth, her final name, she erases her life as Ruchel and Rachel from her mind, at least until James comes investigating in her late middle age.

When Ruth says, "Rachel Shilsky is dead," she truly means it. When she left home and changed her name, her Jewish family sat shiva as though she had literally died. Furthermore, by changing her name Ruth separated her self and made Rachel a separate entity, and by erasing her memories, she effectively killed her past self.

Chapter 2 Quotes

The image of her riding that bicycle typified her whole existence to me. Her oddness, her complete nonawareness of what the world thought of her, a nonchalance in the face of what I perceived to be imminent danger from blacks and whites who disliked her for being a white person in a black world. She saw none of it.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

After the death of her second husband, Ruth becomes depressed. She lets her already disorganized household fall into disrepair, fails to pay the bills, and struggles to discipline her rebellious children. For much of her life Ruth has coped with tragedy and heartbreak by mentally (and sometimes physically) distancing herself from pain, and locking the memories away in the back of her mind. Now, however, after so much tragedy, she has difficulty moving on. As a child Ruth had been a runner, meaning she would run to try and clear her mind and escape her troubled home life. Now, as an adult, she uses her bicycle in the same way — to get out of the house and to clear her head.

For Ruth, the bicycle represents a moment of freedom from the burdens of her life, but for James the bicycle represents something else entirely. Ruth rides around, oblivious to how she looks, but when James sees her he's struck by the "oddness" of his mother, full of contradictions — a respectable middle aged woman on a bicycle usually ridden by children, a white woman in a black neighborhood with

mixed-race children. James is both embarrassed by his mother and afraid for her. Her oddness makes him stick out, which he dislikes, but he worries that the attention she draws to herself will result in some kind of violence, either from black or white people—anyone who might dislike Ruth's blurring of racial boundaries.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Mommy, after all, did not really look like me. In fact, she didn't look like Richie, or David—or any of her children for that matter. We were all clearly black, of various shades of brown, some light brown, some medium brown, some very light-skinned, and all of us had curly hair. Mommy was by her own definition, "light-skinned," a statement which I had initially accepted as fact but at some point later decided was not true. My best friend Billy Smith's mother was as light as Mommy was and had red hair to boot, but there was no question in my mind that Billy's mother was black and my mother was not. There was something inside me, an ache I had, like a constant itch that got bigger and bigger as I grew, that told me. It was in my blood, you might say, and however the notion got there, it bothered me greatly. Yet Mommy refused to acknowledge her whiteness. Why she did so was not clear, but even my teachers seemed to know she was white and I wasn't. On open school nights, the question most often asked by my schoolteachers was: "Is James adopted?" which always prompted an outraged response from Mommy.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

As a child, James realizes he and his mother are not exactly alike. While James is mixed-race and presents as black when he is out in public, his mother, although she claims she is "light skinned," is clearly white. And even though James loves his stepfather, his mother is the primary parent, and so realizing he and his mother do not look exactly alike prompts an identity crisis.

Understanding that he and his mother are of different races causes James to begin to feel an "ache," one that he will feel for much of his life. This ache is a desire to belong. It's a need to understand how he fits into the world, and how he biologically and culturally relates to the people in it, a question he is unable to answer as long as his mother refuses to share her past with him.

❝ Yet conflict was a part of our lives, written into our very faces, hands, and arms, and to see how contradiction lived and survived in its essence, we had to look no farther than our own mother. Mommy's contradictions crashed and slammed against one another like bumper cars at Coney Island. White folks, she felt, were implicitly evil toward blacks, yet she forced us to go to white schools to get the best education. Blacks could be trusted more, but anything involving blacks was probably slightly substandard. She disliked people with money yet was in constant need of it. She couldn't stand racists of either color and had great distaste for bourgeois blacks who sought to emulate rich whites by putting on airs and "doing silly things like covering their couches with plastic and holding teacups with their pinkies out." "What fools!" she'd hiss.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth's very existence is confusing to her children. James spends much of his life, up until he begins to research his family history, with an ache inside of his chest. This ache comes from being outsider, and from a deep desire to know where and how he — the son of black man and a white Jewish woman — can fit into the world.

As a child, understanding his racial and cultural identity is even more confusing because of Ruth's complicated thoughts about race, which she passes on to her offspring as hard truths and lessons to follow. She teaches her children to seek out the best institutions regardless of whether they are intended for black or white people, and to cultivate a certain distrust of white people, although anyone, under the wrong circumstances, can be cruel or prejudiced, which Ruth knows firsthand from the almost universally negative response to her multiple interracial relationships.

Ruth teaches her offspring about systemic anti-black racism and prejudice, which makes her children suspicious of white people, but all while explaining (though to what degree is unclear) that because of generations of discrimination, institutions associated with black people often have fewer resources, and that when possible, white institutions (like schools) are preferable. Although as teens her children begin to express pride in their blackness, James especially

grows up with confusion about his relationship to both races.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ ...One afternoon on the way home from church I asked her whether God was black or white.
A deep sigh. "Oh boy...God's not black. He's not white. He's a spirit."
"Does he like black or white people better?"
"He loves all people. He's a spirit."
"What's a spirit?"
"A spirit's a spirit."
"What color is God's spirit?"
"It doesn't have a color," she said. "God is the color of water. Water doesn't have a color."

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

James spends his childhood feeling caught between two races. He and his siblings all have various ways of dealing with racial confusion; for example, his brother Richie sees himself not as black or white but as green like the Incredible Hulk, who in some ways could be seen as leading an aspirational life for a driven, intelligent, mixed-race child. Richie also looks to religion for some kind mixed-race idol, wondering why Jesus, if he is not canonically white, is always painted that way.

James similarly wonders about his own race and how his race relates to God, in whose image he is supposedly created. What James is really asking here, then, is if *he* is black or white, and if God would love him more if he were one or the other. Ruth herself finds solace in Christianity because it feels more expansive and accepting to her than Judaism. It follows that she sees God as neither black nor white (or simultaneously black and white), and therefore accepting of her mixed-race family.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Nobody liked me. That's how I felt as a child. I know what it feels like when people laughing at you walking down the street, or snicker when they hear you speaking Yiddish, or just look at you with hate in their eyes. You know a Jew living in Suffolk when I was coming up could be lonely even if there were fifteen of them standing in the room, I don't know why; it's that feeling that nobody likes you; that's how I felt, living in the South. You were different from everyone and liked by very few. There were white sections of Suffolk, like the Riverview section, where Jews weren't allowed to own property. It said that on the deeds and you can look them up. They'd say "for White Anglo-Saxon Protestants only." That was the law there and they meant it. The Jews in Suffolk did stick together, but even among Jews my family was low because we dealt with *shvartses*. So I didn't have a lot of Jewish friends either.

Related Characters: Ruth McBride-Jordan (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth's childhood in Suffolk is difficult and lonely, which is why as an adult she tries to erase all memories of her past. The people of Suffolk, and even the civic infrastructure, discriminate against Ruth and her Jewish family. Children make fun of her, no one befriends her, and the zoning of the city itself decrees that her family is banned from buying property in many parts of town. Ruth feels excluded from the white, Protestant Suffolk community, and so, if she wants to feel a sense of belonging, she is left with only her family and the Jewish community.

Unfortunately, even as the Jewish community in Suffolk is being discriminated against by white Protestants, they themselves discriminate against the town's black population. Because Ruth's family sells to black people ("*shvartses*" is, in this context, a Yiddish slur for black people), they are tainted by association, and outcast even from their own religious and cultural group. This leaves Ruth with only her family, but she doesn't even feel like she belongs there, as her home life is harsh and demanding and her father cruel and abusive.

Chapter 10 Quotes

To further escape from painful reality, I created an imaginary world for myself. I believed my true self was a boy who lived in the mirror. I'd lock myself in the bathroom and spend long hours playing with him. He looked just like me. I'd stare at him. Kiss him. Make faces at him and order him around. Unlike my siblings, he had no opinions. He would listen to me. "If I'm here and you're me, how can *you* be there at the same time?" I'd ask. He'd shrug and smile. I'd shout at him, abuse him verbally. "Give me an answer!" I'd snarl. I would turn to leave, but when I wheeled around he was always there, waiting for me. I had an ache inside, a longing, but I didn't know where it came from or why I had it. The boy in the mirror, he didn't seem to have an ache. He was free. He was never hungry, he had his own bed probably, and his mother wasn't white. I hated him. "Go away!" I'd shout. "Hurry up! Get on out!" but he'd never leave.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

As a child, James struggles to understand his mixed-race identity. One method he uses to cope is imagining that his reflection in the mirror is in fact another boy, a version of himself that is better and happier in every way. Whereas James aches to understand who he is and where he comes from, the boy in the mirror feels confident in his identity. Whereas James's white mother causes him a lot of anxiety, this boy has a black mother who looks just like him.

The boy in the mirror also comes to represent everything James wishes he could have. James lives in poverty, is often hungry, and frequently fights with his siblings, but the boy in the mirror lives a full, perfect life. Although James intentionally spends hours in the bathroom playing with his perfect double, he also becomes jealous of the fantasy life he has created. The boy in the mirror proves to be not only a tool for James to understand his identity, but also a projection of all of his deepest desires.

...I myself had no idea who I was. I loved my mother yet looked nothing like her. Neither did I look like the role models in my life—my stepfather, my godparents, other relatives—all of whom were black. And *they* looked nothing like the other heroes I saw, the guys in the movies, white men like Steve McQueen and Paul Newman who beat the bad guys and in the end got the pretty girl—who, incidentally, was always white.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Ruth McBride-Jordan , Hunter Jordan Sr.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

James' racial anxiety is further complicated by the fact that no one in his life, other than his siblings, truly looks like him. Not only is his white mother conspicuously different, but he has no mixed-race idols upon whom he can model his behavior or feel pride in his distinct racial identity. In his community, his role models are all fully black, but in American popular culture and the news, the heroes are all distinctly white.

The world has sent James the message that one can be white or one can be black, but it has been unable to provide a framework he can use to negotiate being both. For James to aspire to be like one set of idols would mean disregarding the other, and would simply have him erasing one half of his identity while reinforcing the other, as opposed to letting him live happily as a mixture of both.

The question of race was like the power of the moon in my house. It's what made the river flow, the ocean swell, and the tide rise, but it was a silent power, intractable, indomitable, indisputable, and thus completely ignorable. Mommy kept us at a frantic living pace that left no time for the problem.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

James and his siblings are constantly thinking and worrying about their racial identity, and also about race in America

generally, partly because they are growing up during the Civil Rights movement. However, Ruth refuses to discuss race with her children. This is partially because she doesn't want to disclose her own background, and partially because she only has time to have conversations about God, school, and any emergencies that have cropped up.

Still, for the McBride-Jordans, race is inescapable. It's literally written into their bodies, and every day, looking at their white mother, their black (step)father, their white classmates, and their black neighbors, they're forced to reckon with how they fit into the puzzle. Even though race isn't discussed, it's unavoidable, from Ruth's children's interest in the Black Power movement, to their behavior around police, to their embarrassment at her appearance, to their treatment by their teachers.

❝ As I walked home, holding Mommy's hand while she fumed, I thought it would be easier if we were just one color, black or white. I didn't want to be white. My siblings had already instilled the notion of black pride in me. I would have preferred that Mommy were black. Now, as a grown man, I feel privileged to have come from two worlds. My view of the world is not merely that of a black man but that of a black man with something of a Jewish soul. I don't consider myself Jewish, but when I look at Holocaust photographs of Jewish women whose children have been wrenched from them by Nazi soldiers, the women look like my own mother and I think to myself, *There but for the grace of God goes my own mother—and by extension, myself.*

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

As a child, James usually deals with his mixed identity by picking one race and committing to it fully. Living in predominantly black neighborhoods and being perceived by the world as black, he and his siblings find it simpler to invest in half of their identity instead of learning how to navigate both. Ruth, who is clearly white, is thus a source of frustration and anxiety, as she does not neatly fit into their constructed blackness.

As an adult, however, James embraces his full identity, black, white, Christian, and Jewish. What was a complication for him as a child becomes exciting and important complexity as an adult. The ache James felt when he was young was because he wanted to belong somewhere. He and his siblings tried to belong by becoming blacker, but that was destined to fail, as they would be left with other, undeveloped aspects of their identities that would continue to ache until addressed. Although James doesn't necessarily feel Jewish, he still feels connected to his Jewish heritage, and is better able to understand his mother and where she has come from when he considers her life in the context of a greater Jewish diaspora.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ You know, my whole life changed after I fell in love. It was like the sun started shining on me for the first time, and for the first time in my life I began to smile. I was loved, I was loved, and I didn't care what anyone thought. I wasn't worried about getting caught, but I did notice that Peter's friends were terrified of me; they stayed clear anytime I came near them. They'd walk away from me if they saw me walking down the road coming toward them, and if they came into the store, they wouldn't even look at me. That started to worry me a little but I didn't worry much. Then after a while, my period was late. By a week.

Related Characters: Ruth McBride-Jordan (speaker), Peter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Growing up in Suffolk, Virginia, Ruth never feels like she truly belongs. The townspeople are anti-Semitic, and even her Jewish community is reluctant to accept her family because they do business with the local black community. Ruth's family, although it provides her with food and bedding, isn't warm or loving, and so she is left emotionally isolated with nowhere to turn.

Meeting Peter changes Ruth's life. More than his personality or his interests, Ruth is drawn to his warmth and the love he feels for her. For Ruth, this relationship is the first time she's felt a sense of real connection with another person, and felt love from someone who isn't her mother (who isn't very emotive anyway).

Because Ruth is so overwhelmed by her positive emotions, she doesn't initially consider the potential negative consequences of her relationship. She is white and Peter is black, and so if the white people in Suffolk find out about their relationship they might actually kill him. Although Ruth

would be ostracized, the physical threat would not be to her, and so she has the luxury of brushing off the potentially violent response to her relationship. Even seeing Peter's friends, who are obviously considering the danger Ruth represents to Peter, doesn't make her fully understand the risk she's taking until she becomes pregnant and has to truly consider the future of an interracial marriage in her intolerant hometown.

> You know, the thing was, I was supposed to be white and "number one," too. That was a big thing in the South. You're white, and even if you're a Jew, since you're white you're better than a so-called colored. Well, I didn't feel number one with nobody but him, and I didn't give a hoot that he was black. He was kind! And good! I knew that! And I wanted to tell folks that, I wanted to shout out, "Hey y'all, it really doesn't matter!" I actually believed folks would accept that, that they'd see what a good person he was and maybe accept us, and I went through a few days of thinking this, after which I told him one night, "Let's run off to the country and get married," and he said, "No way. I don't know where that's been done before, white and black marrying in Virginia. They will surely hang me."

Related Characters: Ruth McBride-Jordan (speaker), Peter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth never feels like she fit in as a young woman, which is part of the reason she is so excited to leave Suffolk after she graduates from high school. It is also part of the reason she's so excited by her first relationship with Peter. As one half of a loving couple, she can finally feel like she belongs to something and is cared for by someone.

Although technically white, Ruth's Judaism and association with black people in her town makes her stand out, and means that she doesn't get many of the benefits of being white — such as freedom from discrimination, generally higher wages, and, in the mid-century American South, access to all sorts of segregated businesses and public facilities.

For Ruth, whiteness is only useful to her if it means she can better fit in. However, since she doesn't, it isn't an aspect of her identity that she embraces. Instead, she embraces Peter and the feeling of being in love, because he and their relationship give her everything that she's been missing from her community and her family. Ruth's love blinds her and makes her naïve. Because race doesn't matter to her, only how she treats others and how they treat her, she assumes the wider world will feel the same way. Also because Ruth isn't under threat of violence (one very real privilege of being white that she does retain), and Peter would be the one to pay the price for their relationship, she doesn't even consider the risk she's taking on by dating him, or, more pressingly, the risk he is taking on by dating her.

Chapter 13 Quotes

> I was always grateful to Aunt Betts for that. Even though she slammed the door in my face years later, I never felt bitter toward her. She had her own life and her own set of hurts to deal with, and after all, I wasn't her child. Mameh's sisters were more about money than anything else, and any hurts that popped up along the way, they just swept them under the rug. They were trying hard to be American, you know, not knowing what to keep and what to leave behind. But you know what happens when you do that. If you throw water on the floor it will always find a hole, believe me.

Related Characters: Ruth McBride-Jordan (speaker), Mameh / Hudis Shilsky, Bubeh, Aunt Mary, Aunt Betsy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth sees her immediate family as people who have a base obligation to her to make sure she's fed and housed, but no emotional investment in her. Earlier in the chapter, Ruth reflects on her family. She relates, "my mother's family, they didn't say a lot to you. They would always take care of you in a basic way but they never said a lot to you. I didn't feel loved by them."

When she becomes pregnant and her mother sends her to New York City, where she's able to obtain an abortion, Ruth's aunts do the bare minimum to make sure she's healthy and her basic needs are meant. Although this may seem heartless, and their treatment impersonal, Ruth understands that her aunts are fulfilling their duty. She isn't their child, and the bonds of family are only so strong.

Ruth also understands her aunts' need to "Americanize" themselves, which leads to them prioritizing money over family. They hope that by focusing on money they'll better fit into their new home, although Ruth understands that simply ignoring problems will not truly make them go away for ever — a lesson she learns as she attempts to do the

same thing. As she says, "If you throw water on the floor it will always find a hole"—meaning that if you have trouble in your past it will always find some way of re-emerging (a lesson that could also apply to Ruth herself, with her willful repression of painful memories).

Chapter 15 Quotes

"They're making me marry her," he said. "My folks are making me."
"Did you get her pregnant?"
"Yeah."
Oh, that messed me up. I told him I didn't want to see him anymore and walked back through the black neighborhood, into the store, and went upstairs and cried my heart out, because I still loved him. I went through this entire ordeal and here he was getting busy with somebody else. The fact that he was black and the girl he was marrying was black—well, that hurt me even more. If the world were fair, I suppose I would have married him, but there was no way that could happen in Virginia. Not in 1937.
I made up my mind then that I was going to leave Suffolk for good.

Related Characters: Ruth McBride-Jordan (speaker), Peter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

After Ruth returns to Suffolk from her summer in New York City, during which she had an abortion, she breaks off her relationship with Peter. She still loves him, but she knows that their relationship is too risky—they cannot get married and she does not want to become pregnant again if they continue to see each other.

When Peter impregnates a black girl in their neighborhood, however, their solution is to marry immediately. Ruth understands why this is the case, and understands that in the South in the 1930s, the community will not accept an interracial marriage, but she is still hurt by the fact that she had to have an abortion and cut off her relationship simply because of her race and the race of her beloved.

This injustice convinces her that she must leave Suffolk, and the entire South — anywhere that will deny her a marriage to the man she loves because of the respective colors of their skin. From here on out, Ruth makes living decisions based on where seems the most accepting of interracial interaction, moving to Red Hook partially because she likes its integrated, multi-ethnic communities, and later turning against Delaware when she realizes how segregated it is.

Chapter 16 Quotes

"I'll never learn to drive," she said.
The irony was that Mommy knew how to drive before she was eighteen. She drove her father's 1936 Ford back in Suffolk, Virginia. Not only did she drive it, she drove it well enough to pull a trailer behind it full of wholesale supplies for her family's grocery store. She drove the care and trailer on paved and dirt roads between Norfolk, Suffolk, Portsmouth, Virginia Beach, and North Carolina. She could back the trailer up with the goods in it, unload it at the store, back the car into the yard, unhook the trailer, and park the car in the garage, backing in. But she had left her past so far behind that she literally did to know how to drive. Rachel Deborah Shilsky could drive a car and pull a trailer behind it, but Ruth McBride Jordan had never touched a steering wheel before that day in 1973, and you can make book on it.

Related Characters: Ruth McBride-Jordan , James McBride (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

After the death of her second husband, Ruth mourns for what James estimates is ten years. Still, soon after his death she feels that she must take charge of the family, and decides she should learn to drive the car he left behind. The short driving lesson she takes with James is disastrous, but James notes that this is unexpected, as Ruth was a skilled driver as a teen back in Suffolk.

James realizes that not only has Ruth cordoned off aspects of her memory that are too painful for her to revisit, she has truly forgotten even the skills she learned as a young woman, before she separated from her family. Ruth's memories are so deeply tied to her identity that in killing her memories of Rachel, who did know how to drive, she also killed off everything else that made Rachel a person, like her talents and manual skills.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ I kept in touch with her for many years. She helped me through college and helped me get into graduate school as well; she didn't pay my way, but if I had an emergency, she would help. One morning a couple of years later when I was at Oberlin College, I went to my mailbox and found a letter from her telling me that her husband had died suddenly of cancer. Later that day I was standing on the street with a group of black students and one of them said, "Forget these whiteys. They're all rich. They got no problems," and I said, "Yeah, man, I hear you," while inside my pocket was the folded letter holding the heartbroken words of an old white lady who had always gone out of her way to help me—and many others like me. It hurt me a little bit to stand there and lie. Sometimes it seemed like the truth was a bandy-legged soul who dashed from one side of the world to the other and I could never find him.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), David H. Dawson , Ann Fox Dawson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

During high school James gets a scholarship to travel to Europe playing in the American Youth Jazz band. To pay off his scholarship, he spends a summer working for the Dawsons, a rich white couple from Pennsylvania who donate the money. For the first time, James has a healthy, close relationship with white people. Mrs. Dawson especially takes him under her wing, and talks to him about art, music, and literature, in a way that makes him feel heard and respected.

After a lifetime spent under the impression that most white people will not respect him, and might even pose a danger to him, this is a formative relationship for young James. It also causes him to feel conflicted — in college, as he continues to explore his black identity, it often comes at the cost of his whiteness and his relationships with white people. As a young man James is still working out his relationships to whiteness and blackness. He understands much of the anguish that black people have faced has been due to racism, and that people who are white do not face these kinds of issues, but he also understands that all people, black and white, are human, and feel sadness and distress regardless of the addition burdens (or lack thereof) of their race or class.

Notably, James imagines truth as a "bandy-legged soul" who runs from one side to the other, white to black. His mother, Ruth, has a similar strange walk, and similarly straddles the line of white and black, truth and fiction, in the way she has constructed her post-Rachel identity.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ "I know you're gonna marry a *shvartse*. You're making a mistake." That stopped me cold, because I didn't know how he learned it. To this day I don't know. He said, "If you marry a nigger, don't ever come home again. Don't come back."
"I'll always come to see Mameh."
"Not if you marry a nigger you won't," he said. "Don't come back."

Related Characters: Ruth McBride-Jordan , Tateh / Fishel Shilsky (speaker), Andrew Dennis McBride Sr. , Mameh / Hudis Shilsky

Related Themes:

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth returns to visit her family one last time after she's already begun to settle in to New York City. Her mother is sick, and she wants to go home and check on her. As Ruth is waiting at the bus station after her visit to travel back to New York from Suffolk, her father drives up and surprises her: he wants Ruth to stay in town.

Ruth believes she can move to New York and still remain connected to her family. She also, naively, believes she can marry a black man and still be a part of her Orthodox Jewish family. Unfortunately, her father, although he has suffered discrimination as a Jewish man, is unable to extend any empathy towards black people, who face similar (and worse) discrimination. His cruel bigotry forces Ruth to choose between her family, and by extension her Judaism, and the man she loves. Ruth, who never felt like a part of her Jewish community, and who has suffered so much abuse at the hands of her father, decides in the end that her own happiness is more important than remaining tethered to her family. Cut off from her culture, she sheds Rachel and sets about creating a new, inclusive family, where race is (supposed to be) a nonissue, and everyone can choose to love who they want to love.

Chapter 22 Quotes

Like most of the Jews in Suffolk they treated me very kindly, truly warm and welcoming, as if I were one of them, which in an odd way I suppose I was. I found it odd and amazing when white people treated me that way, as if there were no barriers between us. It said a lot about this religion—Judaism—that some of its followers, old southern crackers who talked with southern twangs and wore straw hats, seemed to believe that its covenants went beyond the color of one's skin. The Sheffers, Helen Weintraub, the Jaffes, they talked to me in person and by letter in a manner and tone that, in essence, said "Don't forget us. We have survived her. Your mother was part of this…"

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), The Sheffer Family, The Jaffe Family, Helen Weintraub, Tateh / Fishel Shilsky, Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

When James travels to Suffolk to try and learn more about his mother's early life, he meets several Jewish families who remember her and the Shilskys. These families surprise James with their warmth and cooperation, and James begins to feel more Jewish because of the bond he has with Helen Weintraub, the Sheffers, and the Jaffes.

Because James's mother is Jewish, he is technically Jewish too. Although he doesn't often feel Jewish, his experience in Suffolk has educated him about a religion and culture he is technically a part of. For someone who has spent much of his life searching for a community he could call his own, it is a true gift that Judaism is expansive enough to include him under its banner. James has felt especially excluded from white spaces, and so it is even more meaningful to him that these white Southerners can see past the color of his skin and include him in their community.

As I walked along the wharf and looked over the Nansemond River, which was colored an odd purple by the light of the moon, I said to myself, "What am I doing here? This place is so lonely. I gotta get out of here." It suddenly occurred to me that my grandmother had walked around here and gazed upon this water many times, and the loneliness and agony that Hudis Shilsky felt as a Jew in this lonely southern town—far from her mother and sisters in New York, unable to speak English, a disabled Polish immigrant whose husband had no love for her and whose dreams of seeing her children grow up in America vanished as her life drained out of her at the age of forty-six—suddenly rose up in my blood and washed over me in waves. A penetrating loneliness covered me, lay on me so heavily I had to sit down and cover my face. I had no tears to shed. They were done long ago, but a new pain and a new awareness were born inside me. The uncertainty that lived inside me began to dissipate; the ache that the little boy who stared in the mirror felt was gone. My own humanity was awakened, rising up to greet me with a handshake as I watched the first glimmers of sunlight peek over the horizon.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Tateh / Fishel Shilsky, Mameh / Hudis Shilsky

Related Themes:

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

During one of James's final visits to Virginia, during which he had hoped to better understand his mother, he begins to understand the struggle of his grandmother as well. James feels lonely and trapped in Suffolk and wants to leave, which leads to an epiphany: his grandmother Hudis was trapped in Suffolk for much of her adult life, and surely she too would have felt the agonizing loneliness James is currently experiencing.

James, who is constantly looking for a community to belong to, can suddenly imagine how Hudis must have felt like such an outsider, disabled, foreign, and far from her family. As a child, James described feeling an "ache." He didn't know where this feeling came from, or how to stop it, but it seemed to indicate some kind of absence in his life, likely the absence of a larger community outside of his immediate family. As he begins to understand who Hudis was and how she must have felt, the ache finally subsides. James has found his people; he understands where he has come from, and to whom he truly belongs.

Chapter 23 Quotes

There was no turning back after my mother died. I stayed on the black side because that was the only place I could stay. The few problems I had with black folks were nothing compared to the grief white folks dished out. With whites it was no question. You weren't accepted to be with a black man and that was that. They'd say forget it. Are you crazy? A nigger and you? No way. They called you white trash. That's what they called me. Nowadays these mixed couples get on TV every other day complaining, "Oh, it's hard for us." They have cars and television and homes and they're complaining. Jungle fever they call it, flapping their jaws and making the whole thing sound stupid. They didn't have to run for their lives like we did.

Related Characters: Ruth McBride-Jordan (speaker), Mameh / Hudis Shilsky, Andrew Dennis McBride Sr.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 232

Explanation and Analysis

After the death of her mother, Ruth, who is living in New York City with her soon-to-be first husband Dennis, attempts to wash her hands of her Judaism and her whiteness. Judaism promised but never delivered her a loving community, and so Ruth, who has been isolated all her life, feels no need to continue practicing a faith that gives nothing back. Whiteness promised to protect her against racism, but her Judaism meant she was permanently a second-class citizen, and her continued association with black people meant her whiteness was actively dangerous for her romantic partners. Whereas white people saw her association with blackness as something to be looked down upon, and Ruth herself as someone to cast out, she finds black communities more willing to accept her.

Still, Ruth and Dennis face oppression from all sides. People white and black are violently opposed to their mixed-race relationship, with the difference being that every white person Ruth has encountered opposed the relationship, while only a few black people did. Dennis's family, for example, happily accepted her into their family, while Ruth's own white family disowned her.

Chapter 24 Quotes

Sometimes without conscious realization, our thoughts, our faith, our interests are entered into the past…We talk about other times, other places, other persons, and lose our living hold on the present. Sometimes we think if we could just go back in time we would be happy. But anyone who attempts to reenter the past is sure to be disappointed. Anyone who has ever revisited the place of his birth after years of absence is shocked by the differences between the way the place actually is, and the way he has remembered it. He may walk along old familiar streets and roads, but he is a stranger in a strange land. He has thought of this place as home, but he finds he is no longer here even in spirit. He has gone onto a new and different life, and in thinking longingly of the past, he has been giving thought and interest to something that no longer really exists.

Related Characters: Andrew Dennis McBride Sr. (speaker), Mameh / Hudis Shilsky, Ruth McBride-Jordan , James McBride

Related Themes:

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

As an adult, James uncovers some of his late father's writing from a quarter century earlier. Dennis's writing is concerned with many of the same issues *The Color of Water* deals with — questions of memory, identity, and the value of revisiting the past.

Ruth lives her life by the words of her late first husband. She understands that dwelling on the past will bring her no closure, and will bring her no joy. To think back on her early life in Suffolk, or even on Dennis McBride, is to look back on people, places, and things that have since changed, moved, or died.

In his actions, however, James goes against his father's writings. Over the course of his book project, James assumes that uncovering his mother's past will lead him to some great personal epiphany. This proves to be partially true, as he becomes more connected to Ruth and to his grandmother, Mameh, but Dennis is also partially right. Going back to the past alone will not make James happy, and will not suddenly detangle his complicated identity. More work is required than simply driving to Suffolk. Instead, James spends over a decade writing a book and considering his own life and the life of his mother to truly become comfortable with his mixed race identity.

Chapter 25 Quotes

Doctors found squamous cell cancer in a small mole they removed from Ma's face, a condition caused by too much exposure to the sun. Ironically, it's a condition that affects mostly white people. To the very end, Mommy is a flying compilation of competing interests and conflicts, a black woman in white skin, with black children and a white woman's physical problem.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 260

Explanation and Analysis

In Ruth's old age she remains a walking, talking contradiction. Although technically white, she has lived the past forty years of her life as a light-skinned black woman. She has lived in predominantly black neighborhoods, attended black churches, married black men, and given birth to mixed-race but black presenting children. Unfortunately, although Ruth has re-written her identity as someone culturally, if not physically black, she cannot fully shut off her whiteness. Her body is still that of a white woman, regardless of how she chooses to identify, and therefore is susceptible to diseases that primarily affect white people.

For her, her Jewish side is gone. She opened the door for me but closed it for herself long ago, and for her to crack it open and peek inside was like eating fire. She'd look in and stagger back, blinded, as the facts of her own history poured over her like lava. As she revealed the facts of her life I felt helpless, like I was watching her die and be reborn again (yet there was a cleansing element, too), because after years of hiding, she opened up and began to talk about the past, and as she did so, I was the one who wanted to run for cover…Imagine, if you will, five thousand years of Jewish history landing in your lap in the space of months. It sent me tumbling through my own abyss of sorts, trying to salvage what I could of my feelings and emotions, which would be scattered to the winds as she talked.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

As James researches his book he learns more about his mother, and increasingly understands both how her memory works and why it works that way. Ruth used the suppression of her memories to allow her to create an entirely new identity, free from the baggage and suffering of her past. By strictly compartmentalizing her memories and banishing her life as Rachel and the death of her first husband, she's able to live a relatively normal life, as opposed to one where she must daily relive her painful memories. As a child, James found the erasure of Ruth's past frustrating and confusing, but as an adult he sees that she was protecting herself.

Notable are the dramatic metaphors James uses to describe his mother's past. In Chapter 24 he describes her memory as both hell and as a "minefield, each recollection a potential booby trap." Here, Ruth's memories are as dangerous as lava. By using this language James acknowledges and adds authenticity to the burden Ruth's past places on her.

This quote also describes the passing along or sharing of the burden of history and self-knowledge. Ruth has spent much of her life learning how to cope and repress both with her own history and thousands of years of Jewish history. James, exposed to this side of his identity for the first time, begins to feel the inherited weight of his mother's birth culture, and is, at least initially, unable to fully process his emotions.

Mommy's children are extraordinary people, most of them leaders in their own right. All of them have toted more mental baggage and dealt with more hardship than they care to remember, yet they carry themselves with a giant measure of dignity, humility, and humor. Like any family we have problems, but we have always been close. Through marriage, adoptions, love-ins, and shack-ups, the original dozen has expanded into dozens and dozens more—wives, husbands, children, grandchildren, cousins, nieces, nephews—ranging from dark-skinned to light-skinned; from black kinky hair to blonde hair and blue eyes. In running from her past, Mommy has created her own nation, a rainbow coalition that descends on her house every Christmas and Thanksgiving and sleeps everywhere—on the floor, on rugs, in shifts; sleeping double, triple to a bed, "two up, three down," just like old times.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

In the book's final chapter (excepting the Epilogue) James lists all of his siblings and their academic and professional accomplishments. This is both a portrait of his family and a portrait of his mother, whose identity informed her parenting, which is reflected in the success of her offspring. For the McBride-Jordan family, their mixed heritage, although sometimes troublesome, in the end proves to be a blessing. Because the siblings never completely found communities to fit into—white or black—they became closer as a family, and learned to embrace their shared, unique identity. Although James and Ruth's extended family doesn't all look alike—some blonde, some dark—they're united by their shared heritage, shared upbringing, and shared love of their mother. James also notes how, in leaving her family behind as a young woman, Ruth was given the opportunity to create an entirely new family according to her own rules and moral codes.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ She catches all of her important moments with a camera, waddling down Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue from the A train to Long Island College Hospital to take pictures of my daughter Azure's first days of life; standing my toddler son, Jordan, up against a tree in her yard so she can snap a quick picture of him in his Easter outfit. Her photos are horrible, heads cut off, pictures of nothing, a table, a hand, a chair. Still, she shoots pictures of any event that's important to her, knowing that each memory is too important to lose, having lost so many before.

Related Characters: James McBride (speaker), David Lee Preston, Ruth McBride-Jordan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

James observes Ruth's camera around her wrist as the pair sit at David Lee Preston's wedding. After a life spent carefully compartmentalizing her memories and working hard to forget her past hardships, in her old age Ruth has committed herself to remembering as much as possible. James suspects that although Ruth has cast off old memories (her time as Rachel, her first husband's life and painful death) to protect herself, enough time has passed that she's begun to miss those memories, painful as they are. This is also a signal that Ruth is finally in a comfortable, happy place. When she was poor, lonely, or recently widowed it was essential that she police her own emotions, but enough time has passed that she can take the bad with the good. It's also notable that Ruth has begun to carefully record her memories at the same time her son has begun a book project that documents her forgotten past. Together mother and son are working to preserve the details of her life.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1: DEAD

In first line of the first chapter Ruth declares, "I'm dead." At this point, in the 1980s, it's been almost fifty years since she's seen or talked to one of her relatives. She's dead to her parents and siblings, and her family may as well be dead to her.

This chapter, like every odd-numbered chapter except for Chapter 25, is told from the point of view of Ruth, who is telling James her life story. We will later learn that this is the first time she's revisited her past since she left her family back in 1941, closing the door on her mother, father, sister, brother, and a version of herself.

Ruth tells her son James that her family would not have put up with being interviewed. She suspects her father would "have a heart attack" if he saw her mixed-race son.

Although Ruth's father faced anti-Semitic discrimination, he feels no empathy for African Americans, who he happily discriminates against.

Ruth gives a short history of her life: she was born an Orthodox Jew in Poland in 1921. Her name was originally Ruchel Dwarja Zylska, but when her family immigrated to the United States a few years later it was changed to the Americanized Rachel Deborah Shilsky, and when she left Virginia in 1941 she changed it to Ruth. She explains, "Rachel Shilsky is dead as far as I'm concerned. She had to die in order for me to live."

Ruth has compartmentalized many of her memories in her mind. Her time as Ruchel has been completely forgotten, and her time as Rachel has been locked away and repressed, only accessed in her middle age to help write The Color of Water. *Ruth protects herself by mentally killing off her past self, because to be a happy and functioning adult, she knew she couldn't dwell on her traumatic adolescence.*

When Ruth married her first husband, Andrew McBride, her family sat shiva and acted as though she had died. In Jewish tradition it takes seven days to mourn, and Ruth explains that rules like this, in addition to a loveless childhood, made her dislike Judaism.

Ruth declared her old self to be dead when she changed her name from Rachel and moved out of her hometown, and her family treated her as though she had died as well. This was partially motivated by what they saw as her abandonment, and partly due to racist resistance to her black husband.

Ruth's parents were polar opposites. Her father, Fishel Shilsky, who she called Tateh, was an Orthodox rabbi. He was Russian but moved to Poland for his arranged marriage with Ruth's mother Hudis, called Mameh. While Tateh was cold, controlling, and commanding, Mameh was "gentle and meek." She had polio and the left side of her body and face were permanently paralyzed. Although Ruth does not regret leaving her family behind, she remarks that Mameh was the "one person in this world I didn't do right by…"

Ruth's parents were not a love match, and they never fall in love. Although her mother tries, the pair is unable to provide their children with a warm and loving home. When the opportunity presents itself for her to escape, Ruth takes it. She is happy to find somewhere and perhaps someone who can give her the warmth she was denied in childhood. However, although her early years were unhappy, and Ruth hates her father, she understands that her mother did the best she could, and wonders if she could have done more for Mameh.

CHAPTER 2: THE BICYCLE

James narrates this chapter. When he is fourteen his stepfather Hunter Jordan dies, and his mother (Ruth), unable to drive, starts **bicycling** around the neighborhood. James misses his stepfather, who he thought of as "Daddy," and who treated Ruth's eight children from her first marriage like his own. Hunter was seventy-two and seemingly healthy, and his death was a shock to his entire family. Bicycling around town helps Ruth grieve her second husband, whose death reminds her of first husband, Andrew McBride, who died when she was pregnant with James fourteen years earlier. Ruth is only fifty-one, "still slender and pretty," but uninterested in remarrying, even though it would help her and her twelve children financially.

The book's even-numbered chapters are narrated by James, who writes as an adult reflecting on his childhood. As an adult looking back, James realizes Ruth's bicycling is a way for her to grieve, something he didn't understand as a child. James grew up in a mixed household. Although some of his siblings were half-siblings, and his father was his stepfather, Ruth made sure everyone treated everyone else as full blood relations. It didn't matter how everyone was related, but instead it was important that they stuck together and treated each other well.

James reacts to his stepfather's death by rebelling. He skips class, smokes weed, shoplifts, and steals purses. After a day spent committing petty crimes, James is embarrassed to come home and see his middle-aged mother on her old blue **bicycle**, which he sees as an indication of how different Ruth is from the other mothers in his neighborhood.

As a young teen, James's stepfather's death prompts an identity crisis. He acts out because his home, once his only source of comfort and the only place where he really fit in, is no longer a pleasant place to be.

As a kid, James is aware that his mother is strange— she's light skinned, doesn't have any family, and speaks Yiddish. Because Hunter lives in Brooklyn and only visits on the weekends, Ruth is the "commander in chief" of the family—surgeon, priest, psychologist, and financial advisor—and deals with all major issues, although she refuses to discuss race. Sometimes James wishes his family life was more conventional: a mother and father and only a handful of siblings, like on television. Instead, his mother has created a free-for-all environment that she watches over, stepping in whenever the situation becomes too dire.

From an early age James can tell his mother isn't like the other black mothers in his neighborhood. This begins to bother him, as her confusing identity causes him to question his own, and her evasiveness regarding race just makes him more confused. James just wants to fit in, and while his family provides a safe space for him, he understands that his family is not like many others (because of its chaos, and because of his white mother), which makes him insecure.

On his first day of school Ruth walks James to the bus stop. It's the first time he can remember being alone with his mother, and it quickly becomes a favorite memory. Watching his mother at the bus stop with all of the black mothers in his neighborhood, James sees that she looks more like his white teacher than his black neighbors. When James asks Ruth why she looks different than the other mothers, she doesn't give a full response. She acknowledges she's not like the other mothers, but says it shouldn't matter, and advises James to stick close to his siblings instead of the neighborhood kids.

Growing up with eleven siblings, James finds Ruth's attention at the bus stop to be an incredible gift. However, seeing Ruth next to the mothers of other children is not. James is acutely aware of how he does and does not fit in with his peers, and his clearly white mother makes him and his family stand out. Ruth, however, is unconcerned. After a lifetime of harassment because of her Judaism and her interracial marriages, a few stares at the bus stop do not faze her.

A few weeks later, James gets off the bus and panics when he realizes Ruth isn't there to meet him. He waits and waits until all the other children have left with their parents, until he finally sees all of his siblings running towards him in a ragtag group, ready to pick him up from the bus.

James's siblings are his community and his support system. Ruth has done her best to teach her children that they cannot fully trust anyone but each other, and they must be there for each other in her absence, because no one else can be relied upon.

CHAPTER 3: KOSHER

Ruth, narrating again, describes Tateh and Mameh's loveless arranged marriage. Mameh's family was upper class and wealthy, and was able to sponsor Tateh, Mameh, Ruth, and her brother Sam to come to the United States. Ruth lived in constant fear of deportation, both generally by the US government, and specifically by her father, who threatens to send her back to Europe. Ruth's father also threatens her mother with deportation, which is especially cruel as Mameh has spent much of her life running from Russian soldiers who were killing Jewish people, and would likely die if she were sent back.

Ruth's parents have never been happy in their arranged marriage, and from before she was even born Ruth's family life has been tumultuous. Ruth, who does not remember her life in Europe, wants to feel like she is accepted and belongs in America, and so is especially susceptible to her father's threats of deportation, which would prove once and for all that she is not American, and doesn't belong.

When they first arrive in America, Ruth and her family live with her grandparents, Bubeh and Zaydeh, in Manhattan. This time with her family provides Ruth with her first memories of Judaism. Her whole family keeps kosher, which requires different table settings for every meal and strict separation of milk and meat, and observes the Sabbath every Friday and Saturday, which means they can't use any electricity or do any work.

Although later in her life Judaism becomes a burden for Ruth, as a young child Judaism brings Ruth's family together. It was the first kind of cultural ritual she ever knew, and an integral part of Mameh and Tateh's identities. When she later sheds her identity as Rachel, Ruth is also shedding her deeply ingrained culture of Judaism.

When Ruth is still a small child, Zaydeh dies in the apartment. She has trouble understanding he is dead because to her, it just looks like he's sleeping, and because her family has rarely discussed death. After he has been buried, Ruth worries that he'll wake up and find out he's been buried alive. Later in life, looking back, Ruth is still disturbed by the thought of an accidental living burial, and suspects that this is why she's claustrophobic.

Zaydeh's death early in Ruth's childhood affects her for the rest of her life. Unprepared for her first major loss, Ruth never truly learns how to mourn and move on in healthy, productive ways. She also continues to deal with grief and tragedy by trying to keep moving and avoid potential entrapment, instincts that likely stem from her fear of a live burial.

CHAPTER 4: BLACK POWER

As a child, James wonders about his mother's family history. Because Ruth won't answer many of his questions, James turns to his siblings with questions. When James asks his brother Richie about his mother's light skin, Richie tells James it doesn't matter, because he, James, is adopted. James considers that none of his siblings really look like their light-skinned mother—the children are all shades of brown and are clearly Black—and becomes convinced that he really is adopted.

James's family, because it is made up of mixed-race children like himself, feels like the only place where he truly fits in. This is why it is especially traumatic for him to consider that he is adopted. As much anxiety as his white mother causes him, imagining that he has no siblings, and no mother at all, is even more stressful.

James already feels that something is not right in his family. He describes feeling "something inside me, an ache I had, like a constant itch that got bigger and bigger as I grew…." James has also noticed teachers continually ask his mother if he's adopted. He starts to believe Ruth isn't his real mother.

The "ache" James begins to feel as a child will stay with him for much of his adult life. It represents a desire to truly belong to some group, and to understand where he, his siblings, and his mother came from.

One night James stays up until 2 A.M. to confront Ruth about his origins. She just laughs and tells him he isn't adopted. When he asks about his grandparents, she tells him about his father Andrew Dennis McBride's family, but not her own parents. When James presses Ruth about her family, assuming that they must not have loved her because they are not currently in her life, she counters that they did love her. She then cuts off James's questioning and offers him some coffee cake, which is a huge treat in a poor household with twelve hungry children.

Ruth has so successfully erased her past from her mind that when asked about her family she immediately thinks of her late husband Dennis's family instead. In the wake of her break with her own family, Ruth has constructed a new one, which includes her children, her husbands, her husband's families, and her friends, guaranteeing that she'll never need her birth family again.

In 1966, at age nine, James becomes more aware of the black power movement. His home and neighborhood are transformed as afros come into style, his siblings memorize protest poetry, and local statues are repainted in the red, black, and green of the black liberation movement. Although James supports the movement, he has internalized white fears about empowered black Americans. He worries that "black power [will] be the end of my mother."

James and his siblings, always searching for a sense of belonging and clear-cut identity, are taken in by the Black Power movement because it allows them to feel pride about aspects of their identity that are often looked down upon and discriminated against. Unfortunately, James's mixed-race background means that even as half of him is celebrating black pride, the other half of him is afraid that black pride will lead to black supremacy, which could lead to the death or injury of his white mother.

Ruth, meanwhile, is only interested in church and her children's academics. She encourages her children to socialize only with each other, and teaches them not to share details of their home life with strangers. She has many rules, preferring her children to play indoors, and to be home before dark if they insist on going outside. However, Ruth is also busy working as a typist, which means she's away from home from 3 p.m. to 2 a.m. each day. Because of her busy schedule, she has little time for her children's questions about race and identity.

Ruth puts all of her time and attention into her family, and expects her children to put their time and attention into each other, academics, and God. Ruth wants the best possible life for her children, and so often even sacrifices close relationships with them so that she can work and run the household in a way that will maximize their chances of succeeding. Race, she feels, is a distraction, and so she will not discuss it.

James describes his upbringing as being defined by "a curious blend of Jewish-European and African-American distrust and paranoia." Andrew Dennis McBride knew that not everyone would accept his mixed-race family, and so he taught his children to keep to themselves. Ruth used her own (imperfect) childhood as a model for her parenting, and together with both of her husbands taught her children the value of thrift, hard work, and education—which could help raise them out of poverty.

From their own experience, Ruth and Dennis understand that the wider world isn't always accepting, safe, or reliable. Therefore, they've taught their children to primarily socialize with and rely on each other, so that they can minimize their encounters with people who could potentially judge or hurt them.

Ruth passes on complicated ideas about race and class to her children. Although she understands that many white people are racist, she sends her children to white schools because the education there is better. She also dislikes black people who she feel that she is trying to "emulate rich whites by putting on airs." She is always in financial need, but refuses to apply for welfare. Ruth loves the Red Hook neighborhood and the New Brown Memorial Baptist Church (which she founded with Andrew McBride), both of which are predominantly black, and which she continues to visit even in her old age.

Having lived among many groups of many races, Ruth has a nuanced understanding of the complexities of race in America. She is no fan of segregation, and is happy to send her children to white schools and make use of other white institutions if it guarantees a better life for her children, even if it means crossing racial boundaries. After a life where she had few people to rely on, Ruth is now self-sufficient, and doesn't trust that help from outsiders is really reliable.

James understands from reading the newspaper and watching television that many white people are uncomfortable around black people. Notably, though, his mother is comfortable around black people, and only responds to offensive comments on the street about her mixed-race family if she is worried about the safety of her children. Ruth feels that Malcolm X's comments about "the white devil" don't include her, sees civil rights fight as her own, and refers to "white people" as though they are a group she is not in.

Although Ruth is technically white, she doesn't see herself that way. For Ruth, whiteness is both physical but also behavioral. Because she lives in a black neighborhood, has married a black man, attends a black church, and has mixed-race children, Ruth feels as though she can not be truly classified as white, as her whiteness has very little impact on her day-to-day life. Others might disagree.

James worries about his mother's safety, and as a child is confused by her comfort in dangerous neighborhoods. As an adult he understands that Ruth's faith in God kept her calm, but as a child every incident—like a man stealing her purse on the corner—makes James more afraid for her life. James feels it is his duty to protect his mother. Once, as he is sitting on a bus to go to a summer camp for poor inner city kids, he sees a Black Panther drop his son off for camp. James only knows about the Black Panthers from the news, where they're depicted as violent and white hating. James panics, worried that the Black Panther will want to kill his mother, and so James punches the Panther's son.

James mixed-race upbringing leads to conflicted feelings about the Civil Rights movement and racial justice on a national scale. While on the one hand James is proud of his blackness, and thinks of Black Panthers as intrinsically cool, he has also absorbed white cultural concerns that black people are a threat. Therefore, although he is excited by civil rights gains by black people, he naively worries that his mother, a white woman, is at risk from a militant black public.

CHAPTER 5: THE OLD TESTAMENT

Ruth's father is a traveling rabbi, but he isn't particularly good at his job so Ruth and her family frequently move. Her family values money because they have so little of it, and they value contracts because they guarantee that people will keep their word, whether it's a marriage contract or a synagogue promising that Tateh can preach for a year. The Shilskys move from town to town as Tateh has difficulty getting his contracts renewed, and even though Mameh hopes she can stay near her family in New York City, in 1929 they ultimately move to Suffolk, Virginia.

Ruth's family just wants a place where they can feel like they fit in and earn a steady income. This is a huge motivating factor in their eventual move to Suffolk — they hope that as permanent, as opposed to itinerant residents, they'll have a better community and therefore more opportunities to make money. This is likely part of the reason why, later in life, Ruth is so eager to find an accepting lover and an accepting group of people, as she lived her early childhood without true love and support, relying on contracts as opposed to true emotional connection.

Suffolk is a small, insular, anti-Semitic town. Ruth endures years of insults from other children in school. Despite this, Tateh decides he's sick of traveling, and opens a grocery store. The Jewish families at the synagogue are unhappy that their rabbi is becoming a businessman, and are especially unhappy that he sets up shop in the black part of town with the intent to sell to black people, but in the end they have no control over Tateh.

Although the Shilskys hope to be a part of the community in Suffolk, many levels of bigotry prevent them from ever fully integrating. Anti-Semitism forces the family to find solace in other Jewish people, while anti-black sentiments in the Jewish community isolate Ruth's family even further. Tateh, however, does not choose anti-racist principles over a bigoted community; instead he chooses profits over a sense of belonging.

Their general store makes Ruth's family richer, but not happier. Her parents don't get along. Although Mameh is a devoted wife, a talented cook, and an observant Jew, Tateh does not love her, and even insults her and mocks her disability. Ruth has no personal or family life, instead, all of her family's energy is put back into the store. Before school, after school, and every day of the week except for the Sabbath Ruth and her siblings work in the shop.

Ruth and her family sacrifice love, affection, and community for their family store. Although there is the potential for the Shilskys to grow closer through labor, instead they spend their energy physically and have no time to form emotional bonds with each other. In her early life, family provides Ruth with very little aside from a place to sleep and food to eat.

Ruth is a claustrophobic child (and grows into a claustrophobic adult). She hates going into the icebox because she worries it will shut behind her, and although she doesn't have much free time she likes to go running when she can. Looking back later in life, Ruth sees that she was running from her father. She fears and resents Tateh because he sexually abused her as a child, and she felt she couldn't tell anyone about it.

Not only does Ruth's family fail to provide her with love and a sense of belonging, her father makes her life actively worse. Family, in her early years, is more a source of anguish than it is a source of comfort. This affects Ruth for the rest of her life — after feeling trapped in Suffolk, she developed the instinct to get outside and move around to escape bad situations and bad memories.

As a child, Ruth has low self-esteem, partially due to Tateh's mistreatment of her. She credits her first husband, Andrew Dennis McBride, with teaching her about God, "who lifted me up and forgave me and made me new." There were some aspects of Judaism Ruth enjoyed, like Passover, but the big Passover Seder just made her think about how much she wanted to be somewhere else, where she didn't have to withstand her father's abuse.

Religion, specifically Christianity, provides Ruth with the sense of belonging and the sense of purpose she had always expected from family. Because her birth family was so dysfunctional, later in life Ruth will attempt to construct her own family with her own set of rules that will bring people closer together, instead of continually driving them apart.

CHAPTER 6: THE NEW TESTAMENT

Ruth loves God and goes to church every Sunday. The whole family likes the pastor, Rev. Owens, but he barely ranks on her list of favorite ministers. These include her late husband Andrew Dennis McBride, among others who, James notes, are all black and "quite dead." Ruth likes old-fashioned preachers, who talk of God and genuinely care about their community. She doesn't like churches that bring in negativity or politics.

Ruth finds comfort and clarity in religion. The preachers she likes the best are the ones that bring her to what she sees as the proper spiritual place — one where she can forget the troubles of her past and present, and feel as though she is a part of something great.

During his childhood, James is grateful that his mother never "gets the spirit" and loses control at church, and he doesn't understand those who do. He can see the power of faith secondhand, because church is the only thing that made Ruth cry for joy, but as an adult, James says, he personally understands the power of God.

Religion is something that comes to James late in life, and helps him better connect with his mother. Although he could see how her faith helped her through difficult times, it wasn't until faith helped him *through difficult times that he truly understood Ruth's experiences with God.*

When James watches his mother cry in church he assumes it's because she wants to be black, like the other parishioners.

James assumes his mother's tears are race-related because so much of his own stress comes from wishing his racial identity were simpler.

James asks Ruth if God is black or white. Ruth explains God is neither black nor white, and he doesn't like one race more than the others. She explains that God is "the color of water."

This is where the title of the book comes from. Ruth wants James to understand that he is loved, valued, and important regardless of his skin tone, and so explains that God has no color preferences, as God himself is the color of water, and therefore all colors. James, as both black and white, could thus be said to be the color of water himself.

All of Ruth's children deal with race-related identity crises at various points in their lives. Richie, James's older brother, imagines he's green like the Incredible Hulk, and not black or white. In Sunday school one morning, Richie asks Rev. Owens what color Jesus is, because he's always depicted as white in paintings. Rev. Owens explains that Jesus is all colors, but is unable to argue when Richie then says that if Jesus is all colors he should be painted grey, not white. After this, Richie, although he still believes in God, stops going to church.

Because they are mixed-race and have no framework through which to investigate their own identities, James and his siblings use the tools available to them to explore their identities, be it religion or comic books. They desperately need mixed-race icons, and the failure of Rev. Owens to adequately explain Jesus's coloring is representative of larger societal issues around the mainstream acceptance and portrayal of mixed-race children.

James remembers reciting Bible stories and playing instruments in front of the congregation each Easter. One year, his brother Billy forgets his verse. After struggling to recall it again and again, the Deacon suggests he just recite any Bible verse he knows. Billy recites the shortest verse, which is, in full, "Jesus wept," and sits down. Ruth is angry and embarrassed, and punishes him when they get home.

Going to church and participating in the services is a large part of the McBride-Jordan children's upbringing. Ruth, who allows a fair amount of chaos into her house, disciplines her children only when she fears for them academically or spiritually, and this is one of those times.

CHAPTER 7: SAM

As Ruth works in her family's store, sailors come in and try to flirt with her and Dee-Dee. Mameh doesn't approve, and tells Ruth, in Yiddish, to make the sailors leave.

Mameh does her best to protect Ruth from the outside world, even if she can't provide her with a happy life (or protect her from Tateh).

Ruth remembers seeing the Ku Klux Klan drive through town. She doesn't always realize who they are at first, but the black customers at her family's store always run home when the see the Klan on the street. Ruth and her family don't fear white supremacists specifically, but they do worry about anti-Jewish sentiment in their town. Tateh buys a gun for protection, and Ruth constantly worries that he'd accidentally shoot himself while cleaning it.

Black people in Suffolk have to deal with violent, potentially deadly racism. Although Ruth's family is discriminated against, she has the luxury of not needing to know who the Klan is, because they do not pose a direct threat to her and her family. Although Ruth does not love her father, she dislikes the idea of his death because he is some of the only family she has.

Looking back on her childhood, Ruth considers how different life is for her mixed-race children compared to how black people lived in Suffolk. These people lived in "shacks with no running water, no foundations, no bathrooms…no paved roads, no electricity." Life for black families was "a dead end."

Growing up in the rural South, Ruth understands what true racism and dire poverty look like. She's worked hard as an adult to guarantee her children will never have to experience such hardships.

Ruth and her Jewish family, who had money, were unhappy, whereas black families in her town were very poor, but often happy and content in their communities.

Ruth's family life is so troubled that their relative economic prosperity brings them no joy. As Ruth often notices, her family provided her with a place to sleep and food to eat, but not with love.

Ruth's brother Sam is quiet and hardworking. Tateh is harder on him than he is on his daughters, and Sam is left with no time to study for school and no time to make friends. Ruth can only remember him smiling once, at his bar mitzvah, and she knows he was only happy because Mameh was happy to see him become a man. At fifteen Sam runs away to Chicago, and then enrolls in the army during WWII. He writes one letter home in English, which Ruth has to read to Mameh. Mameh asks Ruth to write back, asking Sam to come home, but Sam doesn't respond, and doesn't return. He would go on to die in WWII, before Ruth could ever see him again.

Ruth's relationship with her brother was similar to the one she had to every member of her family — essentially contractual. His relationship to the family is the same, and he makes the same choice Ruth did years later — he ran away to save himself from the tumult and abuse of his home life.

CHAPTER 8: BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Growing up, James is "lost in the sauce," unremarkable compared to his eleven siblings. He loves his brothers and sisters, but because there are so many of them and their family is relatively poor, they often fight over food. Ruth cannot cook, because she has neither the time nor the talent, so she brings home food from the work cafeteria and her children scrounge what they can. James' house is messy, a "combination three-ring circus and zoo," with pets rotating in and out. Ruth rules the household, but only oversees the most important problems (flooding, injury) and academics.

Although Ruth grew up in a well-ordered house where she always had enough to eat, she was unhappy and felt unloved. In contrast, the household she creates for her children is disordered, and her offspring are frequently hungry, but they're happy and loving. Ruth creates a family that is the opposite of the one that raised her—for her, a sense of belonging and togetherness is more important than material goods.

Dennis, James's oldest sibling, is held up as an example for the rest of the children to aspire to. He was an artist and had finished college, and now he is going to be a doctor. James knows Dennis spends much of his time as a civil rights activist, but Ruth doesn't mind, as long as it doesn't affect his performance in medical school.

As always, Ruth is primarily interested in her children's scholastic and religious achievements. Although race is important to her children, she has no interest in engaging with them about it.

James's second oldest sister is Helen. She's artistic and well liked by the neighborhood boys. Although she was once an A student and the pianist in the church choir, at age fifteen Helen drops out of school to become a hippie and stage a "revolution against the white man." Ruth is furious, and repeatedly disciplines Helen, but her mind remains unchanged. After a fight with her sister, Rosetta, Helen runs away from home, and even when Ruth promises to forgive her for everything, Helen will not return.

Ruth only becomes involved in her children's affairs when she worries that their academics or their relationship with God are at risk. In this case, Helen seems poised to drop out of favor scholastically and spiritually. This is one of the few times Ruth engages with her children over an issue of race. Although Ruth does not acknowledge it as a racial issue, Helen's rebellion is tied to her burgeoning black pride.

Helen stays at her half-sister Jack's house for a little while (her father's daughter from a previous relationship), before disappearing for months.

Jack is an example of the McBride-Jordan's extended family. Although she's only a half sibling to the McBride children, she treats all of Ruth's children as her blood relatives, and is happy to help them in times of need.

Months later, Jack calls Ruth and says she's found Helen. Helen is living in a housing project in Upper Manhattan. Ruth immediately travels to Helen's new home, which turns out to be a run-down housing project. Ruth makes it into the apartment, up to the eighth floor, down the hallway and to the door, but although Helen looks out at her through the peephole she will not open the door to talk. Ruth promises to forget the fights and months of silence if Helen just comes back home, but her daughter does not respond.

Just as Ruth once needed to escape her oppressive family, Helen has felt the need to escape her own. Although the two women had very different childhoods, Helen decided that her birth family was not providing her what she needed. In this moment Ruth also reveals the most important aspect of family life. Although she's made it clear that her priorities for her children are academic excellence and law abiding behavior, in the end what she wants most is for her family to stick together.

CHAPTER 9: SHUL

As the local rabbi, Tateh gives Hebrew lessons, circumcises children, and kills cows in a Kosher way. Watching her father, who she already fears, butcher animals makes it hard for Ruth to eat meat for much of her childhood.

Although her father is a rabbi, seeing up-close the workings of the Jewish faith makes Ruth less excited about her birth religion, and causes her to associate it with violence and her own unhappy family.

Suffolk has three schools, one for black townspeople, one for whites, and one for the Jewish community. Although Tateh doesn't think Ruth will learn anything in school, and he pays for private lessons in sewing and record keeping, legally Ruth has to go to the white school. The other kids tease her, which is what first prompts her to change her name from Rachel to the less Jewish-sounding Ruth. Ruth is lonely, and feels that no one likes her. Even the Jewish community ostracizes her family because their store also sells to Suffolk's black residents.

Ruth grows up isolated from the dominant white Christian population in her town, as well as from the Jewish community. Although one could expect the Jewish and black communities to feel some solidarity for each other, as the white, Christian majority treats both groups as outsiders, there is instead animosity towards the black residents of Suffolk from the Jewish ones.

In the fourth grade, Ruth makes her first and only friend, Frances. Frances isn't Jewish, but she doesn't care that Ruth is. Although Tateh disapproves of Ruth's friendship with a non-Jew, she disobeys him and remains friends with Frances all through childhood. Ruth appreciates that when Frances is around, the other kids at school don't pick on her.

Frances becomes the first non-biological member of Ruth's extended family, and is one of the first people Ruth meets who treats her with kindness and compassion, and who doesn't see her religion as an impediment to respect or friendship.

As a child, many of the families around Ruth are poor, regardless of race, Frances's family included. Comparably, Ruth's family is relatively well off and she has "to admit I never starved like a lot of people did." But, she explains, "I was starving in another way. I was starving for love and affection."

Although Ruth doesn't grow up poor, her family doesn't provide her the emotional support a person needs to feel happy and loved. Later in life and in her own family Ruth prioritizes community, love, and belonging above material wealth.

CHAPTER 10: SCHOOL

Ironically, although his mother was raised as an Orthodox Jew, James doesn't realize that Jewish people exist outside of the Bible until he goes shopping for school clothes in a Jewish neighborhood. He's surprised to hear Ruth haggle in Yiddish, but when he asks her, she refuses to tell him how she learned to speak it.

Ruth has closed off her past not only to herself but to her children. She's forgotten much of her former self, but occasionally, or apparently when it is useful, she's able to access this past self.

James recognizes that Jewish people are different from other white people, but he doesn't feel any connection to them. Ruth, drawing from her own childhood, testifies that "some Jews can't stand" her mixed-race children, but she also tells her children that certain Jewish people will treat them more kindly than other white people.

One of the reasons Ruth abandoned Judaism is her perception of its intolerance for interracial relationships. Although not universally true, Ruth's Jewish family threatened to disown her if she married a black man, and this is a prejudice she has never forgotten. Still, she knows her family is not indicative of every family, and suspects that the discrimination Jewish people and black people share will motivate some Jewish people to be kind to her children.

In her parenting Ruth draws upon her Jewish traditions, especially one of academic excellence. Ruth makes sure to take every opportunity she can to transfer James and his siblings from their neighborhood schools to better-performing, predominantly white and Jewish public schools.

Although Ruth no longer practices Judaism and no longer even identifies as white, some aspects of her heritage are hard or unnecessary to shake. Although James doesn't know about this Jewish heritage, he's partially raised in the Jewish tradition anyway, decades before he goes on a hunt to uncover his identity.

While most of the other children in James's neighborhood walk to the local schools, James and his siblings take buses to white and Jewish schools miles away. At these schools James is the only black student in his fifth grade class. He feels like "the token Negro," and is aware of harassment from teachers (who round down his test scores) and fellow students (who call him slurs in class). Although he knows his siblings would fight back against this kind of treatment, James is too quiet to say anything.

James experiences overt racism for the first time at the hands of his white classmates. This experience is doubly troubling because he so desperately wants to fit in somewhere, and is already self-conscious about his mixed-race background. The bullying by his fellow students makes him feel both like an outsider and insecure in his blackness.

In late elementary school James begins to escape from reality through music, books, and his own imagination. He imagines a **boy in the mirror** who represents his true, untroubled self. This imaginary James doesn't have a white mother, and always has enough to eat.

The boy in the mirror represents everything James wants that he does not have — enough food to eat, a black mother, a clear sense of belonging — and gives him someone to talk to about his troubles. James doesn't have anyone in his life who will listen to non-life-threatening issues, and so the boy in the mirror also acts as a silent friend in a household of noisy siblings.

James is generally a good kid—he does well in school, goes to church, and even has "good" or curly hair. Still, he feels incomplete because he doesn't know where his mother comes from, and he's aware that he doesn't look like her, white celebrities he looks up to, or his black role models and relatives. James learns the term "Tragic mulatto" in a book and asks Ruth about it. She becomes upset and refuses to answer his question regarding whether he's black or white. Some of James' older brothers identify as black, but no one considers mixed-race to be an identity.

It's hard for James to understand how he fits into the world racially when he never sees anyone who looks like him in his neighborhoods or on the television. The trope of the "tragic mulatto" is one that describes him well, but is an unflattering pop culture depiction — it generally involves a person, half black and half white, who is unable to be truly happy because they are unable to ever fit in to a white or black world.

James describes the question of race as "a silent power" which dominates his childhood household. Ruth, however, tries to keep her children too busy with school, free concerts, library visits, and other low-cost activities to think about their racial identities. Because the family is poor, she does everything as cheaply as she can, even getting her children's teeth cared for by half-trained dentistry school students.

Although Ruth refuses to discuss race, she cannot prevent her children from thinking about it, and as mixed-race young adults her children will constantly be considering their race, and trying to navigate their black identity in a primarily racist, segregated world.

The revolutionary spirit of the 1960s disturbs Ruth's carefully constructed household. Helen, who had run off at fifteen, returns five years later with a baby, signaling that the other children don't have to follow the rules so closely either. Many of James's siblings become excited by the Black Power movements, and express newfound black pride.

Again, although Ruth refuses to bring race into her household, she cannot prevent her children from exploring their blackness outside the home. It makes sense that many of her offspring, confused and ashamed of their mixed heritage and white mother, would gravitate towards a movement based around pride in their identities.

James's older brother Richie is arrested by the police during a summer home from college. Richie is absentminded and has money in his pockets for his student loan. The police find what they think is a bag of heroin on the street, and pin it on Richie because he's black and because he has money. Ruth, panicked, goes to his trial, and because the judge is white and Ruth is white, Richie is released and the charges are dropped. Unfortunately this makes Ruth even harsher on her younger children, as she attempts to keep them safe and out of trouble.

This is another instance of overt institutional racism. Richie is arrested solely because of his race, not because of any true ties to the supposed crime scene. Ruth's experiences with her black husbands and in the South had made her wary of bigoted people putting her sons in danger, and every time she is proved right she becomes more and more protective. At the same time, this scene shows that no matter how much Ruth identifies as non-white, she still is white, and so receives many of the accompanying privileges in a racist society.

As he gets older, James becomes more embarrassed of his white mother. One day, instead of walking to the store with her, he insists he go alone. Unfortunately, the white storeowner purposefully sells him expired milk. Ruth is outraged, and marches back to the store to demand a refund. When the storeowner refuses to reimburse her she eventually turns to leave, but after she hears a whispered (presumably racist) remark, she throws the milk at him.

Ironically, although James appears black and therefore is more likely to be discriminated against than his mother, his mother is the one who notices and responds to this small act of injustice. Although James thinks the milk is just expired, Ruth, having witnessed a lifetime of anti-black discrimination, identifies the storekeeper as a white racist who is intentionally swindling her son.

As a child, James felt it would be easier if he were just black or white, and he wishes his mother were black. As an adult, however, he appreciates the diversity of his black and Jewish upbringing. He doesn't identify as Jewish, but believes he is "a black man with something of a Jewish soul," and often sees Ruth in Jewish women he encounters. As an adult James "belong[s] to the world of one God, one people," but admits that as a child he preferred being black.

As an adult James understands that his mixed identity and his Jewish heritage are part of the rich tapestry of his identity. As a child, however, with no information and a lot of questions, that richness simply translates to confusion and angst. Although in many ways James is right that it is "easier" to be a single race and feel like a part of a single community, later in life he realizes that being part of many communities is in fact a blessing.

James remembers one day in school when his classmates forced him to dance like James Brown. Even though he explained he couldn't dance, his white classmates didn't believe him, and eventually he did a James Brown impression for his class. Everyone applauded, but James realized that even by entertaining his white classmates he was no closer to fitting in. He thinks of the **boy in the mirror**, who is free, while he feels trapped.

Once again, James is harassed by his white classmates simply for not being white. Like earlier in the chapter, James is offended by his classmates' racist assumptions and upset by the way his race makes him an outsider. He feels trapped both by the people around him who he feels are mistreating him, and by his own insecurity and racial confusion.

CHAPTER 11: BOYS

Ruth's unhappy home life only gets worse after Sam runs away. She's expected to do more at the store to make up for her brother's absence. She's also becoming a teenager, and starts to want nice clothes and attention from boys. Unfortunately Tateh is very cheap, although he will spend money on himself, and he won't pay for trendy clothing when they can get hand-me downs for free. Ruth's other attempts to integrate into the social scene at her school are all failures; she loves dancing and has long legs, but because she is Jewish her classmates refuse to be her partner in gym class, and complain so much that she's forced to drop out of the school musical.

Ruth's interest in boys initially comes from her desire to have someone love and desire her. At home she receives abuse and no real affection from her father, and limited attention from her mother, and at school she's ostracized because of her Judaism. She has no hobbies, and is unable to participate in extracurricular activities, again because of her religion. This leaves her with romance as her only potential distraction from her everyday life.

Ruth meets her first boyfriend, Peter, in her father's shop. They flirt whenever he comes in to buy something, and eventually he invites her to go on a walk. Ruth initially speculates that because Tateh hated black people, and black men in particular, she rebelled by dating a black man, but she also knows that Peter is more than his race. He's kind to her, and Ruth is drawn to his kindness and nonjudgmental nature (which is something she likes about black people generally: that they don't judge her for being Jewish, and accept her as she is).

Ruth's interest in Peter is seemingly mostly due to his kindness and her loneliness, but potentially also because of her desire to rebel against her father. He hated black people, and Ruth spends her life in romantic relationships exclusively with black men. However, this could also be due to her sense that unlike white men, who bullied her throughout her childhood, black men were accepting of her and her Jewish heritage.

Falling in love changes Ruth's life. In addition to loving Peter, she feels loved for the first time. She isn't worried about people finding out about her relationship, although Peter's friends are clearly afraid of her—they know the Ku Klux Klan and the regular townspeople would kill Peter if they found out his was dating a white girl. Seeing how Peter's friends respond to her makes Ruth a little nervous about her relationship, but it falls apart when she becomes pregnant at fifteen. She's devastated, and knows that she cannot ask anyone for help.

Just like her son, who aches because he doesn't feel like he belongs anywhere, Ruth finally begins to feel happy when she feels desired and loved by Peter. Unfortunately, she is initially clueless about the danger of their interracial relationship. To her it's a fun, secret romance, but for Peter their relationship could literally lead to his death, as the KKK was known to murder black men who they believed were involved with white women.

In the South, Ruth and her family are technically white and "number one," even though they're Jewish, which elevates them socially above the black residents of Suffolk. However, Ruth only feels "number one" with Peter. She tries to convince Peter to elope, but he refuses, worried that he'll be killed. Ruth had believed Peter had all the answers, but when he tells her "If white folks find out you're pregnant by me, I will surely hang" she realizes there's no easy way out and begins to panic. Luckily, Ruth's mother finds one of Ruth's bracelets in the alley behind the family store where Ruth and Peter would meet and talk. Somehow Mameh pieces together that Ruth and Peter are dating, and that Ruth is pregnant, and suggests she go to New York city to see her grandmother.

Ruth's Judaism has prevented her from experiencing many of the privileges of her whiteness. Because of her religious identity she's been a second-class citizen all her life, and it's only with Peter that she begins to feel important and special. Although she begins to understand how taboo and dangerous their relationship is, she naïvely believes that if the people of Suffolk can see how in love they are, they'll accept them. She's wrong, unfortunately, and it will be three decades before interracial marriages are even legalized in her state (thanks to the case of Loving vs. Virginia in 1967). Although Ruth is not close to her family, her mother's attention and help likely save Ruth and Peter's lives, as Mameh's intervention allows Ruth to get an abortion and keep her relationship with Peter a secret.

CHAPTER 12: DADDY

Hunter Jordan and Ruth met when he was a fireman for the NYC Housing Authority and Ruth was selling church dinners by her apartment. Hunter came back to buy from her again and again, eventually inviting her (and her eight children) out on a date to the movies. All of James's brothers and sisters see themselves as full siblings, although some of them are half siblings, and the younger ones especially, who don't remember Andrew Dennis McBride, all call Hunter "Daddy." James is so comfortable calling Hunter is father that, for his early childhood, he doesn't realize he has a biological father.

Ruth has successfully brought together a family that loves one another regardless of how closely related they actually are. Siblings and half siblings see no difference between each other, and Hunter, who is a stepfather to eight of Ruth's children, treats the children like he is their father.

Hunter Jordan values neatness and order, and so doesn't live with Ruth and her children. When James is seven Hunter buys the family a house in Queens, but he remains in his brownstone apartment in Brooklyn. He visits on the weekend with groceries and treats, taking carloads of children back to his home for a few days at a time.

The McBride-Jordan family is unconventional, but what keeps them united even when physically apart is the love and affection they all feel for each other.

James notices that his stepfather is "odd." He's of a different generation than many of James' friends' parents, and as a result is more formal and well mannered, and less interested in discussing race. In the summer of 1969 Hunter is forced by the city to move out of his beloved Brownstone to make way for low-income housing. He moves to Queens with his family, but "his heart was back in Brooklyn."

Although Hunter has faced severe racism in his life, his response to his past hardship is stoic. Like Ruth, Hunter prefers not to talk about his past trauma, and seems to cope by remaining strong and silent. Even when he is evicted from the home he loves, he doesn't complain, though James can tell it breaks his heart.

One night, when James is fourteen and Hunter is in his seventies, he complains of a headache. He goes to the hospital and discovers he's had a stroke. He stays in the hospital for the next two weeks, and James does his best to avoid going to visit. Eventually, Ruth forces James and his sister Kathy to see their father, and both children are horrified by how sick Hunter looks—weak, attached to an IV, and paralyzed on his right side. Although he cannot speak, Hunter tries to comfort Kathy, while James leaves the room in tears.

James loves Hunter as though he is his biological father, and so it is difficult for him to see Hunter sick. James knows seeing his stepfather ill will be upsetting, and so does his best to avoid having to confront a situation which he knows will be devastatingly sad.

A week later, Hunter returns from the hospital. He seems better, and begins to regain his speech, but is still clearly ill. One day, he takes James to the garage and they sit in his car. Hunter wants to drive one last time to Richmond, Virginia, where he grew up, but he is too sick to go anywhere. He asks James to look out for his younger siblings because "y'all are special…and just so special to me." James is unused to talking to his stepfather about his emotions, and though he wants to he is unable to tell Hunter that he loves him and hopes he gets better. Two days later, he is hospitalized again, and dies.

Hunter's last wish is for his family to remain united as they deal with the trauma of his death. James infers that when his stepfather calls him and his siblings "special," he is referring to their mixed-race heritage. If his inference is correct, then this is the only time James and his stepfather ever explicitly discuss race or racism.

CHAPTER 13: NEW YORK

Somehow, Mameh knows that Ruth is pregnant. Though a quiet woman, Mameh is very perceptive. For many years she could see that Ruth was unhappy and so would send her to New York in the summer to stay with aunts and Bubeh. Ruth likes New York because "everyone seemed too busy to care about what race or religion you were." Her aunts are kind enough to her, and take pity on her because of Mameh's disability.

Mameh isn't able to offer much of a family life to Ruth, but she does what she can to make Ruth's life easier. In this case, Mameh sends Ruth to New York every summer because she can tell that Ruth needs to get out of Suffolk, and this specific summer Mameh sends Ruth to New York to help her deal with her teenage pregnancy.

When she visits New York Ruth stays with her grandmother, Aunt Mary, or Aunt Laura. Aunt Laura is rich, with a live-in maid and cook, but doesn't mind doing her own housework. Aunt Mary runs a leather factory that Ruth works in some summers. Mary is not kind to Ruth, but Ruth forgives her, as it is difficult to run a business as a woman in the 1930s. Ruth's mother's family takes care of her, but she says, "I didn't feel loved by them." They provide her with food to eat and a place to stay, but they do not feel any emotional obligation to her. The exception to this is Bubeh, who loves Ruth.

Ruth's mother's family is not warm to her. Like her immediate family back in Suffolk, they provide her with the very basics she needs to survive — food, a place to sleep — but she still feels starved for love and affection, and doesn't feel as though she is wanted or as though she fits in.

Bubeh is warm, funny, and "full of life." She's older and diabetic, and Ruth is constantly worried that she will go into diabetic shock. Ruth repeatedly wakes Bubeh up from naps to make sure she's alive, and Bubeh always responds sweetly that she's sleeping, not dead, but is happy to talk if something is wrong.

Bubeh is the one member of Ruth's family who treats her the way family is expected to treat one another. Bubeh clearly loves Ruth, and is actually kind to her, offering her more than just the bare necessities.

Ruth's Aunt Betsy lives with Bubeh. She can tell that Ruth is upset about something, and asks what is wrong. Eventually, Ruth breaks down and explains that she's pregnant. Betsy doesn't ask any more questions, but finds Ruth a Jewish doctor who can perform an abortion. The operation is painful and the doctor does not use anesthesia. After this, Ruth feels guilty for being a burden.

Ruth appreciates the help her Aunt provides her. Although Ruth's mother's family is not warm, they feel an obligation to help one another because they are all related. In this time of need, Ruth's family proves reliable, if not particularly comforting.

As an adult, Ruth goes to Aunt Betsy again for help, but Betsy slams the door in her face. Ruth explains that she's never felt bitter towards Betsy, because her mother's sisters were just "trying hard to be American," and as a result were focused more on money and their own hardships than on their extended families.

As an adult Ruth is cast out by her family, and when she approaches them for help in her middle age, they shut the door on her. However, instead of feeling resentful, Ruth understands that her mother's sisters' obligations were to themselves and their children, and that she, as a niece, didn't deserve any kind of help from them.

CHAPTER 14: CHICKEN MAN

After her second husband's death, Ruth "stagger[s] through the motions of life." She does her best to maintain her household, but emotionally she is falling apart. James doesn't like being around the house with his devastated mother, and so he begins sneaking out, and eventually staying out and not going to school. Looking back, James understands he was beginning his own "process of running, emotionally disconnecting myself from [Ruth], as if by doing so I could keep her suffering from touching me."

Although Ruth has been able to cope with many tragedies in her life by locking away her negative memories or else by physically running away, after the death of her second husband she is unable to escape her grief. James also finds his emotions unbearable, and so he reacts by spending as much time away from home as possible, because home reminds him of the father he's lost.

At fourteen, James is finally the oldest child in his house, but instead of ruling over his siblings he is out of the house as much as possible, smoking marijuana, drinking, and playing in a soul band. James handle watching his mother suffer, and is afraid of taking on the responsibility of looking after his family, so instead of trying to help pay the bills or keep the house in order he ignores the chaos. Instead, together with his new friends Beanie, Marvin, Chink, Pig, and Bucky, he shoplifts, breaks into cars, and robs freight cars on the nearby railroad. One particularly debaucherous night, the police find James and his friends with cases of stolen wine. James runs and hides, and when it's clear he's home free he gets so drunk in celebration that he can't walk. When he eventually makes it home Ruth whips him in punishment, but it doesn't change his behavior. James explains, "my friends became my family, and my family and mother just became people I lived with."

James's home life has become too emotionally complicated for him to deal with. Although he has waited his whole life to be the oldest sibling, and to rule over his younger brothers and sisters, he would rather suppress his emotions through crime, drugs, and alcohol than face his mourning family. Just as Ruth left home as a young woman and constructed a new family for herself out of people she met in New York City, James temporarily abandons his biological family in favor of friends, who help him detach from the death of his stepfather.

James snatches purses and even robs a drug dealer with his straight razor and his friend Joe's gun. When James robs women he feels guilty, but not guilty enough to stop. He believes he is "getting back at the world for injustices I had suffered," although he admits that he wouldn't be able to name those injustices if asked. As an adult he can see the connection between when he watched his own mother's purse get stolen as a child and his purse stealing now, but at the time James felt they were unrelated. He does his best to repress his feelings by drinking and smoking.

As a young adult James never pauses to consider his behavior or why he is acting out. Later in life, writing his book, he can look back and understand that he was running from his feelings about the death of his stepfather. Looking back James can also begin to understand his criminal behavior. Although he never explains it, perhaps by stealing the purses of women his mother's age he is regaining some of the control he lost when Ruth's purse was snatched during his early childhood.

James forges his report card for a while, and enlists Kathy to help. However, Kathy gives him C grades instead of his usual As, which prompts Ruth to call the school. Ruth then discovers that James is not even a C student—he's entirely dropped out. Ruth is unable to punish James. She enrolls him in summer school but he gets thrown out, his older brothers come home and beat him, but nothing works. Eventually, Ruth sends James to spend the summer in Kentucky with his sister Jack, Andrew Dennis McBride's daughter from a previous marriage.

Kathy helps James forge his report card because they're siblings, and siblings look out for each other. Yet Ruth uncovers their deception. As a mother she wants nothing more than to see her children succeed, and she only punishes them to try to keep them doing their best. With James, Ruth can see that there is no way she can convince him to change his behavior, so she outsources her disciplining to Jack, a member of her extended family network.

Kentucky is not a punishment for James. He loves Jack, and feels free running around Louisville. He spends a lot of time with Big Richard, Jack's husband, and the "boys on the 'the Corner,'" a group of blue collar workers and hustlers who hang out in front of the liquor store. Most of them are "good-natured alcoholics," and they obey loose codes of ethics—no cheating at dice, don't pull out a gun if you don't intend to use it. Chicken Man is James's favorite of the bunch. He's a sweet man, incoherent when drunk, and a minor philosopher when sober. James notices that the men on the Corner don't pay much attention to white people, and are indifferent to the police. James likes that "their world was insular, away from the real world that I was running from." Here, his dead father and white mother are his own private business.

During his summers in Kentucky, James seeks out a new family in the alcoholics who sit on the corner. For many years this group of men is aspirational — James wants to live outside of the real world, full of stress, death, and racism, and it seems to him that the men on the corner don't have to deal with any of the real issues that make his life so complicated. What he doesn't understand as a child, however, is that this lifestyle isn't preferable to the one he could have if he stayed in school and applied himself. Instead of being free from burdens, a life as an unemployed alcoholic would come with an entirely new set of worries and struggles, one of those being the frustration of unrealized potential.

The men on the Corner look out for James. He steals a few car batteries with one man, Pike, but when they are shot at by an angry car owner Pike refuses to continue to endanger James. Eventually, James gets a real job pumping gas, but is fired after he fights with one of his boss's friends, a gay man who is sexually harassing him. Unemployed and angry, James spends all of his free time on Corner, plotting revenge against his harasser and former boss. Chicken Man cautions him to "forget it," and warns him that he'll get himself arrested and end up on the Corner permanently, with the middle-aged drunks and jobless. James argues that he's too smart for that to happen, but Chicken Man points out that if James were so smart he wouldn't be flunking out of school, and forced to spend summers in Louisville because he can't be trusted in New York.

The men on the Corner look out for James even when he cannot look out for himself. They treat him as a little brother, or as a child, and try to keep him out of harm's way. Chicken Man sees what James cannot — that living on the Corner is not a life James should aspire to. James is a smart boy, with the resources to go far in life. Chicken Man can see this, and tries to caution James not to squander the potential he has to make something of himself in the world.

A few days later, James gets a real look at what permanent life on the Corner could look like. He sees a man, Mike, arguing and hitting girlfriend because he believes she's unfaithful, and the next day watches Mike return to the Corner with a sawed-off shotgun ready to shoot her lover. The lover never arrives, and Mike and his girlfriend eventually make up. Chicken Man tells James "that's why I don't have no arguments with no woman," because they'll just lead to a man embarrassing himself. But Chicken Man eventually does get into an argument with a woman, who shoots and kills him in a liquor store.

Even after James sees some of the harsh realities of living on the Corner, like the constant threat of death, he still entertains fantasies of dropping out of school completely. Still, Chicken Man's sudden death sticks with him throughout his life, and slowly begins to convince him that this isn't the easy, carefree existence he had imagined.

CHAPTER 15: GRADUATION

After her abortion Ruth stays in New York. She lives with Bubeh and attends Girls Commercial High school. She realizes after a year that the academics are moving too quickly and she won't graduate on time, so she returns to Suffolk for her senior year. As soon as she gets home she breaks up with Peter, because although she loves him, she understands how dangerous their relationship is for both of them. However, not long after, she's upset to hear customers at her father's shop gossiping about Peter—he's gotten a girl pregnant and he's going to marry her. Ruth is devastated. Peter's new lover is black, and Ruth understands that she could never marry Peter, not in Virginia, not in 1937.

Ruth finally understands how dangerous her relationship with Peter is for him, and how impossible it always was in the long run. Still, although she understands that contemporary racism will keep them apart, she still loves him and is upset by the injustice of the situation. She's especially upset when she discovers that Peter has been cheating on her with a black girl who he will easily be allowed to marry, and who will keep her child, whereas Ruth was forced to get a painful abortion to protect both of them.

After finding out about Peter's upcoming marriage, Ruth decides that once she graduates high school she's leaving Suffolk forever. Her only reservation is leaving behind Mameh, who still cannot speak English and relies on Ruth to navigate the world. Still, Ruth sees her parents' unhappy marriage and knows that if she stays she will be pressured into an arranged marriage as well. She explains she'd "rather die" than have an arranged marriage, and that by leaving home and abandoning her mother and sister she was, in a way, killing off her past self.

Ruth's realization that interracial marriage will not be accepted in Virginia for a long time is enough to convince her to leave it forever. Having seen how unhappy her parents are, Ruth wants to marry for love, and she doesn't' want to be limited by the prejudices of the town she lives in, especially if those prejudices could potentially turn deadly.

As graduation approaches, Frances asks Ruth to walk with her. Ruth hasn't shared any of the trouble in her life with Frances, but Frances is a loyal friend and Ruth wants to do this small thing for her. Ruth is nervous about the graduation because it ends with a ceremony in a Protestant Church. For this same reason Tateh at first refuses to give her the money for her cap and gown, but Mameh convinces him, and he pays on the condition that Ruth not go into the church. Tateh doesn't care about Ruth's graduation, but he is worried that she has no marriage prospects, and takes her on business outings so she can meet eligible Jewish men.

Because Ruth loves Frances as a family member, she will do anything for her. However, as a Jewish woman, she still has difficulty with the idea of going into a Christian church. Still, she sees love and friendship as things a person should make sacrifices for, and so commits to walking with Frances in their graduation, even though it makes her uncomfortable, because it will make Frances happy.

On graduation day Ruth is nervous. Frances understands, and tells Ruth that if she can't go into the church, Frances can graduate by herself. Ruth doesn't want this to happen and so walks with Frances through the town to the church doors. As she approaches, Ruth steps out of line. She just cannot make herself go inside the church. Both Ruth and Frances cry as it becomes clear Ruth will not graduate with her friend, but Frances continues into the church. Ruth walks home alone, and the next day leaves for New York.

Ruth tries her hardest to go into the church with Frances, because she knows how important it is for her only friend, but her religion, the culture of the town, and the ingrained habits of her family hold her back. This is one of the last times Ruth will find herself pulled between her Judaism and her friendships.

CHAPTER 16: DRIVING

One morning in 1973, when James is sixteen, Ruth decides she's going to learn to drive Hunter Jordan's car. James doesn't think his mother has ever driven before, but she decides it's time to learn. James is beginning to acknowledge Chicken Man's advice—he knows that if he keeps up his behavior he's going to end up like the men on the Corner, drunk or dead. Modeling himself on his mother, and following Jack's advice to "put yourself in God's hands and you can't go wrong," James prays to God to help him change into a man. It takes time, and James still relies on marijuana to keep from thinking about his dysfunctional family and his mother's grief.

According to James himself, his turn toward religion helps save his life. He was on a path where he could have easily ended up like Chicken Man — on the Corner or even dead — but by asking God to help him change he begins to grow and mature. What James needs is some outlet through which he can process his grief. Drinking, drugs, and crime were destructive, but religion proves to be a safer and more constructive option.

Looking back, James sees that it took Ruth a decade to recover from her second husband's death. She mourned her husband, but also "the accumulation of a lifetime of silent suffering," like the loss of her family, the death of her first husband, and the death of her best friend Irene Johnson, who was like a sister to her. To keep from losing her mind completely, Ruth remains in motion, riding her **bicycle**, taking bus rides, and walking around the neighborhood. James explains, "She ran, as she had done most of her life, but this time she was running for her own sanity."

Ruth has managed to escape bad situations and negative emotions in the past relatively easily. After she left her family she changed her name and shut the door on the first chapter of her life. After her first husband died she quickly remarried and somehow stopped thinking about Dennis at all. But now she has no easy way of moving on. As she mourns Hunter she also mourns Dennis, and her mother, and her brother, and all the memories she's been trying so hard to suppress and outrun for so long.

Even when everything else is falling apart, Ruth finds strength and hope in Jesus, and goes to church every Sunday regardless of how awful she feels. James notes the irony that once Ruth couldn't make herself walk into a church, and now she cannot live without it.

As both Ruth and James comment frequently, Christianity saved Ruth's life. It gave her a reason to live, and it gave her tools to cope with the tragedy she faces in her life, and has faced in her past.

Ruth has convinced herself that she needs to learn how to drive, and recruits James to help her. The two of them drive a few blocks down the street to the grocery store, running stop signs and swerving into incoming traffic. Ruth parks in the street with the engine running as she goes into the store, and on the way back she smashes the brakes so hard that James almost hits the windshield. Ironically, although she has since forgotten, Ruth knew how to drive before she was eighteen, when she would drive Tateh's car around Suffolk. James speculates that "she had left her past so far behind she literally did not know how to drive." Although Rachel Shilsky was a skilled driver, Ruth McBride Jordan had never driven a car before that day.

Ruth wants to drive because she thinks it will help her family if she can use the car. Ironically, she was once able to drive when she went by Rachel, but she has erased her memory of her past so completely that she can no longer even remember how. Although Ruth's careful compartmentalizing of memories and identities has made her life easier, this is one situation where she erased her past self too completely.

CHAPTER 17: LOST IN HARLEM

When Ruth first moves to New York she stays with Bubeh and works in Aunt Mary's leather factory. Aunt Mary, who was already unkind to Ruth, cuts her no slack now that she is an adult. Ruth's New York family is more or less in chaos. Mary dominates in her marriage to her husband, Isaac, a mean alcoholic. Meanwhile Mary is having an affair with her best friend's husband.

Ruth's family, who took care of her as a child out of obligation, now feel no need to give her special treatment. Still, Ruth shouldn't feel too bad, as her Aunt doesn't even respect her husband, and if she can't be counted on to be kind to the man she is married too, it seems too much to ask that she make special accommodations for her niece.

In 1939 Andrew Dennis McBride comes to work at Aunt Mary's factory. He is kind to Ruth, and always takes time to do little nice things for her. Looking back, Ruth thinks she should have married him right then, but she was young and excited to explore the city, and Harlem in particular. "Harlem was like magic," Ruth says. It was a place for black and white people to party together, and it drew partiers from across the country.

As in her relationship with Peter, what first draws Ruth to Dennis is that he is kind to her and makes her feel interesting and desired. Still, she delays this particular relationship because at this point in her life the borough of Harlem makes her feel more excited and more included than she believes any relationship could.

Ruth tries to get a job in a movie theatre in Harlem, but most employers don't understand a white girl's desire to work in a predominantly black neighborhood and assume she's a prostitute. When movie theatres prove to be a dead end, Ruth tries to get a job as a hairstylist—but she cannot style black hair—and finally as a manicurist. Ruth gets a job at the Hi Hat Barbershop, which pays fifteen dollars a week. Her boss, Rocky, has other plans for her, although she doesn't realize it at first. He takes her to nightclubs and on long drives; he even rents her an apartment closer to work. Eventually he tells her he'll teach her about the girls standing out on the street, and Ruth realizes he's grooming her for prostitution.

Black business owners in Harlem cannot understand why a white girl would want to work for them. Ruth, however, is captivated by the vibrancy of the city, and has always gravitated towards black people and black communities, as they were some of the only ones to accept her as a child. Although Ruth does eventually find a job, Rocky fetishizes her and her whiteness, which is not the kind of accepting community Ruth was searching for.


Ruth lives some of the time in her Harlem apartment, and some of the time at Bubeh's. Eventually, she stops staying with Bubeh, because she reminds Ruth of her family, "what I was and where I came from." She moves to Harlem and tells Rocky she's ready to make money like his other girls. A little while after this, Ruth runs into Dennis on the street in Harlem. He tells her that her family is all looking for her, and is disappointed to hear she's running around with Rocky, a "pimp." Dennis makes Ruth feel so ashamed that she packs up and goes back to Bubeh's. Rocky tries to track her down—he calls and sends flowers—but she ignores him for long enough that he eventually leaves her alone.

Even before Ruth fully cuts her family out of her life, she practices isolating herself from her family to protect herself. Although she never outright says that she dislikes Rocky, or is nervous about a future as a prostitute, she likely feels guilty imagining how her mother or grandmother would react. However, in the end it's Dennis whose response to her career choices make her reconsider. Although he's not yet family, and she does not yet have any obligation to him, his disappointment in her is enough to convince her to rethink her profession.

CHAPTER 18: LOST IN DELAWARE

In June of 1974 Ruth announces the family is moving to Delaware. Three years after the death of her second husband, her house is in disrepair and she's unable to maintain it financially. James is excited to leave; his old friends are bad news, and he'll probably have to complete an additional year of school if he stays in New York. Meanwhile, his sisters love the city and want to stay. Ruth waffles back and forth, but eventually commits to moving. At the end of the summer, the family loads up a U-Haul and drives to Wilmington, chosen because Ruth has an old friend who lives in the state.

Ruth needs to move for financial reasons, but picks her location based on personal ones — she hopes that having a friend in Delaware will provide her with some kind of readymade community. Ruth also wants to move for personal reasons; all her life she's run from tragedy, and in the wake of her second husband's death she needs a change of location so she can begin to move on.

James and his family are shocked by the suburbs. Unlike in New York, where they could take public transportation anywhere, they need a car to navigate the town. The town itself is shockingly segregated, with white families living in the suburbs and attending well-funded schools, and black families living in the city at understaffed, underfunded schools.

Wilmington is immediately a disappointment because of both its suburban sprawl and its racism. Although Ruth had assumed Delaware was "Northern" enough to avoid the anti-black sentiments of her childhood, the segregation of the city is not unlike Suffolk.

One evening, while the family is driving, they're pulled over by state troopers. David, who was driving, had made an illegal U-turn, and although that's generally only cause for a ticket or citation, he's taken to night court. In court Ruth panics, and yells across the room to David not to plead guilty. From this moment on Ruth decides she hates Delaware and is moving. She loads her daughters on the Amtrak going north, but two hours later James has convinced her to stay.

Although Ruth already dislikes Wilmington for its segregated neighborhoods, she turns against it forever when her son is arrested. David did make an illegal traffic maneuver, but his arrest was likely racially motivated, as it's the kind of offense that generally gets a ticket or warning and not an immediate trial. Ruth values her children and their success above all else, and so this interaction with the police is especially horrible for her, as it threatens to jeopardize David's future.

James understands that Ruth is "spinning in crazy circles only because she was trying to survive," and she always starts running when she's in a tight spot. For the past thirty years she's been married, but now she has to run a family entirely alone. Eventually, Ruth is jolted out of her spiral of panic and guilt by prayer, and by her commitment to her children's education. Unhappy with the public schools, she gets her driver's license and attempts to enroll James in a private or Catholic school. His years of missing school mean he can't pass their entrance exams, however, so James is forced to go to the all-black Pierre S. Du Pont High School.

Ruth's move to Delaware was an attempt to regain control of her life, as she's always found changing locations to be useful. This time moving doesn't help, but she does find focus and purpose in her children's education. In the end, Ruth's family is her anchor, and she is able to center herself by trying to help her children get into the best possible schools.

Luckily, James and his sisters like Du Pont high school. James finds the schoolwork easy and commits himself to music instead of drinking and doing drugs. He is even selected to travel to Europe with the American Youth Jazz Band. Although James cannot pay for it, Mr. and Mrs. Dawson, a rich white couple from Pennsylvania, sponsor him. Their one request is that he, and other students they sponsor, work at their estate on weekends during the summer. James is aware of what a turnaround he has had in life—from sitting on the Corner in Louisville to acting as a butler for rich white people in the Pennsylvania suburbs. Although the men and women he serves (among them the governor of Delaware) are nothing like him or his family, James "had no anger toward them"; instead, his "anger at the world had been replaced by burning ambition."

James's interactions with the Dawsons are some of his first positive encounters with white people. Although their scholarship comes with strings attached and he's forced to act as their butler for the summer, interacting with the Dawsons shows him that not all white people will be discriminatory against him. Additionally, seeing the family's lavish home and wealthy friends is aspirational, and motivates James to work harder, presumably so he can be rich like them.

James is a terrible butler, but he gets along with Mrs. Dawson, who is the first white person to talk to him about music, art, and literature. James also works in the grounds and gardens of the estate, but he's bad at that too, and eventually Mrs. Dawson fires him. He's upset that she tells him "You, *boy*, have to learn to work," but is grateful to be fired.

James's relationship with Mrs. Dawson is complicated but generally positive. She teaches him about music, art, and literature, and treats him as an equal. Still, the racial divide and norms of an unequal society are always present between them, like when she calls him "boy," which is a derogatory way white people have been referring to black adult men for decades.

Years later, as a college student, James receives a letter from Mrs. Dawson that Mr. Dawson has died of cancer. Later on that day another black student comments that "whiteys" are "all rich. They got no problems," and while James agrees, he feels conflicted.

In college James's feelings about the Dawsons are conflicted. On the one hand, he's become more invested in his blackness, and as a result he and his friends are more dismissive of white struggles. On the other, he knows Mrs. Dawson on a human level, and understands that, despite what his friends say, she is experiencing similar hardship. This likely also reminds him of his own white mother, and the grief she's felt after the deaths of her husbands.

James considers graduating from high school and immediately trying to start a music career, but more than anything wants to leave Delaware, which he knows will be easier if he goes to college. He applies and is admitted to Oberlin, and in September 1975 packs his bags and drives to the Greyhound station. Even as he is getting out, James is aware that Ruth is stuck in the state. She has few friends, and cannot get along with anyone, black or white. As his bus begins to drive away he thinks of all the times Ruth has put him on a bus—to camp, to elementary school, to Kentucky—to try and guarantee him a better life. He knows how much it hurts her to send her children away, but he also knows she believes it is the best way to make sure they are successful. Although Ruth never cries in front of her children, as the bus turns the corner James can see Ruth sobbing against the wall of the bus station.

Ruth lives her life with the intention of giving her children more opportunities than she ever had. Although Ruth hates Delaware and wants to get out, and although she would love her children to live nearby, she forces James to leave because she knows it will provide him with more opportunities. Ruth sees family as the people one makes sacrifices for, a sentiment likely grown out of her own upbringing, where, with the exception of her own mother, no one ever made sacrifices for her.

CHAPTER 19: THE PROMISE

A few weeks after Ruth has officially parted ways with Rocky, she and Dennis start dating. He's a violinist and a talented singer, but makes very little money, which is why, later in life, she tries to keep James from following the same career path. Dennis is so poor he can't afford rent, and eventually goes to his family friends Curtis and Minnie Ware, who offer him a place to stay. Dennis introduces Ruth to the Wares and, although they're shocked for a moment, they recover and invite her in.

Although Dennis is not technically family, Curtis and Minnie open their home to him as though he is. This is the beginning of Ruth's extended, predominantly black family, made up of friends and the families of her husbands. Although her whiteness is shocking for a second, she is quickly accepted into Dennis's world.

At this time, in 1940, interracial relationships are very uncommon, but Dennis insists on being public with it, and introduces Ruth to all the members of his family. His family adopts Ruth as their own, and some, like his Aunt Candis, become invaluable sources of support for Ruth, helping her through Dennis's death years later. Ruth falls in love with Dennis after only a few months, and Dennis suggests living as husband and wife before they get married for real, so Ruth moves out of Bubeh's apartment and the pair move in together.

Being with Dennis is everything Ruth ever dreamed of. Finally, she has a community of people who love and accept her, people who will continue to support her and care about her wellbeing even after Dennis is gone. Unlike her first relationship with Peter, where they had to keep it secret because of the danger of racist violence, Ruth is happy that she can be public in her love for her soon-to-be husband.

One day, Ruth misses her mother and decides to call home. Tateh answers and tells her Mameh is sick and he needs help with the store. Ruth feels that she needs to go back for Mameh, and so travels to Virginia. Mameh is getting sicker and sicker—almost blind in one eye, and prone to passing out—but remains a good Jewish wife, keeping house and cooking. Ruth remarks that today, Mameh would be seen as an abused woman, but back then she was just a wife, as Tateh's abusive treatment was normalized.

Although Ruth has mostly left her family behind, she still feels some obligation to them, and feels especially indebted to Mameh. Looking back, Ruth realizes that her parents' marriage was abusive, but at the time it just seemed like an unhappy partnership. Luckily, Ruth was able to understand how unhealthy the dynamic was as a young woman, and so was able to avoid the same kind of trauma in her own marriages.

Although Mameh is a devoted wife, Tateh begins to cheat on her with a white Christian woman from the town. He has Ruth act as an intermediary between himself and Mameh, and tries to get Mameh to divorce him, which she refuses to do. Mameh is left with no one to take care of her—she's sick and handicapped, with sisters who don't care about her. When Mameh will not agree to a divorce Tateh goes to Reno and gets a divorce by himself. Still, things don't change in the household. Everyone was miserable before the divorce, and everyone remains miserable after.

Tateh has no respect for Mameh, and seems to place no value on the family he's been terrorizing for so long. Ruth doesn't understand Tateh's total disregard for her mother. Even though she will soon abandon her family to preserve her own wellbeing, it seems that Tateh was doing just fine as a member of the family and is divorcing Mameh out of spite, although it is unclear what she has ever done to anger him.

Ruth worries about how Dee-Dee, who is only fifteen, is being affected by the problems in their family. No one, Ruth included, talks to her about her feelings or what is going on in the family. One evening, Dee-Dee comes to Ruth and asks her not to go back to New York. She cries and makes Ruth promise to stay, which Ruth does. But Ruth doesn't stay in Virginia, and Dee-Dee holds this against her forever.

Ruth and Dee-Dee are not very close, as no one in their family ever shared emotions. Ruth then destroys any chance at having a positive relationship with Dee-Dee when Dee-Dee is open with her for the first time, expressing how much she needs Ruth and how she wants Ruth to stay, but Ruth breaks her promise and leaves anyway. This isn't because Ruth doesn't love her sister, but because she cannot stay trapped in Suffolk.

CHAPTER 20: OLD MAN SHILSKY

In 1982 James is living in Boston and working as a journalist at The Boston Globe. He's torn between writing and music, not realizing that he can do both. Similarly, he's caught between feeling black and white, unhappy that racism did not end in the '70s when he expected it to. James has a girlfriend, Karone, of whom his mother disapproves, but they're united more by convenience than anything else. Karone wants to move out of Boston and leave behind her ex-husband; James says "I wanted to leave myself behind."

Even as an adult James is still confused about his race and where he belongs in the world. He hoped racism would end, and then race would be a nonissue, but unfortunately the 80s arrived and he was still a mixed-race man, unable to pick a side but feeling like he should. Like his mother before him, he attempts to physically run away from his problems, which is tricky when his problems are his own identity.

After years of badgering, James has finally found out about Suffolk, Virginia, where Ruth grew up. James wants to understand where she came from, and wants to understand who he is. Ruth isn't very helpful, and claims not to remember anyone in the town, but she tells James he can look for her friend Frances or her family. Once he gets into town James goes to a McDonald's, which he realizes is on the exact lot where the Shilsky store used to be.

James still feels the ache he's felt throughout his childhood, and has decided that perhaps somewhere in his mother's past is the key to his lifelong identity crisis. Although it's not clear why Ruth finally becomes more comfortable revealing details of her past, it's likely because enough years have gone by that she no longer needs to protect herself from her memories of her childhood by locking them away. The pain and trauma has eased with time.

James knocks on a stranger's door on a whim, and asks if the elderly black man living there knew the Shilsky family. The man, Eddie, knew "ol' Rabbi Shilsky" (Tateh) and thinks it's hilarious that he ended up with a mixed-race grandson. He tells James his mother's old name, Rachel, and tells him about his disabled grandmother, Dee-Dee, and Sam. The man is hesitant to talk about Old Man Shilsky at first, but eventually reveals that he was cruel and racist, and even his own wife and children were afraid of him. He tells James how his grandfather eventually ran off with a white woman. Eddie asks if he can call Ruth, so James calls his mother and asks if she'd like to talk. The chapter ends with Eddie comforting Ruth, asking, "You remember me? Don't cry now…"

Because Tateh was so racist, it's ironic that he ended up with twelve mixed-race grandchildren. Still, the fact that Tateh could be so racist and Ruth could end up so progressive is a positive sign for the future of race relations. Eddie confirms what Ruth has narrated in the first person in previous chapters — that her father was a cruel man who placed no value on his family aside from the work he could extract from them.

CHAPTER 21: A BIRD WHO FLIES

During her last summer in Suffolk Ruth receives a letter from New York announcing that Bubeh has died. The letter is in English, and so Ruth must read it to her mother, who cries and cries. Ruth remains in Suffolk a while longer, but eventually she knows it's time to leave. Mameh asks her to stay, but Ruth knows she can't have a good life there.

Although Ruth understands how much her presence would mean to her mother and to her sister (who asked her to stay in an earlier chapter), Ruth knows that staying in Suffolk will suffocate her. She must choose whether or not she's willing to sacrifice her own happiness for her family, and she decides that she is not.

Tateh meets Ruth at the bus station and tries to bribe her into staying, promising that she can move to the nearby town of Norfolk and go to college. Eventually he tries to use Mameh against her, saying Mameh needs Ruth, which Ruth sees as unfair, since Tateh divorced Mameh and clearly doesn't care about her wellbeing.

Tateh is the last member of her family to ask Ruth to stay. His reasons are unclear. While Mameh needed Ruth to help her navigate in a country where she didn't speak the language and Dee-Dee was likely lonely, Tateh only needs Ruth for the physical labor she provides. Perhaps as he realizes he's going to lose her forever Tateh feels some kind of emotional connection, but that's unlikely.

Tateh warns Ruth that if she ever marries a black man she won't be welcome back, and drives away. On the bus, Ruth opens the bag lunch Mameh has packed for her, and in it finds Mameh's Polish passport, the only picture she has of her mother.

The final conversation Tateh has with Ruth encapsulates so much of who he is. He's racist and controlling, and he would rather never see his daughter again than see her marry a man of a race he disapproves of. Mameh, meanwhile, although sad that Ruth has left her, gives Ruth her passport as a sign that she respects Ruth's choice and wishes her luck in the future.

Back in New York, Dennis is still working for Aunt Mary, and he hears that Tateh has hired a detective to look for Ruth. Not long after that, Dennis overhears that Mameh is sick and has been brought to New York for treatment. Ruth calls Aunt Mary and tries to see her mother, but Mary tells Ruth that she's out of the family, and has forfeited her right to see her mother. A few days later Ruth gets a call at the glass factory where she works—her mother has died. She's devastated, and enters a months-long depression. She realizes Mameh knew she was dying when Ruth left, which is why she gave Ruth her passport. Ruth worries that because she was leaving, and with Sam gone and Bubeh dead, Mameh didn't have anything left to live for.

Although Ruth doesn't regret leaving her family behind, early in the book she says that her one regret is leaving behind her mother. Leaving Dee-Dee behind dealt an emotional blow, but Ruth worries that she literally killed Mameh by taking away everything she had to live for. Still, it seems clear that Mameh knew she was dying, and blessed Ruth in her life by giving her the passport to remember her by.

It takes time for Ruth to begin to feel better. What helps her is Dennis and his talk of God, and God's forgiveness. Ruth believes Mameh "deserved better" from her, and this guilt helps motivate her to go to church. Listening to the preacher helps her begin to let go, and in her own words "that's when I started to become a Christian and the Jew in me began to die. The Jew in me was dying anyway, but it truly died when my mother died."

Judaism brought Ruth very little but pain and social exclusion, but Christianity is able to make her feel good in a way Judaism never could. Ruth's last tie to Judaism was her mother, but with her mother's death she is free to find a new religion that offers her the love, forgiveness, and community she's always wanted.

Ruth remembers her mother playing with live chickens on Yom Kippur, explaining that by killing the chicken they were showing their gratitude to God for letting them live. Mameh makes a distinction between chickens and birds who fly, explaining that "A bird who flies is special. You would never trap a bird who flies." Ruth also remembers her mother sitting in the window, feeding birds and singing to them in Yiddish a song that translated to "*Birdie, birdie fly away.*"

Mameh lived her life trapped — trapped in an unhappy marriage, trapped in an anti-Semitic town, trapped in a body that was slowly breaking down. She seemed to understand that her life would never be completely happy, and made sacrifices for her children, the biggest being letting Ruth, "a bird who flies," return to New York City where she can be free, while Mameh remained in Suffolk.

CHAPTER 22: A JEW DISCOVERED

In August 1992 James returns to Suffolk to further investigate his mother's past. James has recovered his uncle Sam's death records, as well as the graveyard where his grandmother, Mameh, is buried. He's discovered that Dee-Dee dropped out of high school right before Mameh died, and though he suspects he could track her down, he decides not to bring more pain into her life.

Tragically, James is introduced to an entire branch of his family tree only to realize that they're either dead or uninterested in meeting him. Instead of reaching out to Dee-Dee, which would likely give him and Ruth some sense of closure or fulfillment, James sacrifices the chance to meet a blood relative as a merciful "favor" to Dee-Dee herself.

James makes his way to the Suffolk synagogue, the very same building where his grandfather led congregation and his mother sat in the audience. He has recently learned that because his mother was born Jewish, he is technically Jewish too. Unfortunately this religious bond doesn't help him with the new rabbi at the Suffolk synagogue, who knows James is black and as a result seems unwilling to aid him in his research.

James has to deal with much of the same anti-black discrimination that his mother, her boyfriend, and her husbands had to deal with at the hands of the Jewish congregation in Suffolk. Even though he now knows he is Jewish, it doesn't overcome the racism deeply entrenched in parts of the town's Jewish community.

James thinks back to a 1982 trip to Suffolk when he met Aubrey Rubenstein, an office worker whose father had taken over Tateh's store around 1942. He made some phone calls and connected James with other Jewish people in the area, who James describes as "truly warm and welcoming, as if I were one of them, which in an odd way I suppose I was." Rubenstein described James' grandfather as a good teacher, but a corrupt man who didn't live up to his potential. Mameh, in contrast, he called a "fine lady." Rubenstein recorded a message for Ruth on James's tape recorder, but James never played it for his mother, worrying it would make her too emotional.

Although his experience with the local Suffolk synagogue is disheartening, James manages to connect personally with some member of the Jewish community. Many Jewish people of Ruth's generation see James as one of them, whether he is a practicing Jew or not. This is one of the first times in his life that James has been so readily accepted into a community, and for a man who has so desperately wanted to belong, it is a big deal for him.

Back in 1992, James wanders around Suffolk. He imagines how his grandmother (Mameh) must have felt—isolated and lonely, in a loveless marriage far from her family. In this moment, James begins to understand his family history, and therefore himself. The ache he's felt since childhood transforms into a new sense of humanity. He realizes the greatest gift anyone can give is life, and he decides to live his life in a way that gives life, instead of taking it away.

In this transformative moment, James finally finds what he's been aching for his entire life. As he wanders around Suffolk and imagines how his grandmother must have felt, he suddenly understands his family history, and the sacrifices his grandmother and his mother made to give him the life he has.

CHAPTER 23: DENNIS

In 1942 Ruth and Dennis lived together like husband and wife, although they are unmarried. Some black people are critical of the union (a woman in their apartment building once punches Ruth in the face, and one night Denis and Ruth almost cause a race riot) but mostly they are accepted. After Ruth's mother dies, she feels disconnected from her white past and commits to "the black side."

Dennis and Ruth's interracial relationship is scandalous to people both black and white. Although white people seem to be more opposed to their union, which contributes to Ruth's choice to live in a black neighborhood and make black friends, some black people are also disturbed by the couple.

Dennis brings Christianity into Ruth's life, along with the struggle for equal rights, and Southern food. During the week Dennis and Ruth go to the movies and watch musicians perform, but on Sunday they go see Rev. Abner Brown preach at the Metropolitan Baptist Church. A few months after the death of her mother, Ruth decides she's ready to join the church officially, and during that weekend's service she commits herself.

Joining the church represents the official death of Rachel, and the rebirth of Ruth as a proud Christian. It also marks the beginning of Ruth's inclusion in a series of new communities — Christianity generally, but the churches she chooses to frequent more specifically.

Ruth eventually begins to work as church secretary, and as she gets more religious she becomes embarrassed that she and Dennis are not married. They get the paperwork at city hall (although no one wants to write up the license), and Rev. Brown marries them in his private office in the church. During their reception in their friends' apartment, Dennis warns Ruth that people will gossip about them and try to break them apart, but they must remain strong.

Ruth worries that she and Dennis are living in sin and so she convinces him to get married. The racism they face every day extends to city hall, where public servants whose job is to issue marriage licenses are morally opposed to the interracial marriage. Still, they manage to get the paperwork and are married in a Christian ceremony.

In 1943 Ruth and Dennis have their first child and move to a one-room kitchenette. They live in that room for nine years, and have four children. In 1950 they move to the Red Hook Housing Project in Brooklyn, which, with its two bedrooms, feels luxurious. Ruth and Dennis continue to go to Rev. Brown at Metropolitan for a few years, but after Rev. Brown dies of a heart attack Dennis gets a divinity degree and they found their own church. They eventually find a building they like, but as the owner will not sell to Dennis, Ruth goes in and signs the lease. They name the church "New Brown Memorial" after Rev. Brown.

Ruth's new family, made up of her husband and her children, is the most important community in her life, and the group she is happiest to belong to. Still church plays a huge role in her life, to the point where, just as they've created a biological family, she and Dennis decide to create a spiritual one as well with the founding of their own church.

In 1957 Dennis gets what seems to be a bad cold. He gets worse and worse, and so Ruth takes him to the hospital. Once there, he continues to get sicker. The doctors do not communicate with Ruth because they disapprove of the relationship, and so she doesn't understand how severe the illness is.

Even in a life or death situation, the doctors' bigotry and racism prevents them from sharing crucial details of Dennis's illness with Ruth.

When Dennis in the hospital Ruth realizes she's pregnant, and Dennis decides they'll name the child James, if he's a boy. Ruth feels in her heart that her husband is going to die, and she brings the children by to wave at him through the hospital window, because there are too many to come inside. On April 5, 1957 Ruth receives a call from the hospital—her husband has died of cancer.

After her husband's death Ruth does her best to forget him, but what she never discusses is the fact that James, with his name given to him by his father, is a living memory of Dennis. Although James is less interested in his father's past than his mother's, the timing of his birth forever connects him to the father he never met.

Ruth buries her husband in North Carolina, where his family lives, and when she returns to New York she finds the mailbox full of checks, cash, and money orders from neighbors and friends. Jack and Aunt Candis come up to help, as do local family friends. Still, Ruth reaches out to her Jewish family for help. Aunt Betsy slams the door on her, and when she calls her sister Dee-Dee she just reminds Ruth that she asked her to stay, and Ruth broke her promise.

After the death of her husband Ruth's extended family comes to the rescue. Her neighbors, her friends, and Dennis's relatives all reach out to comfort her and help her navigate this tragedy. Ironically, although her found family is incredibly helpful in her time of need, Ruth's biological family literally slams the door on her, as they saw her departure from Suffolk and her interracial marriage as a betrayal.

Luckily, not long after the death of Dennis, Ruth meets Hunter Jordan. She's hesitant to marry him, but Aunt Candis tells her it's the right thing to do, and Dennis's parents give her their blessing to remarry. Hunter promises to help Ruth the rest of her life if she marries him, which she does, and he keeps his word.

Dennis's family sees Ruth as one of them, even after Dennis has died. They care about her wellbeing and the wellbeing of her children, which is why they encourage her to remarry if it will make her happy.

CHAPTER 24: NEW BROWN

Ruth and James attend the fortieth anniversary of the New Brown Memorial Baptist Church in 1994. This church has memories for the whole family—James's father founded it, and James was married in it. Celebrating the church makes James think back on everything he knows about his father.

The New Memorial Baptist Church is a site of worship, a site of community, and a site of communal remembrance — an institution that reminds Ruth of her late husband and reminds her children of their father.

Andrew Dennis McBride left no money for his wife and children, but he did help create a set of rules Ruth could raise their children by. From poverty his children became college graduates, lawyers, writers, and doctors. James reports that some people say the success of himself and his siblings was the work "of none other than Jesus Christ Himself."

Although Dennis died without passing on any physical wealth, he contributed instead a philosophy on how to raise a family. For Ruth, who values community more than she values money, this is the greatest gift her husband could have provided her.

Ruth rarely talks, or even thinks about her first husband Dennis. James thinks of her memory as "like a minefield, each recollection a potential booby trap," and so she avoids potentially triggering memories by refusing to dwell.

Along with her childhood, Ruth has blocked many of her memories of Dennis, because his sudden death is too painful for her to deal with day to day. Instead, she never fully mourned him, which is part of the reason why she is so devastated after Hunter dies, because she's actually mourning two men instead of one.

James and Ruth do not like the new minister, who hasn't paid the proper respect to Ruth, one of the church's founders. He treats her as though she is a white outsider, when in fact she is integral to the history of the congregation. Ruth tends to compare all ministers to her first husband, and unsurprisingly they often fail to measure up.

Ruth was one of the founders of the church, and founded it because she wanted a place where she and her family could fit in, so it seems unfair that after decades of service Ruth is treated as an outsider just because she is white.

At the anniversary, the new minister invites Ruth to the stage to say a few words. She begins her speech nervously, but soon stutters to life and "plows forward, reckless, fast, like a motorized car," her words barely comprehensible. Finally she slows down, and gives a brief history of the church—she and her husband founded it in their living room, where they sang without an organ. The crowd gets excited, punctuating all of her sentences with "Amen!" She ends her speech by blessing the crowd, and telling them that they are looking at a "witness of God's word."

Ruth is nervous to give her speech, but eventually finds strength in God and in speaking about her faith. Through much of her life she has navigated unfamiliar and stressful situations by turning to the Church and its accompanying community, and relying on them to help her get by. Though the new minister initially treated Ruth like an outsider, by the end of her speech it seems that she has received the congregation's full appreciation.

CHAPTER 25: FINDING RUTHIE

In 1993, as James puts together Ruth's will, the two of them discuss where she wants to be buried. She doesn't want to be buried in New Jersey, where she now lives, or in Virginia, or North Carolina, or anywhere in the South. Ruth recently had a cancerous mole removed, a condition that mostly affects white people, which James sees as the ultimate representation of his mother—"a black woman in white skin, with black children and a white woman's physical problem."

Even in her old age Ruth remains a walking, talking contradiction. She has black children and black friends and identifies as black, but her skin is still white and still susceptible to the diseases that predominantly affect white people, regardless of how she chooses to identify racially.

James believes it took him so long to uncover Ruth's past because he spent so long wrapped up in his own questions of race and identity. After college and journalism school, James vacillates between music and journalism. He gets good writing jobs but always quits them, feeling trapped between blackness and whiteness in the workplace. He doesn't identify with racist white editors "finding clever ways to gut the careers of fine black reporters," but neither does he feel like a radical black man trying to make a difference in the media. He also resents conservative black men at work, who make a big deal of their race, even though he feels they do not understand the urban black experience.

James struggles to navigate his racial identity in the professional world. He sees a clear racial divide in the reporters at his workplaces, but doesn't feel as though he can easily pick a side. Because James assumed his identity crisis would eventually resolve itself, even as an adult he doesn't have the tools to navigate the world as a mixed-race man with conflicting interests and priorities.

Ruth hates that James keeps quitting his jobs, but just like she ran from her troubles, James feels that by moving from job to job he can outrun his identity confusion. He only finds out his mother's maiden name in college when he needs to fill out a form, and it isn't until 1982, when he writes a Mother's Day piece, that he begins to deeply investigate Ruth's past. He asks her if she'd like to collaborate on a book, and she says she will if he wants to and if it will make him rich.

After many years of locking her memories away, Ruth is finally willing to access them for the sake of her son. Although she feels no real need to revisit the past, Ruth decides to put the needs of her family above her own desires, and to take a trip back in time if it will make her son happy, successful, and wealthy.

It takes James over a decade to get Ruth to sit down for his interviews, a process he hoped would take a few months at most. Although Ruth eventually opens herself to him, James understands that her Jewish side is gone, and in talking to him about her childhood she is essentially raising the dead.

As Ruth says again and again throughout the book, she has so completely disassociated from her Jewish past that "Rachel" is not just a series of memories, but is like an entirely different person—one who has been dead for decades.

At sixty-five Ruth gets her college degree in social work, and moves in with her daughter, Kathy, in New Jersey. She keeps busy volunteering, taking yoga classes, and driving around. She still takes trips back to Red Hook to visit her church and old friends, even as the neighborhood gets more dangerous. James describes his mother as living her life like she's piloting an airplane. She lets it get out of control, but at the last minute rights the craft, and then wipes her memory of the whole ordeal.

In her later years Ruth remains interested in all the same activities she enjoyed as a younger woman. She still likes being close to her children, and she still enjoys spending time in the neighborhood and in the church where she raised her children.

In 1993, James and Ruth return to Suffolk. It's the first time Ruth has been in fifty years, but she comments that "nothing's changed." The two of them are looking for Ruth's childhood friend Frances, whose address they find in the Suffolk town library. Together the pair drive to Frances's new home in Portsmouth, and Ruth gets increasingly nervous. But once they've arrived and met each other, the two seem to pick up where they left off. Their friendship is instantly rekindled—a happy side effect of a book Ruth at first didn't want to participate in.

Ruth's friendships have always operated more like family relationships (while her early family relationships operated more like business dealings), and so when she is reunited with Frances she's able to resume her friendship as though no time has passed at all.

Ruth sees her life work as her children's achievements. She's proud of all her sons and daughters, who have endured hardship but "carry themselves with a giant measure of dignity, humility, and humor." Every year the whole family gathers at Ruth's house in Ewing, New Jersey, and all the siblings immediately revert to their crazy childhood dynamics, full of bickering and chaos, but also unwavering deference to their mother, who still wields absolute power.

In the book Ruth has asked James to include a list of all of his siblings and all of their accomplishments. This also reads as a list of all of Ruth's accomplishments, as her greatest joy in life was watching her children grow and flourish as bright, driven adults.

EPILOGUE

In 1942 Halina Wind, a young Jewish woman, was sent into hiding by her parents as Nazis invaded her Polish hometown and slaughtered her family. Halina fled to a neighboring city where she hid in the sewers and survived for over a year. In 1980, Halina's son David Lee Preston and James meet while working at the *Wilmington News Journal*. The two become best friends, and over time slowly find out about their shared histories and their resilient Jewish mothers.

The epilogue is told in first-person from James's point of view. He opens the chapter by describing Halina Wind, a Jewish woman he feels connected to through her son, through his own Jewish mother, and through his recently discovered Jewish heritage.

When James marries his wife, Stephanie, David is invited, and when David marries his wife, Rondee, in a Jewish ceremony, both James and Ruth are invited. Ruth is hesitant, but enlists Kathy to come and provide moral support. During the wedding the rabbi, David's uncle, mourns his sister, Halina, who died before she could see her son marry.

James and David are best friends to the point where they are as close as family. This closeness extends to Ruth, who feels warmly enough about David that she's willing to step into a synagogue for the first time in decades because he asked her to.

Ruth brings her camera to the wedding. Late in life she has started to take pictures of important moments. James suspects this is because she knows "each memory is too important to lose, having lost so many before."

After a lifetime of erasing memories that threatened to be too painful, Ruth has finally begun to revisit the past through James's book project and through her own self reflection. But more importantly than looking backwards forty years, Ruth is interested in preserving the present, a luxury she's never had before, as she's always been trying so hard to simply stay afloat.

Walking through the synagogue, James reflects that it seems like his mother is visiting a museum. He saw how her former Jewish self truly did die back in the 1940s. She enjoys the wedding, eating kosher food and joking with Jewish women, but then announces that it's time to go home. She reflects, "that could've been me,"—in another life, Rachel would have been married in the Jewish tradition. As they leave, Ruth pauses in the doorway of the synagogue to look back for a moment in thought, but then turns and joins her son.

For Ruth, visiting the synagogue and witnessing the Jewish ceremony is like excavating her own past. It gives an opportunity to see what her life could have been like, had she stayed with her family in Suffolk and had an arranged marriage and never converted. She considers this alternative timeline for a moment, but despite the hardship she's had in her life, she wouldn't give up anything for the love and achievements of her many children, and her Christian relationship to God.

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