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# **The Secret Life of Bees**

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# **CliffsNotes®**

**On Kidd's**

# **The Secret Life of Bees**

**By Susan Van Kirk**



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# **SWIFT CLIFF**



*The Secret Life of Bees* re-creates the rural South in the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, where a young girl named Lily Owens is growing up unwanted and unloved. Escaping her home, she begins a journey of self-discovery, finding out about the mother she accidentally killed and learning about racial prejudice. Taken in by a community of strong African-American sisters, she gains strength, knowledge, and self-forgiveness before finally confronting the injustice of the law and the wrath of her callous father.

**WRITTEN BY:** Sue Monk Kidd

**FIRST PUBLISHED:** 2002

**TYPE OF WORK:** Novel

**GENRES:** Coming-of-age fiction; historical fiction

**SETTING:** The 1960s in rural South Carolina, a time when black and white alike were feeling the growing pains of the Civil Rights Movement.

**MAIN CHARACTERS:** Lily Melissa Owens; August Boatright; Deborah Fontanel; T. Ray Owens; Rosaleen Daise; Zach Taylor

**POINT OF VIEW:** Told in third person through the eyes of Lily Owens, the novel is narrated by an older Lily looking back. The ever-present evening news provides the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and the space race.

**MAJOR THEMES:** The learned nature of racial prejudice; the difficulty of forgiveness; the triumph of love; the loss of innocence; the power of women

**MOTIFS:** Prejudice versus understanding; innocence versus knowledge; men versus women; appearance versus reality; parents versus children

**SYMBOLS:** The wooden Mary picture (a mother's love); the wooden Mary statue (hope and freedom); the Boatright house (safety and acceptance); the bees/bee hive (community); the photo of Deb and Lily and the whale pin (a mother's love); the wailing wall (evil); the forest near Tilburon (freedom)

# **LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR**



- Sue Monk Kidd was born August 12, 1948, in Sylvester, Georgia. As a teenager, she was influenced by Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. She also listened to the honeybees in the wall of her home.
- Graduated with a B.S. degree in nursing from Texas Christian University in 1970.
- Married Sandy Kidd; they have two children.
- Worked as a registered nurse in Fort Worth, Texas, and then taught nursing at the Medical College of Georgia.
- By age 30, Monk Kidd began working as a freelance writer of non-fiction articles and biographies. Her writing contained Christian themes, and she was a contributing editor to *Guideposts Magazine*. Then she took courses in writing at Emory University and attended writers' conferences, including the prestigious Sewanee and Bread Loaf Writing Conferences. Her writing contained themes that had always interested her: Western religion; theology; and spirituality.
- In the 1980s, Monk Kidd published two books of nonfiction: *God's Joyful Surprise: Finding Yourself Loved* (1987) and *All Things are Possible* (1988).
- In 1990, she published *God's Hidden Blessings: God Can Touch Your Life When You Least Expect It* and also *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions*.
- In 1994, Monk Kidd wrote a short story version of *The Secret Life of Bees*, winning a number of awards for new writers as well as awards at writers' conferences.
- In 1997, she began to write the novel of *The Secret Life of Bees*, basing much of the context of the times on her years of growing up during the 1960s in the South.
- She then published two spiritual books of nonfiction: *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine* (2002) and *A Luminous Presence: One Woman's Awakening to the Inner Life* (2005).

- *The Secret Life of Bees* was published in 2002 to critical acclaim and numerous awards. Awards include: Nominee for the Orange Prize for excellence in women's fiction (England), 2002; Literature to Life Award, American Place Theater, New York, NY, 2004; the Book of the Year award, Book Sense, 2004. *The Secret Life of Bees* was also chosen for *Good Morning America's* Book Club.
- In 2004, *The Secret Life of Bees* was adapted for the stage and produced by the American Place Theater, New York, NY.
- Monk Kidd published *The Mermaid Chair* 2005 and won the Quill Award for General Fiction. It was produced as a movie by Lifetime television.
- In 2006, her early writings were released as a collection called *Firelight* by Guideposts Books, and in 2007, Penguin paperbacks produced a paperback edition.
- In October 2008, the film version of *The Secret Life of Bees* was released by Fox Searchlight.
- Currently Kidd is a writer-in-residence at The Sophia Institute in Charleston, South Carolina.





# **A BRIEF SYNOPSIS**

It is 1964 in Sylvan, South Carolina, and Lily Melissa Owens, a fourteen-year-old white girl, lives on a peach farm with her father, T. Ray, who is both neglectful and abusive. Lying in bed in her room at night, Lily is often visited by bees that seem to be at home with her. Lily holds a terrible and guilty secret: She believes she shot and killed her mother, Deborah, when Lily was four years old. Her vague memory of that day—when her parents were arguing and she picked up and shot the gun that her mother had dropped—continues to haunt her, and she yearns to know more about her mother.

Lily has a housekeeper/nanny named Rosaleen Daise, who has cared for Lily for ten years. When Rosaleen watches President Johnson sign the Civil Rights Act on television, she decides she will register to vote. She and Lily walk into town but are accosted by three white men who harass Rosaleen. Rosaleen angrily pours the contents of her snuff jar on their shoes, and the men beat her right in front of Lily. The police arrive and arrest Rosaleen, taking her and Lily to jail. When T. Ray comes to pick Lily up, he is angry and berates her for such stupid behavior. He also scares her when he explains that Rosaleen may be killed by the men she insulted. This terrifies Lily because she loves Rosaleen. Once home, Lily stands up to her father during an argument, and T. Ray hurts her by saying that ten years ago her mother was only coming back to get her clothes; that is, that she had planned to abandon Lily. Earlier, Lily captured some bees in a jar, and now she sees they have escaped. Like the bees, she also plans to escape, leaving behind her abusive father and freeing Rosaleen.

When T. Ray leaves temporarily to work on his workers' payroll, Lily sneaks away, carrying with her a bag of things her mother, Deborah, had left earlier, including a photo of a black Mary, mother of Jesus. Lily manages to free Rosaleen, and they hitchhike to Tilburon, South Carolina, because Deborah had written that town on the back of the picture in Lily's bag. Lily hopes it's a clue to help her find out about her mother. Once they reach Tilburon, Lily sees the exact same picture of Mary on honey jars at a small grocery store. After inquiring about the label, Lily finds it belongs to a local black family of sisters—called the Boatrights—who are beekeepers. Lily and Rosaleen go to the bright pink Boatright house outside of town and are welcomed and taken in. Lily lies about their earlier life and hopes to stay long enough to find out whether her mother was ever there.

August Boatright and her sisters, May and June, have a lucrative honey business on twenty-eight acres of land. June is suspicious of and

distant from Lily, and May seems slow and emotional. They also meet Neil, June's boyfriend of many years, who wants to marry June but keeps getting rejected. The other sister, May, is oversensitive to pain, and when she gets upset she must write down the sorrowful thing on a paper and stick it in a crack at her "wailing wall," a wall of stones on the farm. This behavior seems to be connected to the suicide of June's twin sister, April, years earlier. As time passes, Lily helps August with the bee-keeping, and Rosaleen keeps an eye on May in the house. Lily is given a room in the "honey house," where she can sort out her feelings. She increasingly likes August but is afraid to tell her the truth about her previous life, for fear that August will reject her. Meanwhile, she develops a crush on Zach, a black teenage worker who helps with the bees.

Lily and Rosaleen become increasingly comfortable in this amazing community of sisters. A group of women called the Daughters of Mary also come to the house, because they all practice a form of homemade religion. It is partly Catholic, including reciting the rosary, and partly a product of slavery. The group displays a wooden ship's statue of a black Mary. The Daughters pray to her, believing she can give them power and lead them to unchain themselves from various social barriers. Lily and Rosaleen join them, and soon Lily realizes the women do not see her as white. The society of women helps August, June, and May encourage Lily to believe in herself and feel loved. But still she cannot tell August the story of her family or earlier life.

Lily becomes increasingly close to Zach and on a trip to work on the bee hives, she feels the first stirrings of sexual awakening. They share their hopes and dreams: Lily's of wanting to become a writer and Zach's of becoming a lawyer. Sensing Lily's lack of self-confidence, Zach gives Lily a journal to record her stories. They go to town and take honey to the law office of a white lawyer who is helping Zach. While Lily is alone in the office, she impulsively calls her father, demanding to know if he even knows her favorite color. He is angry and threatens to find and beat her.

One day, Lily walks into the kitchen and sees May doing something she remembers her mother, Deborah, doing. She confronts May and discovers she knew Lily's mother. Totally shaken, Lily doesn't know what to make of this new information. She decides to face August about it, but before she can, Zach takes her into Tilburon—which is restless because of rumors about a racial confrontation—again to buy parts for his car. The two park the truck at the same time that a group of African-American boys near the truck throw a bottle at a white man. Zach is

arrested with the group, and a terrified Lily makes her way back to the Boatright house. They don't want May to know about Zach's arrest because she is so fragile. But Zach calls the house and May answers the phone, finding out about his circumstances. Leaving the house by herself, she commits suicide by drowning in the nearby river.

The next few days are taken up with a period of mourning and the funeral. Zach is released from jail on the testimony of an eyewitness. A celebration of the Mary statue ensues for two days, and during a walk, Zach and Lily kiss and he promises that, despite their races, they will be together some day. Neil and June set a date to be married after May left a note reminding June that life goes by too quickly to throw their love away.

Once the mourning and celebration are over, Lily waits in August's room to tell her the true story of her family. Surprisingly, she discovers that August already knows who she is. August reveals that she worked as a housekeeper and nanny years earlier for Deborah's family. She explains the story of Deborah's marriage to T. Ray and how, after she had Lily, she suffered a nervous breakdown and came to stay with August for a few months, leaving Lily behind. Her picture of T. Ray's love for Deborah and his loss is a viewpoint Lily had never considered before. August says Deborah was arranging for a divorce and a trip back to get Lily so they would live together in Tilburon. Lily explains to August that she accidentally killed her mother, and that she is unlovable. But August begs her to forgive her mother for not being perfect and forgive herself for an action she didn't understand.

Lily spends the next few days angry and bitter about her mother leaving her to go to August's. She nearly destroys the honey house with her grief and rage. But as she thinks about August's words, she begins to acknowledge that her mother loved her and came back for her. August gives Lily some of Deborah's belongings, including a photo of Deborah feeding a baby Lily, which Lily takes as the sign of her mother's love, for which she has waited most of her life.

T. Ray shows up at the Boatright house, having traced Lily's call from the lawyer's office. He and Lily have a terrible argument, and T. Ray hits and kicks her. But Lily is able to call him "Daddy" and get him to realize she is not her mother. His pride was wounded when Deborah left, and he has taken his anger out on Lily ever since. August convinces him to let Lily stay with her and, as he leaves, Lily asks him if she truly did kill her mother. He replies, "Yes," but that she didn't mean to, an extraordinary admission.

That fall, Lily goes to school with Zach at the white high school and learns to love herself living with this community of strong, independent women. Through these experiences, Lily has learned to trust her own instincts and matures into a young lady who believes in herself.

# **LIST OF CHARACTERS**



**Lily Melissa Owens** Lily is the main character, protagonist, and narrator of her story. She is a fourteen-year-old white teenager growing up in Sylvan, South Carolina. When Lily first appears, she is beaten down, abused, and misused by her brutal father. He runs a peach farm where Lily has always lived, and neither he nor Lily ever forget that at age four, Lily killed her mother while witnessing an argument between her parents. But within Lily are qualities she discovers only after she leaves home and goes on the run with her nanny, Rosaleen. Through her interactions with other people, Lily gains strength in her independence, understanding of prejudice, and loving connections in her life. Her sense of humor helps her survive, and she comes to an understanding of her yearning for her mother, her ability to forgive, and her growth that takes her far beyond her father's lack of humanity.

Lily has always been beaten down and abused by her father, but witnessing Rosaleen's courage gives Lily courage, too. Her father physically beats her and punishes her atrociously, and Lily has no choice but to take it. But after she witnesses Rosaleen's nerve in the face of beating and imprisonment, Lily finds her spark of independence and ingeniousness. She learns to lie convincingly and plans their escape to Tilburon. Defying her father and leaving home is something she'd never considered. She uses her intelligence—a brain that her father thought was a waste to educate—to create a false past, learn a new set of skills, and reflect on the people and events she sees around her. In the end, she even finds the courage to stand up to her father once and for all.

Racism is a fact in South Carolina, and although adults like T. Ray and Rosaleen know how dangerous it is, Lily doesn't know, and that danger will become part of her education. When T. Ray tells her that Rosaleen will probably die at the hands of racists, Lily takes no time to even question saving her. Later, although the television news tells Lily facts and shows her pictures, the incident with Zach in town is a stronger education. Lily realizes that the white world does not think she should live with the Boatrights and certainly would frown on any liaison with Zach. However, Zach encourages her to imagine a color-free world in order to make it happen. The lessons her father taught her about race are slowly proven wrong, and one notion after another falls. When Lily realizes June is prejudiced against her because

of her whiteness, Lily is shocked and recognizes how wrong June is to judge her without knowing her. Once again, Lily reflects on this idea and takes it in.

Part of the reason Lily can survive, as one after another of these early lessons are shattered, is that she has a great sense of the absurd. She even has a conversation with God, asking why He couldn't stick with his "original idea about Paradise." Her sense of humor gets her through many situations, including her father's abuse—she muses that many children have a parent who doesn't love them but wonders why must she have two? Perhaps she developed her sense of the absurd to shield herself from pain.

Throughout her story, Lily feels a deep sense of longing for her mother and a need to connect with other human beings. She reflects on the mother she allegedly killed and compares herself to her unknown mother, always coming up short. She imagines her mother romantically, doing things ideal mothers do, like brushing Lily's hair. Lily goes to Tilburon in search of her mother, not knowing whether her mother had really been there. After August presents Lily with her mother's items, she finds the photo of her mother feeding her as a child, and all the longing and sadness of her life is contained in her reaction. Through August and Zach, Lily begins to find loving connections to humans who treat her like she is a human being. The teacher who first encouraged her began that connection, and Rosaleen followed it up. Now the Boatright home and sisters show her what it is to be part of a community who loves her. Zach also believes in her, giving her a journal for writing her thoughts. This group of people gives her the courage to stand up to her father.

In forgiving both herself and her mother, Lily becomes a better person than her father. All her life, she has accused herself and beaten herself up mentally for her mother's death. She also has been bitter and angry about her mother's leaving her. But in the end, Lily finds a way to forgive both her mother and father and, in doing so, she begins to see her father's bitterness and anger over being left by Deborah. Lily reaches out to him, but he can't see his own way to forgiveness. Being able to see his viewpoint is the final step in Lily's growing into a young woman who believes in her worth and can love others.



**August Boatright** August breaks the stereotype of black women in the South during this period. She lives in her own home with her two sisters and runs a successful business. Although she was once a housekeeper for Lily's mother, August also graduated from college and became a high school teacher. She also decided not to marry because it would take away some of her independence. Lily has never met a woman—let alone a black woman—like this in her world.

August's most important function in the novel is to help Lily on her way to maturity and acceptance of herself as a good human being. Prior to Lily's arrival, August takes care of her two sisters and provides a warm, safe community for them and for other friends. She shelters May from the worst of her fears as long as she can, and she doesn't tell June what would be best for her, instead letting her find it out herself. She has created a religion that will help Lily find her own beliefs and help others to be stronger and more spiritual. For Lily, August's image of Mary is a stand-in at first for her mother, and later a symbol of the strength of women. August holds her religious community together and provides a black spiritual image for the Daughters of Mary.

She could have told Lily immediately that she knew who Lily was. But instead, August keeps this information to herself and wisely provides key turning points for Lily to find her own way. August uses bees and beekeeping to explain what community is all about. As she sees Lily grow spiritually, August stands back and lets Lily discover her own sense of God. August also protects Lily, worrying about her growing attraction for Zach. Finally, instead of giving Lily her mother's things, she waits for Lily to come to her. Then she helps Lily get out all her anger and bitterness before she works on rebuilding her.

August becomes the mother Lily never had. But she can also give Deborah back to Lily since August shares a history with Deborah that Lily didn't have. August's brave example, her understanding of the world and the necessity sometimes to bend to it, her endless capacity for love, and the wisdom of her years are all qualities that have kept her community together and now help Lily find herself.

**T. Ray (Terrence) Owens** T. Ray is Lily's father, a bitter, cruel man who takes his anger out on Lily. The source of that anger is Deborah's abandonment. From August, Lily learns that T. Ray was once deeply in love with Lily's mother, but they were totally unsuited for each other in social background and personality. When Deborah became pregnant with Lily, they married to give her a name and a home. But Deborah's increasing unhappiness led to a nervous breakdown, causing her to leave her husband. This powerful blow to his pride caused T. Ray to take all his rage out on his daughter, ignoring her at times and abusing her for senseless reasons. Although he is present only at the beginning and end of the novel, his influence is felt as a dark cloud looming over Lily's life. In the end, when Lily confronts him, she realizes that his pent-up bitterness is not really directed at her, but at the mother who left them both. T. Ray is given some sense of redemption in Lily's eyes when his final words are that she didn't mean to kill her mother. The roughness leaves his voice, and he departs in his truck slowly. Lily gives him her last vestige of romanticism when she interprets this as his understanding that she wouldn't grow strong with him and is better off with the Daughters and the Boatrights.

**Deborah Fontanel Owens** Although she is already dead when the story begins, Deborah's influence is felt throughout the lives of Lily and her father. Deborah married T. Ray Owens because she was pregnant with Lily. Once married, she couldn't be the mother and wife everyone expected, so she left to go see her old nanny/housekeeper, August Boatright. Deborah had a nervous breakdown, and August helped her get better. When Deborah returned for Lily, she argued with T. Ray, pulled a gun down from a closet shelf, dropped it, and was accidentally shot by four-year-old Lily. Lily longs for Deborah and blames herself for killing her mother. T. Ray's version of Deborah's departure is the only one Lily hears, so she blames her mother for abandoning her. But Deborah planned to divorce T. Ray and take Lily away with her, a fact Lily didn't know until she finally broke down and talked with August. That Deborah loved her daughter is apparent in the photo August gives Lily of Deborah feeding Lily as a baby.

**Rosaleen Daise** Rosaleen is the only mother figure Lily knows for most of her life. She is the black housekeeper/nanny whom

T. Ray pulls out of the fields to care for his daughter after his wife is killed. Rosaleen has amazing spirit and courage, for which she sometimes pays a terrible price, as when she spits on the white men who accost her on her way to voter registration. She loves and cares for Lily and could never hurt her. She fits in well at the Boatright house, becoming a good friend to the doomed May. Originally, Lily felt she was better than Rosaleen because of Lily's prejudices, but she comes to see Rosaleen as an amazing and gutsy woman.

**Zachary (Zach) Lincoln Taylor** Zach has many qualities and circumstances in common with Lily because of disadvantages: he is black in a white world, while she comes from a home where she is unloved. However, Zach is a fast learner and a hard worker, and he has built a life for himself helping August with beekeeping. He is handsome, athletic, and smart, and he has a goal to become a lawyer. But he has a burden in that he is black at a time when few black men can attend law school. Zach wants to do well because of his brains, not because of his athletic prowess. A white lawyer, Clayton Forrest, is his mentor, giving him advice and talking about legal cases. When Zach is jailed unjustly, he comes out a different man—a bit harder, but also more determined than ever. He encourages Lily, giving her a journal for her writing, and falls in love with her. But he knows the danger of their relationship, so he keeps his distance, especially around others. Zach teaches Lily that if she can imagine something she can make it come true; he promises her they will eventually be together. He is another positive and strong model for Lily when it comes to reaching for her dreams and dealing with the circumstances of the 1960s South. And Zach reminds Lily that she is not unlovable.

**May Boatright** May is a pivotal character—she not only tells Lily that Deborah once lived with them but also gives advice posthumously to June that convinces June to marry Neil. May was one of a set of twins, and her twin sister April committed suicide long before Lily came to the Boatright house. May also suffers from depression, and because of this, her sisters, June and August, keep an eye on her. Although May occasionally goes into a trance whose cause is never really explained, May mainly is oversensitive to the sadness of the world. August and June have constructed a wailing wall like the one in Jerusalem, so that May can write down the sad

things and stick the notes in her wall. This seems to help her. When May finds out Zach is in jail, however, she finally reaches her limit of sadness and, going off alone, drowns herself in a river near their house. Her death helps teach Lily that out of death good things (like June's marriage) can also come, and May's death provides August an opportunity to explain the concept of rebirth.

**June Boatright** June is the closest figure to an antagonist in Lily's life for much of the story. June is the Boatright sister who is angry about Lily's staying with them. Unbeknownst to Lily, June resents the fact that her sister August had a menial job in Deborah Fontanel's home years earlier. June also is unhappy that a white girl is staying with them, prompting Lily to think about discrimination in a reverse way. Within June, however, is a kind and generous person who works as a cellist at the local hospital, where she plays for dying patients. Because June was left at the altar years earlier, she is afraid to love again and strings along the hapless Neil. But, ever patient, he finally wins her love after May leaves June advice that she must seize happiness while she can.

**Daughters of Mary** This is the group of strong, black women who practice a religion made up by August Boatright; they gather at various times to celebrate their sisterhood and pride in their heritage. Their acceptance of Lily is key to her growth. The group is composed of Lunelle (the hat maker); Sugar-girl and her husband, Otis (the only man); Violet and her mother, Queenie; Cressie; and Mabelee. In Lily's confrontation with her father near the end of the novel, the solid, arm-in-arm wall of Daughters of Mary is too much for T. Ray to defy.

**Neil** Neil is June's boyfriend, who has been waiting for years to marry her. He is a kind and considerate man who helps around the house and escorts June around town. Despite his growing exasperation, he never gives up on wanting to marry her.

**Clayton Forrest** Clayton is a white lawyer in Tilburon who mentors Zach. He tries to be kind to Lily, but she mistakes his curiosity as a threat to her identity. Clayton gets the wheels of justice grinding for Zach and makes sure Rosaleen's charges are dropped.

**Becca Forrest** Becca is Clayton Forrest's daughter, and her relationship with her father is a foil to that of T. Ray and Lily. Once school begins in the fall, she is a friend and companion to Lily.

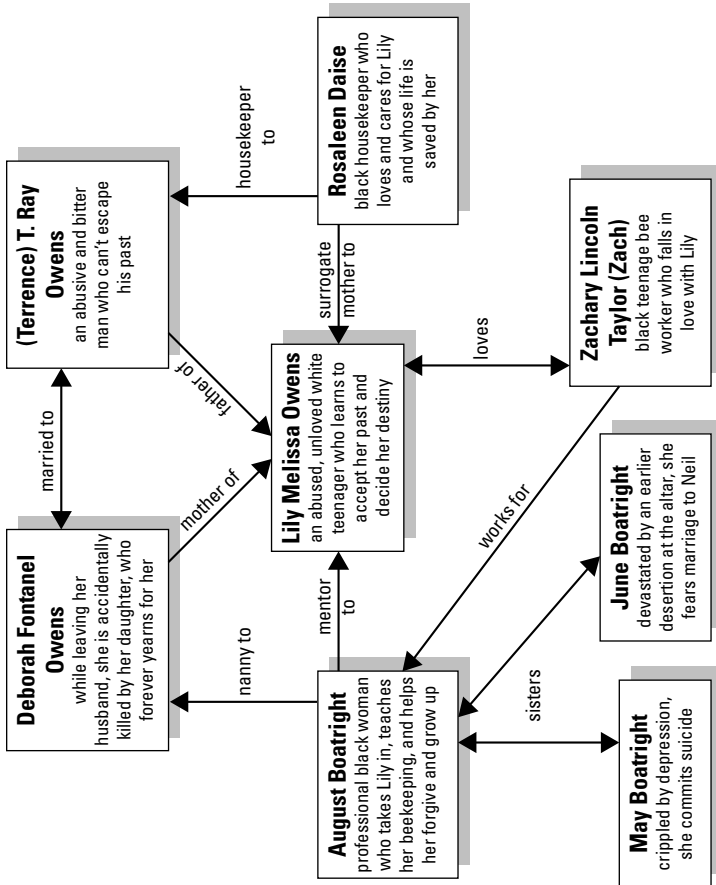
**Brother Gerald** Brother Gerald is the minister of the local Baptist Church attended by Lily. He is a brainless racist whom Lily easily tricks into dropping the theft charges against Rosaleen.


**Miss Lacy** Miss Lacy is the gossipy receptionist at Clayton Forrest's law office. She makes no secret of her disdain of Lily's staying with black people, and she tells Lily's whereabouts to her father.

**Franklin Posey** Franklin Posey is the stereotypical racist who is also violent. T. Ray says he is the one who will most likely kill Rosaleen for "being uppity."

**Avery Gaston** Avery Gaston is the prejudiced policeman who allows Rosaleen to be beaten and seizes Lily so she can't cry out. He teaches Lily that the law is not colorblind.

# Character Map





# **CHAPTER BY CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES**

# Chapter 1

## Summary

Looking back at the summer of 1964, Lily, the fourteen-year-old narrator, realizes everything changed that year. It was the first time the bees came swarming in her bedroom, a sure sign of death according to the black housekeeper, Rosaleen.

At that time, Lily lives with her father, T. (Terrence) Ray, and Rosaleen in Sylvan, South Carolina (pop. 3,100), a town of peach stands and Baptist churches. Her cruel father mostly ignores or punishes Lily, denying her the opportunities and accoutrements that are so important to teenagers trying to fit in. No boys are attracted to her, especially since she wears “Pentecostal dresses.” No girls invite her to sleepovers. Like the thrashing bee she traps in a jar, Lily struggles to be like everyone else. But she is an outsider.

Lily has a horrific memory that haunts her. Deborah, her mother, died on December 3, 1954, after a heated argument with T. Ray. Lily was only four, but she remembers her mother hurriedly packing a suitcase. Then T. Ray arrived and argued with Deborah, who reached up on the closet shelf for a gun. T. Ray knocked it out of her hand and it fell on the floor near Lily. Lily picked it up, and she still remembers an explosion. She had accidentally killed her mother. “She was all I wanted. And I took her away.”

Now, at fourteen, Lily begins a systematic search for information about her dead mother. She can find out only bits and pieces. Her mother was from Virginia and is buried there. Strangely, Deborah was also adamant about saving bugs instead of killing them. This is all Lily knows about her. She finds a paper bag of her mother’s things in the attic: a photo; gloves; and a wooden picture of Mary, mother of Jesus, with (surprisingly) a black face. On the back of the picture someone has written “Tilburon, South Carolina.” It’s a town only two hours away, and Lily vows to go there. Lily buries her mother’s items in a tin box in a wooded area and visits them when she aches for Deborah.

Lily is encouraged by some and discouraged by others. Because Lily’s verbal aptitude score is high, her teacher, Mrs. Henry, encourages Lily,



telling her she can be a college professor or a writer. Prior to this support, Lily thought she might possibly make it as far as beauty school. Now she has hope, and Mrs. Henry loans her books to read and talks about her getting a scholarship. A discourager, T. Ray makes Lily sell peaches at his stand along the highway but he won't allow her to take a reading book because he thinks education and college are a waste of time for girls. After she leaves the peach stand one day, Lily returns home and sees Rosaleen watching President Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act on television.

Before Lily starts school, her father talks to her about her mother's death. When Lily tries to explain that she remembers that day, T. Ray gets angry. He explains that he and Deborah were arguing and Lily picked up the gun and "it just went off." He can't look her in the eye or comfort her, but he staunchly repeats that he has told her the story she must tell others.

A series of events causes Lily to start thinking about leaving home. July 4 is Lily's birthday, and she wants a charm bracelet like the other girls. T. Ray utterly ignores this request. Unhappy, that night she goes out and sleeps in the trees with the tin box of her mother's things. She unbuttons her blouse to allow "night to settle on my skin." The next morning, T. Ray is hunting for her and when he sees her hastily buttoning her blouse, he believes she is meeting a boy. He calls her a slut and punishes her in the usual way. She has to kneel down on uncooked grits, which feel like powdered glass. The next morning, her knees are swollen with red welts and bruises, but she has the tin box safely hidden under her mattress. When Rosaleen arrives, she is appalled at Lily's punishment. T. Ray says Lily will follow his orders as long as she lives in his house, and Lily thinks for the first time about living somewhere else.

Rosaleen is going to town the next day to sign up to vote. She has practiced writing her name, Rosaleen Daise, on a piece of paper. Lily lies to her father so that he'll let her accompany Rosaleen without asking any questions.

The next morning begins with Lily's birthday and ends in an unexpected assault. Rosaleen brings an angel food cake with fourteen candles for Lily's birthday. They walk to Sylvan on a scorching hot day, stopping at the Ebenezer Baptist Church to cool off. Brother Gerald disapproves of Rosaleen in his church, and when she asks about borrowing two paper fans from the church, Brother Gerald says no. So Rosaleen steals them. On the way into Sylvan they are accosted by three

white men playing cards who make fun of Rosaleen and ask where she is going. Lily wants no trouble and tells Rosaleen to ignore them. But Rosaleen, disregarding common sense, tells them she is going to register to vote. When they ask about the fans, she admits she stole them. Anggrily, she pours the contents of her snuff jar all over their shoes. They grab her, beat her, and call the police, resulting in her arrest. She is charged with assault, theft, and disturbing the peace, and put into a police car with Lily to go to jail. Lily will be released to her father, a fate almost as bad as Rosaleen's.

## Commentary

Chapter 1 of *The Secret Life of Bees* introduces the reader to the point of view, setting, exposition, and themes that will be integral to the novel. Each chapter begins with an epigram about bees, and these short quotations foreshadow happenings in the chapter. In Chapter 1, the Queen Bee is Deborah, Lily's mother.

The story has a first-person reminiscent point of view; it is a coming-of-age story and will be told by looking back. Because the mature Lily has had time to reflect on the events from her childhood, this viewpoint will be a real advantage. In 1964, Lily is living under horrible conditions, with a father who does not love her and takes every opportunity to punish her. In fact, he punishes her so viciously that the reader wonders why he is so cruel. But Lily also has a substitute mother in Rosaleen, the housekeeper who sometimes has more courage than sense for her own safety.

Reoccurring motifs are introduced. The first of these is the idea that the lives of bees parallel human lives. Kidd begins this connection with the short epigram about bees. Later in the chapter, when Lily imprisons the bees, they fight to get free, just like Lily is imprisoned in a loveless home. But when she opens the jar, the bees are so desensitized they do not fly away. They are battered and exhausted from trying to survive. This, too, represents Lily, who does not think to leave her abusive parent until he punishes her so deeply that she begins to think of freedom.

Lily's yearning for her real mother and her guilt about killing her are themes that will also appear throughout the novel. These two situations add to her loneliness and sense of being an outsider. Lily is already different from other teenagers at her school because she has only her father, and her loneliness is heightened when she is excluded from events like

charm school because she is motherless. Lily particularly misses her mother when it comes to maturity issues such as picking out a training bra or starting her periods. Twice, the story of her mother's death is repeated, both through Lily's memory and T. Ray's dubious explanation. Lily even suggests that her own death will allow her to ask for her mother's forgiveness. In this world, however, she has no one to help her with teenage dresses or explain the bits of wisdom that are passed from mother to daughter. Because Lily knows so little about her mother, she makes up romantic stories about her and compares her own photo with that of her beautiful mother. She dreams of what her mother would have been like and the motherly things she would have done, like brushing Lily's hair. She even dreams sometimes that Rosaleen is her mother.

Religion is mentioned only briefly in this chapter, given that the photo with her mother's items is of a black Mary and that Lily is used to attending a church for whites only. Lily does not know why the photo of the Virgin Mary is black, and she accepts the fact that Rosaleen should not be in her Baptist church because blacks are not allowed. In fact, the world of black and white are totally and legally separated in 1964 America, and Lily understands that is the way things are.

The 1964 world of black and white are separated by both law and attitudes. Even churches condone segregation. As Brother Gerald says, "We love them [black people] in the Lord...but they had their own places." That divided world, as well as the Civil Rights Act that will eventually change those divisions, are all part of a theme that will be intertwined with the events of Lily's growing up. Rosaleen does not know her own age or birthday, given that she has no birth certificate. She has six brothers and sisters but has no idea where they are. Rosaleen threw her husband out, but with no mention of legal divorce. Although the Civil Rights Act has become law, changing years of social behavior and attitudes is not so easy. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., is mentioned in this chapter, because he is defying the law and spending time in jail in order to challenge the white world's intentions. When Rosaleen decides to register to vote, Lily becomes uneasy, because she has heard from a church deacon that the white world will find ways to keep this from happening. In fact, a man from Mississippi was killed for registering.

Finally, Chapter 1 introduces ideas that will appear later in the story. Lily's ability to lie in the face of adversity will come in handy in many situations. The one story she knows about her mother—that of not

being able to kill or hurt bugs—will also be a thread that is embellished later. Rosaleen's protection of Lily will also continue, even when they are no longer in Sylvan. But the most crucial idea introduced in this chapter is the understanding that this will be a coming-of-age novel, so that Lily will mature through adversity and challenges before the novel ends.

## Chapter 2

### Summary

In this chapter, Lily's education in race relations really begins. Following Rosaleen's arrest, the policeman, Avery Gaston, drives Lily and Rosaleen to the jail with the three hollering men following them in a green pickup with a gun rack. Rosaleen ignores their yelling, but Lily can tell Rosaleen is scared by the way the seat is shaking. When they reach the jail, Franklin Posey hits Rosaleen in the forehead with a heavy flashlight, and she falls to her knees. The policeman, smiling, covers Lily's mouth so she can't scream. After the beating, Lily and Gaston drag Rosaleen into jail, as Posey declares he wants an apology. The two are put in a foul-smelling jail cell. T. Ray arrives but only to free Lily, who promises to return, and although Rosaleen tries to be brave, Lily can see that she is scared. All the way home, T. Ray speeds at 70 to 80 miles per hour, and Lily can imagine the pyramid of grits he'll have waiting for her, a veritable torture chamber for this offense. T. Ray tells Lily that Posey is the "meanest nigger-hater" in Sylvan, and he'll probably kill Rosaleen. A frightened Lily realizes that he means it.

After arriving home, T. Ray goes to oversee the payroll, leaving Lily in her room and warning her not to leave. In a moment of courage, she asserts that he doesn't scare her, and he takes a swing and misses. To hurt Lily, he tells her that her mother didn't care about her and was actually leaving her when she died so long ago. Once he is gone, Lily debates this new information, half sad and half believing that he lied.

Now she must get Rosaleen out of jail before her housekeeper is killed, and Lily has decided they will leave T. Ray's forever. She packs the \$38 she earned selling peaches, some clothes, a map, and her mother's things. Then she leaves a note for T. Ray ending it with, "People who tell lies like you should rot in hell."

She makes up her plan on the way to the jail. She will free Rosaleen and somehow they will go to Tilburon, South Carolina. On the way, Brother Gerald picks her up in his car, and she lies that she is taking things to Rosaleen. When Gerald explains that he is going to the jail to file charges against Rosaleen, Lily lies, saying Rosaleen is deaf and prob-

ably didn't hear him say "no" about taking the fan. And she again lies that Rosaleen, when accosted, was singing a hymn and the three men told her to shut up. Because of this information, Brother Gerald decides not to press charges against this deaf religious martyr.

Lily's newfound courage gets Rosaleen out of town. She finds out from Gaston that Rosaleen is at the hospital, but he warns Lily not to go there. Lily ignores him, going to the hospital and sneaking past the policeman. Although Rosaleen's door has a "no visitors" sign, Lily goes right in. Rosaleen cries when she sees her, and Lily sees that Rosaleen has a huge bandage on her head. It turns out that, after Lily left, two men held Rosaleen while Posey hit her, until Gaston said "enough." But she didn't apologize. Lily assures Rosaleen that they will kill her and she must escape. Lily dresses Rosaleen and takes the telltale bandage off her head, advising her to walk like a visitor. Lily finds a phone and calls the nurse's station, posing as the jailor's wife. She says to tell the policeman he must come back to the jail. Once he leaves, she and Rosaleen walk out of the hospital.

Lily is sure her mother must have been at Tilburon sometime because of the picture and name on the piece of wood. Lily plans to walk to highway 40 and thumb a ride to Tilburon. A black man in a beat-up truck gives them a ride to within three miles of Tilburon. Lily lies to the man, telling him she is visiting her aunt and Rosaleen is going to do housework. Once they are dropped off, a full moon allows them to walk in the dark; when they tire, they stop for the night at a stream. When Lily explains T. Ray's story about Deborah's returning from somewhere only to leave again, she looks at Rosaleen for confirmation. But Rosaleen says she had seen Deborah only a couple of times and she thought Lily's mom always looked sad. Rosaleen believes that this trip to find where Deborah stayed is crazy. The two argue, but they spend the night near the river and bathe in the stream. Lily falls asleep, dreaming of her mother.

## Commentary

Two major threads of the story come together in this chapter. Lily's decision to leave a loveless home is fueled by her resolution to help Rosaleen escape certain death. Lily's understanding of the adult world is heightened when she realizes that both her father and Rosaleen are right to be fearful about the dangerous black and white divide.

T. Ray and Rosaleen both understand how prejudice works, but Lily doesn't. Rosaleen's trembling during the police car ride and in the jail warns Lily that forces she doesn't understand are at work here. When Avery Gaston allows Rosaleen to be brutally beaten, not once but twice, he smiles and says, "I can't say what men riled up like that will do." A culture where the police tacitly accept violence is a fearful place. Lily is kept from screaming during the first beating, during which Posey smashes Rosaleen with the flashlight. The second beating puts the housekeeper in the hospital. When Lily says T. Ray will get *both* of them out of jail, Rosaleen answers ironically. But when T. Ray gets only Lily out, Lily says she'll be back and sees the "caved in look" on Rosaleen's face. Later, T. Ray asserts that Posey is the worst "nigger-hating" man in the town and he will kill Rosaleen. At first Lily doesn't believe him, but then she sees that he is telling the truth. Thus her understanding of prejudice is growing. The black and white divide is part of the culture: When Lily goes to the hospital, it has a wing for blacks and a wing for whites. Lily casually accepts this division, having grown up in it all her life. But she had not seen the violence until this point in her life. This motif is a continuing one throughout the novel.

Rosaleen's courage—or foolishness—gives Lily the audacity to confront her father and leave home. When her father tries to hit her, she fights back by saying her mother wouldn't allow him to hurt her. At the mention of her mother, Lily feels something deadly and cold happen with T. Ray, and as a result, a tremor goes down her spine and she is afraid. T. Ray hurts her with his strongest weapon—his sarcasm about her mother protecting her. He devastates her with the words that her mother was coming back ten years earlier in order to pack and leave Lily. While she shouts that she hates him, Lily feels her heart breaking, and the tears she had been holding in over ten years come out. She replays her memory of that day and believes her father's hurtful words. But after he leaves, she pours a tear out of her bee jar and considers that he might have lied. And she hears a voice telling her, "Lily Melissa Owens, your jar is open." Lily believes it's the voice of the mother for whom she yearns. She must find out the truth about her mother, and she must get Rosaleen to safety.

Another aspect of the adult world, one that will help Lily, is a skill she has learned from her father. She leaves a note to T. Ray calling him a liar, but Lily, too, is an accomplished liar. When Brother Gerald picks her up, she convinces him not to press charges against Rosaleen, on the pretext that she is deaf and was singing a hymn when she was accosted

for her religious zeal. Lily can't believe her own talent when the nurse at the hospital thinks she is truly calling from the police station, nor when she tells the black truck driver, who takes them near Tilburon, that she is visiting her aunt. Perhaps T. Ray has taught her a useful skill to help her survive.

The bee motif also progresses, only this time Lily is the bee in the epigram, leaving for a new life. Her tear over the family secrets parallels the title of the novel, and the tear falls into the jar that the bees have fled. When the idea to leave enters her head, she hears a voice saying her name and reminding her that her own jar is open.



## Chapters 3 and 4

### Summaries

It is the next morning. Waiting for Rosaleen to wake up, Lily studies the picture of the black Mary, trying to figure out why her mother had it. Having been raised Baptist, Lily has always been told to convert Catholics. In fact, Brother Gerald taught her that Hell was designed for Catholics. Now Lily believes her mother must have been mixed up somehow with Catholics, given that she had this picture and Baptists don't talk much about Mary.

Rosaleen wakes up, and they start walking toward Tilburon. Neither has eaten, so Lily suggests they find a hotel and get some food, but Rosaleen explains that a hotel won't take a black woman. When Lily demands to know why the Civil Rights Act doesn't help that, a shrewd Rosaleen explains that the law doesn't mean people will change their minds.

So far, Lily has no plan, but she hopes the voice that persuaded her to leave will come back. She waits for a sign. They come upon the Frogmore Stew General Store and Restaurant. Lily goes to the restaurant to buy food; the owner, not recognizing her, asks where she's from. Lily lies, saying she is visiting her grandmother. She persuades the owner to open her two purchased Coca-Colas, and when he leaves momentarily, she steals snuff for Rosaleen. Guilt-stricken, Lily promises herself she'll send a dollar back to the store sometime in the future. Suddenly she sees the sign she has been looking for. On a store shelf are dozens of honey jars with the exact black Madonna in her mother's picture. The owner explains that "the woman who makes the honey is colored herself," and her name is August Boatright. She lives outside town in a pink house.

Lily hurries back to Rosaleen and explains this sign. She is sure her mother must have known the honey collector. They walk through the town, and Lily checks the post office for their pictures on wanted posters. Fortunately they are neither there nor in the newspapers.

The two continue walking, coming to a place that will provide refuge. When they reach the edge of town, they see a pink house and a

woman walking around who looks like “an African bride.” August Boatright is dressed in white, with a helmet that has veils attached. She swings a bucket that is belching smoke, and bees fly up from boxes on the ground. Lily and Rosaleen watch before approaching the pink house. June Boatwright answers the door, followed by May. Both are August’s sisters. June invites them in, and Lily can feel instinctively that her mother was in this house at some time. Her whole body tingles. Lily is amazed by the smell of furniture wax, the velvet cushions and footstools, and, mostly the carved wooden figure from a ship. She surprisingly tells August the truth: They’ve run away from home. Even though June objects, August says they may stay for awhile.

Lily and Rosaleen discover more about the Boatrights. Rosaleen asks about the Boatright sisters’ names, and May explains that her mother named them for her favorite months. A fourth sister named April died when she was little. May then begins humming “Oh! Susanna” and breaks into tears. August tells her to go to her wall to finish her cry. Lily and Rosaleen are puzzled by this ritual.

Lily lies about their last names—Smith and Williams—and says her mother died when she was little and her father recently died in a tractor accident in Spartanburg County. To avoid being sent to a home, they ran away. Rosaleen is the housekeeper, and they’re going to Virginia to find Lily’s aunt, but need to earn money first. When August asks about Rosaleen’s bruises, Lily says Rosaleen fell down the stairs.

August explains that she is from Virginia and, immediately, Lily gets a strange, tingling feeling once again. The Boatright sisters offer them room and board, and say they can call Lily’s aunt to get bus money. Lily says she doesn’t know her aunt’s last name. August lets them stay for awhile but it is clear that she does not believe Lily’s stories. They will stay and sleep on cots in the honey house. It is a one-room building with all kinds of machines and tools for making honey for distribution. A thin coating of honey lies over everything. August explains that Zach—a hired boy—will be back soon to help with the honey and that Lily can work with him.

Despite being in a strange place, Lily feels that she belongs, but she also feels very white. Lily tells Rosaleen not to tell anyone about her mother’s wooden picture. The prospect of talking to August about her mother makes Lily feel uneasy.

The next day, Lily goes outside to explore and can see fourteen beehives. She learns that August was left twenty-eight acres of land by her

grandfather. Lily then walks over to a stone wall and finds hundreds of bits of paper, folded up, in the cracks between stones. One refers to Birmingham, where four angels died on September 15. Lily suddenly feels guilty for intruding, so she leaves and walks down to a river. She takes off her shoes and wades in it, feeling at peace. Lily wishes life could always be like this without cruel people like T. Ray or Gaston.

## Commentary

In these two chapters, the epigrams about bees sum up what is about to occur. At the beginning of Chapter 3, the circle of attendants refers to the Boatwright sisters, and Lily believes she will find out about her mother, the queen bee, through them. Chapter 4 begins with an epigram that describes the female establishment at the home of the Boatwright sisters, who seem to get along fine without males. Life in the Boatwright home is quiet in comparison to the violence in Lily's life back home.

Religion continues to be a dominant theme as Lily notices the ship's figurehead. It is a black woman, and Lily instantly realizes it is Mary, mother of Jesus. Her heart aches because she believes Mary can see into her cheating conscience and recognize her hatred of T. Ray, of the girls at school, and of herself. But at the same time, Lily feels deep love for herself. Her understanding of right and wrong is awakened by her religious upbringing, and she refers to it once at the end of Chapter 4, when she wishes evil men like T. Ray and Gaston were not part of her world.

Lily also spends a great deal of time trusting her instincts, a decidedly mature trait. When she first sees the black Madonna at the grocery store, she is sure her mother was there or was connected somehow with the honey sellers. She believes that August will be a "portal" to finding out about her mother. Lily feels as though she has a spiritual connection with her mother, given that she senses her presence in this house. Even the mention of Virginia leaves Lily shaking as if she is instinctively sensing something about her mother's past. However, she feels uneasy talking to August about Deborah, and she isn't sure why.

Another continuing motif is Lily's use of lies to forward her plans. She lies to the grocery store owner and to August about their names, the nature of her mother and father's deaths, and Rosaleen's bruises. Lily has not lived in a world where people can be trusted, so she trusts her own instincts when it comes to revealing too much.

The Boatright home is an education in race. The sisters are intelligent and competent, running their own business and doing well. Because T. Ray taught Lily that black women aren't smart, or at least not as smart as white women, Lily is amazed by these women. She realizes that she has been prejudiced by her upbringing. She also is shocked that June would be prejudiced against her, a white girl. It is always the other way around. This is another lesson about growing up: An understanding of all forms of prejudice is necessary in order to realize that skin color is not a fair way to assess peoples' characters. The Civil Rights theme is again brought up with a reference to the senseless Birmingham church bombing, where four children died. In addition, Lily doesn't understand why Rosaleen can't stay in a hotel in spite of the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Prejudice is a wall Lily hasn't quite figured out, but she's beginning to see that the world isn't exactly as described to children.

The nature of good and evil is a question in Lily's mind. People who bomb churches and kill children are evil. T. Ray and Gaston are part of evil, so Lily wonders why they exist. As they grow up, children have to devise ways to cope with the evil and sadness in the world. May is a symbol of what happens when a person feels too deeply about tragedy in the world. She can't deal with that knowledge, and it has crippled her life.

## Chapter 5

### Summary

Lily and Rosaleen have been at the Boatright house for one week, and they are fitting in and learning the routine of the household. Lily is figuring out both the business and the family. Honey surrounds their lives. Lily discovers, to her astonishment, that August has a mail-order honey business that extends to Vermont and beyond. August begins to teach her about the bees, stressing that Lily must love them because everything in the world needs love. Lily works very hard at learning bee-keeping, because she believes if August comes to love her, she won't send her back home to T. Ray.

As they learn the routine, Lily and Rosaleen work on understanding the sisters. While Lily is working with August, Rosaleen is helping May in the house. The sisters buy Rosaleen a new set of clothing, and she and May get along well. Rosaleen understands that May is a bit "slow"—a child in an adult body. She also understands that the singing of "Oh! Susanna" is May's attempt to keep from crying about sad things. She can't even hurt a bug, so she carries spiders out of the house rather than kill them. June is a teacher at the African-American high school and plays the cello, often at funerals. It is clear to Lily that June does not like that Lily and Rosaleen are staying at the house, but Lily doesn't understand why. She begins to figure it out, however, when she overhears a conversation between June and August. June is angry because she and August both know Lily is telling lies about her past. August protests that they can't send Lily back to where she came from, because Lily has a sadness that makes leaving a bad plan. August thinks maybe they can help Lily. June is also angry because Lily is white, which means she doesn't belong there.

In the evening they sit and watch the television news. Lily likes Walter Cronkite, the news anchor. But there is continuous news about violence related to the Civil Rights Movement, and Lily wonders why violence seems to be increasing, given that the Civil Rights Act was just passed. May becomes so upset at the news that they have to put her in a warm bath and calm her down.

One evening, Lily attends the sisters' religious ceremony. They say "Hail, Marys," while looking at the statue they have named "Our Lady of Chains." August explains that their mother was Catholic but their father was "Orthodox Eclectic." This gives them some latitude to make up their own flourishes to the Catholic beliefs. August tells a story to Lily about a nun named Beatrix who ran away from her convent. While she was gone, Mary was standing in for her. Lily thinks August is trying to tell her she knows Lily has run away, and that if she asks Mary for help she'll find peace.

Lily and Rosaleen discover the story behind May's wall. May's problems began when her twin, April, died by suicide. August describes an event where racism caused April great sadness, and she began to become more and more depressed, eventually shooting herself with a shotgun. Since April's death, May also suffers from depression and sadness. Now she is so empathetic to other people's pain that it overwhelms her. So June and August invented her wailing wall, similar to the one in Jerusalem. When May gets sad, she goes to her wall, writes down what makes her sad, and sticks it in a crack in the wall, like a prayer. This calms her.

Lily understands that sadness. She compares May's overwhelming sadness to T. Ray's total indifference to people's suffering. Lily feels she wouldn't want to take either course: feel too deeply or be totally immune to suffering. Returning to the honey house, she is confronted by a sullen Rosaleen, who is jealous of the time Lily is spending with August. Their conversation is a reminder that Rosaleen feels like a mother to Lily and tries to protect her. Lily explains that she is sure August knows something about Deborah, and Lily can feel her mother's presence in the house. Rosaleen tells her to stop this silliness because she doesn't want Lily to get hurt. But once Rosaleen falls asleep, Lily goes out to the wall, writes "Deborah" on a slip of paper, and sticks it in the wall.

## Commentary

Chapter 5 begins with an epigram about the bees, but this time it describes people as being small enough to follow the bees into their hive and feel the darkness. This refers to Lily's and Rosaleen's immersion in the Boatright home: There is a great happiness and love on the surface, but there is also a darkness in April's suicide and May's depression. In this community of women, Lily comes to find the love she so desperately wants. She is attracted to the family atmosphere and the way the

sisters love and protect each other, so she works very hard to get August to love her so she can stay.

Underneath their relationship, however, are lies and secrets. Lily has lied about her identity, her past, and Rosaleen's injuries. August knows this, but it does not appear to upset her. Instead, she believes she can help Lily and does not want to send her back to wherever she was unhappy. Lily is keeping lots of secrets from the Boatrights, but they, too, have secrets. They distract May from painful events for fear she will be overwhelmed. And August keeps secret her disbelief of Lily's stories. But most of all, Lily is seeking to find out the secrets surrounding her mother's life and death. These secrets parallel the title of the novel and the idea that both bees and humans have complex lives that are difficult to understand.

Racism is again a motif in this chapter. When June protests that Lily is white and that she should not stay there, Lily realizes that June does not even know her. The idea that racism is senseless prejudice that fails to take a person's character into account is a new awakening for Lily. Each similar event slowly breaks down the barriers of Lily's upbringing.

Kidd emphasizes in this chapter that passing a law may simply increase violence without changing social conventions. The violence of the 1960s and the inhumanity of racism are continued in evening news broadcasts that recount various cruel and brutal events. May's intense reaction to these programs underscores the inhumane treatment of human beings for each other and their callous disregard of their victim's humanity.

This chapter also begins to dig deeper into the religious aspects of the novel. Lily and Rosaleen join the Boatrights' evening prayers, including the repetition of the Catholic "Hail, Mary." Lily is not quite sure why they call the statue "Our Lady of Chains," but she follows August's lead because she wants to be a part of this community. August's use of the story of the nun who ran away from the convent is a diplomatic and subtle way to give Lily an opportunity to talk about her own flight. It also connects the idea that religion offers an opportunity for hope. Asking Mary for help will surely make Lily's life easier. However, at this point Lily decides she is going to keep her own counsel.

## Chapters 6 and 7

### Summaries

Chapter 6 introduces Neil, June's boyfriend of many years. He is the principal at June's school. Long ago, June was left at the altar by another man, so although she dates Neil, she refuses to marry him. Lily reflects that it's odd all three sisters are unmarried.

The Daughters of Mary have their weekly meeting at the Boatright house. An assortment of ladies in fancy hats arrive, including Queenie, Violet, Mabelee, Cressie, Singer-Girl, and her husband, Otis Hill. Lunelle is the hat maker. They sit in the presence of the Mary statue and begin to say "Hail, Mary's." This is followed by a Bible reading, and then the story of Our Lady of Chains. To August, storytelling is an important way to keep the past alive, the memory intact, and the community connected. Without stories, we forget "who we are or why we're here." Lily can tell August repeats the story the same way, every time.

The story begins in the days when slaves were yearning for freedom. A slave named Obadiah found a ship's figurehead floating in the water. He figured the Lord had sent her to rescue them, and was sure of this when the statue spoke to him, saying she was there to take care of them. When he set her on the hearth of the praise house, Pearl, the oldest slave, identified her as Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Pearl said mothers have seen suffering and are "strong and constant" with a "mother's heart." Then the slaves danced and touched the statue's chest, where they later painted a heart. The master heard the goings-on and chained the statue in his barn, but the statue always escaped, so he gave up. The slaves called her Our Lady of Chains because she broke their chains. The Mary statue gave them hope, and with that hope, some escaped to the North.

The Daughters of Mary sing "Amazing Grace" and "Go Tell It on the Mountain," with each daughter touching Mary's heart. Lily wants very badly to touch her, too, but when she tries to, June stops the music. As a result, Lily faints. When she comes to, the sisters take care of her.

Later, watching the television news, they find out the United States is sending a rocket to the moon as part of the space race against Russia.



August says it takes away the magic of the moon—one less magical symbol. Listening, Lily decides one day she will touch the statue's heart, and then tell August her true story.

Eight days have passed at the Boatright house when Chapter 7 begins. Lily still jumps when she hears a siren because she is afraid it is T. Ray having her arrested and returned home. She still feels she is loved in her new community, but the worry about her father finding her is never far behind.

A black teenage boy, Zachary Lincoln Taylor, comes to the Boatright house, and Lily sees him at first as an intrusion on her relationship with August. He helps Lily and August with the honey. Lily sees Zach as handsome, which surprises her, because she had never thought of black men as being handsome; in fact, back home, she had joined in on making fun of their looks with her schoolmates. But Zach is August's godson, a junior in high school, a football player, and a strong student. He is hoping for a scholarship to go north for college. He is surprised that Lily, a white girl, is staying with the Boatrights and asks her what she is doing there. She gives the standard reply.

They work companionably together and compare notes on their lack of futures. Zach wants to be a lawyer, not a football player, but he is black, and that will limit him. Lily wanted to be a writer but now that she's an orphan, she doesn't see that happening. Zach advises her that she must imagine what has never been.

The only anxious part of Lily's life now is June and her obvious distaste for Lily. August interrupts a conversation between June and Lily, saying Lily can stay as long as she wants. August gives Lily an opportunity to tell her the truth about her history, but although Lily would like to come clean, she keeps putting it off, afraid that August will reject her. At the same time, Lily wants to know what August might know about her mother. That night, Lily has a good cry, both because she hates lying to August and because she's afraid Rosaleen is right about her living in a dream world at the Boatright house. The same evening, June and Neil have a huge argument, and he leaves. Angrily, she yells at him not to come back.

Lily and Zach go on a trip into the country to bring back honey. The property they are on belongs to a lawyer, who helps Zach with his studies. Lily is shocked to experience sexual feelings about Zach, crying about it at one point. Zach misunderstands and thinks he has offended her. He assures her that she will be a great writer. They see a

sign for Tilburon that mentions the home of Willifred Marchant, who is a writer and Tilburon's only claim to fame.

When they return, Rosaleen is moving out of the honey house in order to sleep in the main house near May. August is reading *Jane Eyre*. That evening, Lily begins reflecting on how her body is turning into that of a woman. Zach has awakened feelings in her that she has never felt before. She daydreams about him, and her dreams are mixed up with her mother calling her name. Two days later, Zach brings Lily a notebook to write in, and she hugs him. It is more than a brotherly/sisterly hug. He warns her that people would kill him for just looking at a white girl. Lily begins writing every day in her notebook, and later reading her stories to Zach.

## Commentary

Chapter 6 reveals the source of June's unhappiness; Lily learns that she was left at the altar many years earlier. Her fear of being hurt again by a man causes her to argue with her boyfriend, Neil. Despite dating for many years, she continually refuses to marry him. This conflict causes her overall unhappiness and explains her treatment of Lily.

The Daughters of Mary have a form of religion that is also a social community. Mary has been their source of hope, from slavery until the present day, and followers have been passing their stories down from generation to generation, taking great pride in their history. Their religious services are somewhat like those at conventional churches, but also not: Hymns, spirituals, joy, dancing, storytelling, and fellowship are key parts of their beliefs. The Daughters accept Lily as a friend, but she is not black, and this bothers June, who stops the music when Lily goes to touch the statue. Lily is so overcome by this enmity that she faints. But Lily understands the idea of Mary and of hope, and her yearning for her mother connects with her new ideas about Mary.

Lily is still in conflict over whether to tell August about her past. When Lily goes to the house to check on Rosaleen's moving, she sees August is reading *Jane Eyre*, a novel of Charlotte Brontë's that is similar in some respects to Lily's life. The novel's protagonist, Jane, is an orphan who survives a horrible time in a cruel orphanage and rises to become tutor to a rich man's daughter. She overcomes terrible secrets, an unhappy romance, and her own poor beginnings to finally find happiness. August simply tells Lily that the novel is about a motherless girl who leaves home.

Another thread in Lily's maturation is her relationship with Zach. He causes a sexual awakening in her that is confusing, especially because she has no mother to talk with about these things. Lily is again surprised that she sees Zach as a handsome man, given that she grew up in a culture that believed black people are not beautiful. Lily also feels a connection with Zach because they are both outsiders, persecuted for their color or poor status. Zach understands that their relationship can't happen; in fact, he knows that it is a dangerous idea that could bring violence—even death—into their lives. So, at the moment when they almost kiss, Zach pulls back.

## Chapter 8

### Summary

While Lily and August put labels on the honey jars, they talk. Lily begins thinking about the picture of the Black Madonna and how her mother looked at the same picture. August explains that she read about Black Madonnas in school and learned they aren't unusual in Europe. When Lily asks why she labeled her honey that way, August explains that she wanted to give the Daughters of Mary a divine being that is their own color. August then further enumerates her beliefs, including the idea that the spirit of Mary is alive everywhere in nature. Then she talks about her grandmother (who taught her about beekeeping) and her mother—Lily realizes for the first time that August misses her mother, too.

Lily hears August's story about her parents and also her opinions about marriage. August's father was a black dentist in Richmond, which was where he met August's mother, who was working in a hotel laundry. August she spent her childhood summers with her grandmother. She then went to college and was a history teacher for a few years, until her grandmother left her the house and 28 acres, where she has lived for eighteen years. When Lily questions August about love and marriage, she explains that she fell in love once but loved her freedom more. She does not plan to marry, because it would restrict her life.

They go out in the woods to check on the bees. August explains that the hardest thing in life is choosing what matters. She has Lily listen to the bees in the hives, where each has a role to play but mostly lead secret lives. The queen in the hive, however, is a mother to thousands. The bees then fly out of the hive and cover Lily. Remembering what August said about Mary being in nature everywhere, Lily lets the bees surround her. Having a spiritual moment, Lily remembers the day her mother died and wishes (privately) that she could go back and fix the "bad things." August asks Lily to talk about herself, but Lily nervously says they will talk later.

Zach arrives and is heading to Mr. Forrest's law office to deliver honey. He says there is a rumor that a movie star, Jack Palance, is coming to Tilburon with a black girlfriend. Supposedly, Palance plans to

visit his sister and go to the movie theatre, where he and his girlfriend will sit downstairs in the white section. This may stir up violence in the town. Hearing this, Lily wishes God had made everyone one color. She wants to go with Zach to town, but August is afraid. Finally, though, August relents and lets Lily go.

Zach takes Lily to Mr. Forrest's law office. She meets his eighty-year-old receptionist, Miss Lacy, who is shocked that Lily is staying in a black household. Lily assumes Miss Lacy will now gossip and tell the rest of the town. Zach introduces Lily to Mr. Forrest, who is kind to her. He takes Zach back to his office while Lily waits in another room, where she sees a photo of Mr. Forrest with his daughter. Looking at the photo, she believes she is looking at a father who loves his daughter; she muses that he probably even knows what her favorite color is. This makes her think of T. Ray, and she picks up the telephone and calls him. She expects him to be worried and concerned, but instead he is angry, telling her she's in big trouble. She asks him if he knows her favorite color, but he ignores her question and threatens to find her and, when he does, to hurt her. She hangs up and fights tears because he will never be the father she wants. He doesn't know the simplest things about her.

The visit to the law office upsets Lily. Mr. Forrest returns and, in a pleasant and cordial way, asks her some questions about her. She makes excuses to leave so she won't have to answer his questions. She and Zach return to the Boatright house. Where Lily goes to her room and writes an angry letter to T. Ray. It is about Father's Day and a card she once spent hours making for him; she found later that he had used it to hold peach skins. She writes that she hates him and doesn't believe her mother left her. Then she tears the letter to pieces. That night, when Lily goes into the house to go to the bathroom, she speaks to the statue of Mary as if she's her mother and asks for her help.

## Commentary

Lily hasn't had a strong woman in her life to teach her the lessons she needs to know. When August takes Lily on as a beekeeper, August also becomes a surrogate mother, who talks to Lily about issues a mother would discuss. In this chapter, several conflicts and themes are developed through Lily's and August's conversations. First, August talks about her philosophy about making choices. Then Lily begins to consider how humans can learn from nature. Finally, Lily comes face to face with her realization that her romantic dreams are not reality.

August teaches Lily a great deal about growing up and making choices, and these are lessons she did not learn from T. Ray. August discusses choices and the idea that peoples' lives depend on the choices they make. The idea that a woman would decide to be on her own and not marry is a revelation to Lily. But, as August explains, women had few opportunities, especially black women. August is lucky enough to own land and a thriving business, so if she marries, she would restrict her freedom to choose. Lily never considered the possibility that a woman could be so strong. August is a strong role model for imagination, passion, intelligence, and leadership, a model that is totally alien to the one to which she was exposed while growing up.

As Lily works with August and notices her patience in dealing with the bees, Lily learns that bees have a great deal to teach humans. The queen is instrumental in sustaining life and making it rich. Without her, the hive cannot thrive, prosper, or reproduce. Just as a strong woman can create a community of workers and thrive in that community, the hive is filled with only one queen and many workers who follow her lead and who have jobs to do. Lily absorbs this lesson as she spends more time working with both August and the bees.

In this chapter, Lily still has many romantic notions about parents and family. When she sees the photo of Mr. Forrest with his daughter, she feels a yearning for a father who cares about her and who cares enough to remember the details of her life. She keeps thinking that T. Ray could come around and be that kind of loving parent. But when she calls him, she discovers that her world is not going to be like the photograph of the happy family. She hopes he misses her, but finds that he is only angry that she's escaped him. The letter she then writes (but does not send) is filled with yearning and a tremendous need for love. Her thoughts about the Father's Day card make her see that no matter what she does to make him pay attention or love her, he won't, which is why she tears up the letter.

## Chapter 9

### Summary

The bee epigram for this chapter explains that communication is key. In the chapter, Lily makes an amazing discovery by being very direct with May.

It is July 28 and the temperature is going up to 103 degrees. Lily wakes August to water the bees. On the way to the hives, August turns on the radio and hears news of the moon landing, several missing Civil Rights workers, and the escalation of the Vietnam War. They reach the hives and, while watering them to cool them down, Lily is stung. August tells her she is now a true beekeeper, and Lily is proud of herself. They return to the house, and all three sisters plus Lily and Rosaleen have a water-sprinkler fight. Even June joins in and by the time it's over, June hugs Lily.

The heat goes to 104 degrees, and everyone takes to her bed. This gives Lily time to think. She is rapidly reaching a point where she has to tell August about her past; she is simply working too hard to keep it all in. Lily still yearns for her mother, but maturity has softened the blow. She wants to talk about God and ask why He let the world get away from His original idea of paradise.

Lily goes to the kitchen, where she makes an unsettling discovery. May is sitting on the floor with graham crackers and marshmallows, breaking off pieces of each and putting them on the floor so that roaches will follow them out of the house. Suddenly, Lily has another light-headed epiphany, because T. Ray told her Deborah did that same thing. Lily has to sit down because she is so shocked by this scene. She asks May point blank if she knew a Deborah Fontanel. May says yes, that Deborah had lived in the honey house. Before Lily can faint, May starts singing "Oh! Susanna" and heads to the wall. Something about the memory of Lily's mother has upset her.

The honey house has a strong effect on Lily. She goes there and meditates on her mom being in that very room. She falls asleep and dreams that her mother walks into the honey house, but she has roach legs. Lily wakes up and is so disgusted she almost vomits. The next few days, Lily

is restless; she walks through the rooms picturing her mother there. She wants to ask August about her mother, but she's afraid that she will ruin her new life. Finally, Lily decides her life is in suspension until she talks to August once and for all. She takes a deep breath, assembles her mother's things, and sets out to confront August. She imagines that she will show August her mother's picture and hear stories about her mother from August.

Lily heads to the house, but Zach informs her August is with Sugar-Girl. Zach is going to town and invites her along. After they drive to town and park the truck, Lily notices that people are out on the street and the atmosphere is tense. Then she remembers: It's Friday, the day Jack Palance is supposed to arrive. A group of African-American teenage boys approaches the truck, and one makes a comment. A white man nearby hears and confronts the boy. The boy—named Jackson—throws an RC Cola bottle at the man's head. It hits his nose, which starts bleeding. A policeman is called, and Zach is rounded up with the other teenagers. Lily doesn't know what to do so she gets out of the truck and walks home.

Lily tells August what occurred in town and since Mr. Forrest is already there, they get a plan together. Bail won't happen, which means Zach will have to stay in jail until the judge comes. They keep the news from May so as not to upset her; meanwhile, August and Lily go to the jail to see Zach. The policeman looks suspiciously at Lily, but gives the two women five minutes with Zach. August comforts Zach, but Lily doesn't get to say much. To reassure her, Zach asks her about her writing. A few evenings later, the phone rings and May answers it. She hears about Zach and goes into a trance, making it difficult for him to communicate with her. She becomes horribly quiet, and then says she is going to the wall. When August tries to stop her and asks to go with her, May says she just wants to be alone and leaves.

## Commentary

The exquisite tension within Lily about staying at the Boatright house and finding out more about her mother is the primary conflict building up and up before the end of the novel.

When August and Lily return from tending the bees, the sprinkler fight is a reminder that this is a community of women who care deeply about each other. Even June lets down her suspicions about Lily and



joins in the fun. This is the happiness and love that Lily wants to be a part of—and she is. Anything that might break up this community causes anxiety for Lily.

That pressure is increased when Lily walks into the kitchen and sees May trying to get rid of the roaches without killing them. She knows little about her mother, and for the first time, she confronts someone about whether her mother has been here. Her curiosity, however, also leads to feelings of dread, because Lily fears anything that will throw her out of her community and talking about her mother may be that thing. But now she must ask questions and find out more. Her fears have been overcome by her yearning for her mother. But she has to choose the right time to ask August about her mother.

That conflict is overshadowed, however, by Zach's serious situation after the episode in town. Lily is still learning about racial attitudes and conflicts, and prior to this day, she didn't understand Zach's anger and frustration, his desire to become a lawyer, his need to achieve. Now she sees firsthand what happens when you are a black teenager anywhere near an "incident." When Zach is hauled in with the other boys, Lily isn't sure what to do. But visiting the jail is a grim reminder of what happened earlier to Rosaleen. She can feel the palpable danger for Zach. If she didn't understand Zach's fear about being her boyfriend, she does now. She has finally internalized the understanding of prejudice that T. Ray and Rosaleen know by heart. Lily is learning that the stories on television about riots and murders happen to real people. And she is afraid for Zach.

The tense tone of this chapter escalates as May leaves to go alone to the wall. Clearly, something bad is going to happen. Over and over, May has shown that she can't deal with sad events that are part of reality. Her dreamlike state and insistence that she leave alone are foreshadowing of a terrible event to come soon.

# Chapter 10

## Summary

August paces while May is gone. After twenty-five minutes, she says they should go after May. Grabbing a flashlight, August sets out, and June, Rosaleen, and Lily follow, calling May's name. They don't find May, and August sends June to the house to call the police, and then says a prayer to Our Lady to protect May. Lily begins reciting the rosary out loud as they search. June returns with another flashlight and announces that the police are coming.

August and Lily find May dead in the river, with a huge stone on top of her to weigh her down. They pull her out and lay her on the riverbank. August and June are heartbroken, but after April's death and May's despair, they have expected it. Both sisters are devastated; Lily reaches for a tree limb and holds on tight.

The police question Lily while August and June accompany May's body to the funeral home. Lily tells the usual lies about her background. The police question her closely about why she is staying in a black person's home rather than going back home among white folk. Rosaleen lies and says she brought Lily here because she's the wife of August's first cousin. The policeman warns Lily to call her aunt right away, because she shouldn't lower herself to live with black people. After he leaves, Lily and Rosaleen sleep in May's room. Lily has a dream about Zach and wakes up with a heavy heart. She remembers the happiest parts of May, as well as the anguish that caused her death.

May's death postpones Lily's talk with August about Deborah. After an autopsy, the body is released and the police call May's death a suicide. The funeral home brings May's body to the house for a vigil. This is new to Lily but August says it helps the death sink in with loved ones. Looking at May and knowing May knew her mother, Lily feels an urge to confess her secrets to August. But she realizes August is too sad right now. Lily says a prayer to Mary, hoping May will be happier in heaven. She asks Mary to let Deborah know she is away from T. Ray; she also asks for a sign from her mother, something to let Lily know that her mother loves her. Then Lily says goodbye to May and sheds some tears.

Mr. Forrest returns with Zach, saying a witness saw the whole thing happen, so Zach is free. Zach gives Lily a huge hug and both he and Mr. Forrest offer condolences for May's death. Zach is unhappy, saying he caused May's death, but August soundly scolds him, saying no one could have stopped it.

Lily helps Zach and August drape a black crepe material over each bee hive. August explains it both keeps the bees from leaving because someone died and ensures the resurrection of the dead person. August tells Lily the story of Aristaeus, in which bees have power over death. To answer Lily's questions, August simply says the black cloths are a reminder to the living that death brings rebirth.

The Daughters of Mary show up with huge amounts of food. Lily notices that no one thinks of her as different—as a white person—any more. She also realizes how wonderful African-American women are and scoffs at the policeman who said she “lowered” herself.

The second morning of the vigil, August finds a suicide note out near where they found May's body. May wrote that August and June should not be sad, but instead be happy that May is with her sister, parents, and grandmother. Although she was tired of carrying the sadness of the world, it was her time to die but their time to live. August tells June she must marry Neil and stop being afraid to take a risk.

The vigil goes on for four days; during that time June is quietly thinking. They then take the drapes off the hives, and when the funeral home takes May away for the burial, the bees swarm around the black cemetery. That night, Lily can still hear the humming bees, and she remembers August's point about the spiritual (Mary) being in all of nature.

## Commentary

If growing up involves considering other people before yourself and learning to deal with the sadness of the world without letting it break you, this chapter shows Lily's progress in these areas. Lily realizes how much August is hurting and respectfully keeps her distance, allowing August to mourn. This is quite a turning point in Lily's maturation.

May's death is filled with symbolism. The stone that weighs her down in the river is the material of her wailing wall. All of the sadness, evil, and ugliness of the world are contained in that wall, and now a

piece of that same stone weighs May down in death, just as the knowledge of evil weighed her down in life. May could not, in effect, deal with the weight of the world.

Lily, too, is thinking about the sadness of the world. She considers May's death—the death of a woman she admired and loved—and she doesn't know what to think. She remembers the comments of the policeman who came to the house, who devalued her for living with African Americans. Her thoughts ramble on to Zach's situation in jail, and she dreams about the prejudice in people's hearts. Unlike May, however, Lily has help in coming to terms with these things.

That help arrives in the words of her mentor, August, who reminds Lily not to live with regrets and sadness, as May did. She reminds Lily that no one could have stopped May's actions, just as no one can blame Zach for being in jail. Lily, August, and June have to go on with their lives and put regrets behind them. August's words are also paralleled by the long vigil and the process of laying May to rest.

Lily has known about death only through her mother's violent, explosive ending. She was too young to take in the concept of "forever" when she was four years old. But now she is old enough to understand what death means. In her mind, many ideas about life, death, rebirth, and nature are processing. She observes how adults lay their loved ones to rest and how the vigil is a fitting way for the people who are left behind to say goodbye. Sadness and mourning are part of the ritual, but remembering good qualities and good times are also an element in considering the value of a life.

When Lily and August go out to drape the bee hives, August speaks of death as part of a cycle that also contains rebirth. Draping the hives is less about the bees and more of a reminder to the living that life leads to death, which gives way to rebirth. August speaks to Lily of Aristaeus and of the early Christians and their beliefs in rebirth.

Nature is always a part of the story, whether in the bee world or the human world, and tying those worlds together is the ever-present face of religion. It is important for Lily to hear these ideas and think about them, because they give her courage to finally deal with her past, her regrets, and the death of her mother.

# Chapter 11

## Summary

After May's funeral, August and June begin a week of mourning, staying away from everyone. Lily writes in her notebook but misses her old routine with the family. She roams the woods looking for signs from her mother, and then pulls out her old map to decide what city she and Rosaleen should go to next. During this period, Zach talks with Lily about law school, but she can see that he has changed. His jail stay has turned him into an angry young man, who is drawn to the likes of Malcolm X and the Afro-American Unity group. Lily wishes he were the Zach she remembers, but he tells her they can't change their skin. Instead they have to change the world.

Once the mourning is over, the women have dinner together, say prayers, and August folds May's suicide note up and slips it in a crack in the side of Our Lady's neck. Lily decides to move back to the honey house to be alone. She resolves to tell August her story the next day and slides her mother's things under her pillow. All night she tosses and dreams, fearful of what August's reaction will be.

The next morning, Lily goes to the kitchen and sees the others making cakes for Mary Day. It is August 15, and they are celebrating the Assumption, during which the Daughters will reenact Mary's story. Neil arrives first and asks June to marry him, and she accepts. When they return from a ride, June is wearing an engagement ring. The Daughters come with Zach, and Lily is reminded that she really loves this place and these people. Lunelle offers to make Lily a hat, and Lily requests a blue one.

During that evening's ceremony, they eat honey cakes, bring in Our Lady of Chains, and take her out to the honey house for the night. There is music and a retelling of the promise that those who are cast down will be lifted up and those who are in chains will be freed.

Zach and Lily go for a walk, and Zach admits to his anger. Lily makes him promise he will work on that and not become a bully; Zach agrees. Zach says he will work hard in school, and then go to college. Then he tells Lily he cares about her. Even though they can't be together

now, Zach promises they will be in the future. He puts his dog tags around Lily's neck.

## Commentary

This chapter marks a reflective time for Lily. August is tied up with her own mourning and thoughts, which means that Lily is essentially alone. But her newfound maturity has taught her to respect August's space. Lily thinks about her mother and roams the forest looking for a sign of her love; much of the time she is depressed and stays in bed. But each of these actions shows a new Lily who is learning about herself and thinking about what August has taught her. Along with these new and reflective ideas, Lily also realizes she must plot the next move for herself and Rosaleen.

Lily also begins to discover the adult realization that life cannot stand still. People are always changing, and everyone grows up and leaves childhood behind. The world hardens the soft spots in everyone. She recognizes that in Zach there are now hard places that didn't exist before he spent time in jail. He still has a passion, a drive to make his idea of being a lawyer come true. But at the same time, he wants to shape a world where he and Lily can be together without fear.

During this time of reflection, Lily grasps how much she loves this place and these people: the Daughters with their crazy hats; the bee-keeping; the sisters and the zany water fight; the wedding plans; and the umbrella over them all (Our Lady). The Mary Day ceremony is a time of remembering, and the Daughters exhort everyone to think about their power, their glory, and the promise that they will be lifted up. On the other hand, Lily does not want to remember her past: killing her mother; living with her father; and the unhappy life she left behind.

## Chapter 12

### Summary

Lily waits in August's bedroom, wanting to finally tell of her past. She looks at a picture book of Mary, in which each photo has the angel Gabriel presenting Mary with a lily. August arrives, and Lily tells her it's time to have a talk.

August tells Lily she knows who her mother was. Lily is shocked that August knew all along. The first day Lily arrived, August recognized her as Deborah's daughter. Lily doesn't understand why August didn't tell her sooner. August explains that Lily needed to have some time to get her life and thoughts together, so August waited.

August was a housekeeper in Deborah's house in Richmond, and she took care of little Deborah. August shares details of Deborah's personality, but August wants to know about Lily's life with T. Ray. So Lily tells her about T. Ray and begins to sob when she says her mother left her. August holds her close and lets her cry. Sobbing, Lily explains about T. Ray half-killing her and about Rosaleen's bruises. Then Lily describes breaking Rosaleen out of jail because she was afraid the white men would kill her.

Weeping, Lily explains that she is a bad person who tells lies. She hates T. Ray and other people. She admits killing her mother, and it breaks her heart because it's the biggest secret of all. And finally Lily says, "I am unlovable." August replies that there are all kinds of people who love her, including June: The reason June resented her at first was because August had worked as a maid in Deborah's house. August says she loves Lily. But one thing she can't figure out is how Lily knew to come to Tilburon, so Lily shows her the picture her mother wrote on. Then she explains the honey labels she saw in the grocery store when she and Rosaleen first arrived.

August explains that she went to work for Deborah's mother when Deborah was four, and Deborah had the same independent streak as Lily. When August left the Fontanel home, Deborah was 19. Two years later, Deborah called August when her mother died, before moving to Sylvan and meeting T. Ray. She describes T. Ray as a decorated soldier

who treated Deborah like a princess. He proposed to her, but she turned him down because he was too common. Then she got pregnant, so he married her. Now Lily feels guilty because she caused their terrible marriage.

August got letters the first two years from Deborah, filled with love for Lily and her accomplishments. Then Deborah came and stayed with August for two months. She was thin and had dark circles under her eyes. She was alone and depressed and unlike herself. August explains that she took Deborah to a doctor because she was skin and bones; the doctor suggested a mental institution, because Deborah was having a nervous breakdown.. Lily doesn't understand depression; she hears only that her mother left her, and Lily now feels hatred toward her, although she is reluctant to let go of the romantic stories she has spun about her mother.

August continues the story. After another month, Deborah decided to go get Lily, and she discussed a divorce with Clayton Forrest. She left August to go back to Sylvan and get her daughter. Lily then recounts how she shot her mother once she came home. Bitter and disillusioned, Lily is done and wants to sleep. August explains that she needs to forgive her mother and that people aren't perfect: Her mother tried to make things right.

## Commentary

This pivotal chapter is the turning point of the novel. August tells Lily what she knows about the past, and Lily explains to August how she happened to come to Tilburon. Throughout this telling of stories, however, Lily is not ready to fully listen or forgive. This tells us that her maturation is not complete.

August fills in all the details about Deborah that Lily has never heard. She had a house where she grew up and parents and a housekeeper. August, the housekeeper, ironed her dresses and made her lunches. She liked peanut butter. She loved playing with dolls and climbed a tree to avoid memorizing "Stopping by Woods on a Snowing Evening." Deborah becomes a real flesh and blood person, a person T. Ray didn't share with Lily after Deborah's death.

Lily is filled with self-loathing. She hates herself, hates being a liar, and hates that she killed her mother. She is sure no one will ever love her. No matter what August says, Lily can't get beyond her self-hatred.



She sobs unrelentingly as August tries to comfort her. She can't forgive herself.

Her anger toward T. Ray has never been in question. But August gets Lily to think beyond herself and understand that, at one point, T. Ray loved her mother. This is an idea totally foreign to Lily. She can't reconcile the angry, ugly T. Ray she knows with a young man who fell in love with her mother. Lily has never considered what T. Ray lost when Deborah left. Obviously, his pride was lost, but he also lost the woman he loved. Even though Lily is not yet ready to forgive T. Ray, August's words do sink into her head.

Lily is also angry about her mother's leaving her. No matter what August says, Lily won't forgive her mother. August tries to explain that her mother had a nervous breakdown, wasn't herself, and was making plans to divorce. But Lily doesn't understand what a breakdown is or why a mother would think of anyone other than her child. She isn't ready to let herself or her mother off the hook, nor is she willing to throw away all the romantic stories she has made up about her mother or her mother's love for her. Forgiveness is still an impossible feeling at this point in her life. Thankfully, August understands that Lily needs time to process all this information, so she leaves her to do that, realizing that many issues are still unresolved in Lily's mind.

## Chapter 13

### Summary

Lily spends a sleepless night in the honey house. She unleashes all the anger inside her and throws all the jars of honey against the back wall, breaking them in her rage. Then she throws a tin pail and tray of candle molds. She's half-mad, and her arms are bleeding. She feels empty because all the romantic dreams of her mother have been cancelled by the fact that her mother left her. She lies down in a fetal position near Mary. Lily wants to open a door in Mary and climb in for consolation.

The next morning, Rosaleen shakes her awake, demanding to know what happened. She takes Lily to the house and cleans up her cuts. Lily tells her that she found out the truth about her mother's leaving her, and Rosaleen confirms the fact from phone conversations she'd overheard in Sylvan. Lily explains what August told her and discovers a terrible bitterness in her voice. She asks Rosaleen why she didn't tell her before, and Rosaleen gently asks why she would hurt Lily that way. They both revert to silence and clean up the disorder in the honey house.

That afternoon, the Daughters show up and everyone feasts on Rosaleen's corn fritters. Lily doesn't talk to Zach but asks August to tell him about her mother. June plays the cello for the last part of the ceremony. Neil and Zach bring Our Lady out to the yard. They chant about Mary's escape and put their arms in the air with a powerful message of her Daughters' rising. But a brooding Lily doesn't join in. August turns a jar of honey over the head of the statue. Then, like a beehive, the queen's attendants rub the honey all over the statue. This time Lily does participate. August explains that the honey is like holy water and they are preserving the statue for another year. Both ants and bees show up for the honey, and Lily feels content for now.

After eating, they wash off the statue and take it back to the parlor. Lily goes back to the honey house to think. August comes to see her with a hatbox filled with a few of Deborah's belongings, and Lily is so stunned that she asks August to tell her what is in the box, rather than looking at the contents herself.

Lily's heart starts thudding. There's an oval pocket mirror, and Lily gets off her bed to sit closer and see it. August tells Lily that if she looks in the mirror she will see her mother's face. There is also a hairbrush, worn down from holding. In the brush is a long, black, wavy hair. Lily is astonished. She then realizes that no matter how hard she tries, she can't leave her mother behind. Deborah stays in the "tender places in you." August then drops a gold pin shaped like a whale into Lily's hand. Next, August brings out a black book of English poetry she'd given Deborah. Lily's mother had underlined eight lines by William Blake about the destructive nature of love. Finally, August gives Lily a photo of mother and daughter, set in an oval frame. In it, Deborah is feeding Lily with a tiny spoon; suddenly Lily knows this photo is the sign she wanted.

## Commentary

This very important chapter has a rhythm and pace to it that begins Lily's change from an angry young woman to an understanding, loved daughter. It begins with her destruction of the honey house, continues on to the consoling ritual of the Daughters of Mary, and ends with August's amazing revelations to Lily about her mother.

After August explains the past and Deborah, Lily goes back to the honey house to give up her last vestiges of being a victim and murderer. It has been her place in life to be both a punching bag to her father and the murderer of her mother. Now she must acknowledge her rage at herself and her anger with her mother's memory. She flings everything she can find at the wall of the honey house, determined to show the world how badly she's been treated. She doesn't want to let go of her hatred for her father and her sadness because her mother left her. To let go of that after all this time will leave her wondering who she now is. But once she has let out all of her rage, she falls into a fitful sleep.

The next day, Lily doesn't want to be part of the community or even speak with Zach. Everyone leaves her alone, sensing that she is trying to deal with her emotions. But she is drawn into the powerful ritual of the Daughters' covering Mary with life-giving honey. Lily begins to come out of her anger and realize there is a place for her, where people love her and include her in their community. This is the turning point for Lily; the point at which she begins to accept who she is without all the baggage of the past. When the ceremony ends and Mary is washed clean, August wisely leaves Lily to go back to the honey house alone to

think. But she has seen that Lily is beginning to once again join the community.

August's visit to the honey house is a perfect extension of the discussion they had in her bedroom. She knows that Lily is whole enough to accept the presents that were her mother's things. Before Lily forgave herself and her mother, the items would have been thrown at the walls with the jars of honey. But now, Lily has had time to understand that she is a woman in her own right and nothing that has happened in the past is going to change that. People will have to respect her for who she is and what she believes. Now is the time August can reintroduce Deborah to her daughter, understanding that Lily is now ready to accept the idea that her mother loved her and didn't abandon her.

It is a poignant moment when Lily sees her mother's hair in the brush and realizes she truly did exist and she had love, dreams, and hopes for her daughter and herself in a new place, away from Sylvan. The underlined words in the book of poetry speak to a young woman who is bitterly disappointed in love, and it shows Lily the state of her mother's mind at that time. If she felt that way, Lily could understand why she was leaving T. Ray but would be coming back for her most precious daughter. The photograph seals that understanding, when Lily sees her mother looking at her with love. It is the emotional turning point and the beginning of healing for Lily.

## Chapter 14

### Summary

Lily spends the early days of August reflecting on what she has learned. Although her heart feels like ice, her head considers why it's so hard for people to forgive. She varies between being angry at her mother for leaving and pondering what she now knows about her. Lily realizes that wallowing in her grief was a tool she used to make her special. It forced everyone to tiptoe around her.

June and Neil set the date for their wedding: October 10. Everyone busily works on cakes, dresses, and themes. June regrets not saying "yes" sooner so May could be there, but August reminds her that regrets don't help.

Everyone seems to be healing. Rosaleen buys a new dress and she is going to register to vote, only this time at a black high school. Everyone goes with Rosaleen to the high school except Lily, who ends up regretting that she didn't go so she could tell Rosaleen how proud she was. Zach calls with the news that he is going to the white high school in the fall, although they both assume Lily will end up going back to T. Ray. That night, Rosaleen reminds everyone she can now vote, and Lily impulsively hugs her and tells her she loves her.

Lily cleans house. Not only does she thoroughly clean the honey house, but she also throws out some of her old things. She puts her mother's items out on display and decides that no one is perfect.

The next day, Lily wears her mother's pin, and she and August attend to one of the hives that is queen-less. August explains that her story about Beatrix (the nun) was supposed to let Lily know that maybe Mary could stand in for Deborah. August quietly but firmly explains that Mary is someone inside of you—you have to find the mother in your own heart. Our Lady was the voice telling Lily not to bow down to T. Ray early in the novel. It's a power Lily has, a confidence to persist. Everyone has it.

That afternoon, when Lily is alone in the house, T. Ray shows up with a nasty smile. Lily tries to stay calm. He explains it was a big mistake to call him from Mr. Forrest's office because that's how he found her. When T. Ray called the number, the gossip secretary told him everything.

Suddenly, T. Ray sees Deborah's pin. When he finds out Deborah was at August's after she left him the first time, he is shocked. For the first time, Lily can see how much he loved her mother and how it hurt him when Deborah left. She realizes she'd never considered his pain before. T. Ray slaps her hard, and she falls back on the statue of Mary. He kicks her and calls her "Deborah" and says she's not leaving him again. He has his knife out and doesn't realize she's Lily. When she shouts "Daddy," he comes to his senses and drops the knife. Then she says she's sorry she left him.

August and Rosaleen come to the doorway, but Lily waves them away. Her father, with hurt in his eyes, explains that Lily looks like Deborah. She now understands why he treated her so badly. He says, "We're going home," but Lily tells him that she's not leaving.

August comes in and tells T. Ray that Lily can live with her as long as she wants. The Daughters all show up, and T. Ray tries to think of a way to save face. August perceives his confusion and explains to the Daughters that T. Ray is Lily's father who has come to visit. He looks at all the strong women and falters. August says she is teaching Lily beekeeping and she will put Lily in school in the fall. T. Ray leaves, slamming the door. But Lily goes running after his truck. She wants to know if she really did kill her mother. He tells her she did, but that she didn't mean to.

It is November now, and June and Neil are married. Lunelle created a hat for Lily to wear that is fabulous. Clayton Forrest comes by to say that the Sylvan police will be dropping the charges against Lily and Rosaleen. Lily becomes friends with Forrest's daughter, Becca. Zach, Lily, and Becca see each other at school, and Lily doesn't mind that the other teenagers call them "nigger lovers."

Lily keeps her mother's picture beside her. She feels closer to Mary, too, who fills the sadness in her heart. Then she remembers how all the Daughters stood up for her that day; Lily realizes that she is no longer motherless.

## Commentary

The last chapter presents the culmination of many themes in the story and demonstrates the lessons of maturity Lily has internalized. Forgiveness, self-confidence, understanding, and knowledge are all ideas that show Lily's growth as a human being. The chapter also ties up loose ends, such as the question of T. Ray and where he fits in Lily's future.

Lily is beginning to reach some understanding about her parents. Before, she was a cowering victim of her father, but now she faces him down and even considers his perspective and feelings. In most ways, she is a better human than he is. When she realizes that he sees her as her mother, she can begin to understand why he treated her so badly. It must have been a terrible blow to his ego to marry his pregnant girlfriend, and then see her leave him, realizing that the community knew, too.

"Daddy" is the name she could never call T. Ray before, but when she screams it, T. Ray recognizes her and sees that he is hurting her, not her mother. When Lily refuses to bend to him and explains that she, too, is leaving him, she does so fully understanding that she has chosen a community of women over her own father. Even T. Ray seems to recognize that she is different, more grown up, and better off in the company of strong women. She is no longer the traumatized victim.

Lily held up her mother as a symbol of what mothers should be like, and yet her mother abandoned her. Now that Lily knows the true story—that her mother was returning for her—she also can let go of the romanticized ideal of her mother. August has explained that her mother was not perfect and she certainly could not have taken care of Lily in her debilitated state, not until she recovered. Before, Lily had romantic pictures in her head of Deborah's brushing her hair and holding her. She had to be able to forgive her mother before August showed her the photo of Deborah feeding Lily. Now she sees that her mother truly loved her, and by forgiving Deborah, Lily can truly appreciate her mother's love. Lily's cleaning of the honey house is symbolic of throwing out all the old ideas and replacing them with what is true, honest, and strong.

Lily's newfound self-confidence in facing T. Ray down is a product of August's teachings, the power of women represented by the Daughters and Our Lady of Chains, and the model of the Boatright women themselves. When August explains that it wasn't Lily's mother's voice she heard telling her to leave T. Ray but the voice of Mary inside of her,

Lily begins to understand that women do not have to be victims. They can be strong advocates for their own lives and ambitions. Just as Our Lady can break her chains, Lily can stand up to the bullies at school who call her a “nigger lover,” and to her own abusive father.

However, Lily had to forgive herself before she could stand up for herself and understand she is a human being who deserves to be treated with respect. All the mourning she did following August’s revelations about Deborah and all the quiet, introspective time led to this new forgiveness of herself. Lily deserves to be loved and cared for. She may have killed her mother accidentally; she cannot change that. Undoubtedly, there will continue to be times when she will still feel badly about what happened, but Lily now realizes (and T. Ray even admits) that she did not mean to do it and she must forgive herself for the accidental death of her mother. Lily has now found a home in a community that loves and cares for her, and she will continue to heal and see a better future.





# **THEMES AND SYMBOLS**

## Forgiveness

In the very first chapter of *The Secret Life of Bees*, Lily describes her mother, beginning what will be an overarching theme throughout the novel. Lily suffers tremendous guilt for killing her mother, and at night she dreams of dying, meeting her mother in heaven, and asking for her forgiveness. Lily has little doubt that her mother will kiss her and forgive her for 10,000 years.

Later in the novel, when August tells Lily about Deborah, Lily becomes irate about her mother's abandonment. Lily can't grasp the concept of a nervous breakdown; all she hears is that her mother left her to come to August's house. She isn't ready to let her mother off the hook, forgiving her for seeking her own health first and leaving Lily with T. Ray.

Lily goes back to the honey house and throws jars of honey against the wall, making a huge mess but letting out her anger. She doesn't want to forgive her mother because Lily has been wallowing in her victimhood. She also doesn't want to let go of the romantic pictures she has created of her mother.

In Chapter 14, Lily is mulling over what August has told her about her mother. She vacillates between being angry at her mother for leaving on the one hand, and better understanding her mother's motives on the other. Lily ponders the idea of why it is so difficult for people to forgive.

There is someone else Lily must forgive: herself. Lily's first reaction, when August tells her Deborah married T. Ray because she was pregnant with Lily, is that it was all her fault that Deborah was saddled with such a terrible husband. Then, when Lily tells August her story about how she happened to come to the Boatright house, she explains with tears and sorrow that she loathes herself and is a worthless person who isn't worthy of love. Before she can become whole and love herself, Lily must forgive herself for killing her mother, and she must understand that this was an accident that she can't go back and fix. She has to go on, realizing she is a human being worthy of love.

Lily comes close to forgiving her father at the end of the novel, when she chooses to stay with the Boatrights. She sees what an unhappy man he is and how his pride has been broken by her mother's abandonment. She understands how much he loved her mother, and although she chooses to stay with the Boatrights, her understanding of her father is a first step toward forgiveness.

## Racism/Prejudice

The nature of prejudice is thoroughly discussed throughout Lily's story. It's important to understand that she grew up in the South, where races were separated by both law and attitudes. The hospital has a separate wing for African Americans, and Christian churches are separated, too. Blacks are not allowed to vote, and are kept from doing so even after a law is passed to specifically allow it. The police routinely allow black citizens, like Rosaleen, to be beaten by their white neighbors. Even Lily understands and believes that African Americans are neither beautiful nor intelligent. Lily has been brought up to believe blacks are second-class citizens, and the world is logically structured this way.

Interestingly enough, Lily does not attempt to reconcile her love for Rosaleen with her understanding that blacks are inferior to whites. But when Rosaleen's life is threatened by a system that Lily doesn't understand, she knows only that she must save Rosaleen's life, even if it means leaving home and breaking the law.

Lily's attitude begins to change when she meets the Boatright sisters—strong black women with a profession, an education, and a religious community that is strong and positive. When June reacts to Lily's whiteness with disdain, it occurs to Lily that prejudice can work both ways. Finding out how prejudice feels, Lily begins to understand that character is more important than skin color.

Zach is another character who helps her education about race. Zach is gorgeous, intelligent, ambitious, sexy, and compassionate. He wants to be a lawyer even though he will find barriers in the way of his dream. But Zach cautions Lily that their love can't happen in the present world and, in fact, it is dangerous for both of them. When he is unjustly imprisoned, Lily finds out firsthand the horror of racial prejudice. It changes Zach and hardens him, although it does make him even more determined to fight it as a lawyer. And Zach promises Lily that if they can imagine a world in which there will be no prejudice, they can be together.

All around her, Lily receives strong messages about prejudice. The policeman who comes to the Boatright house and the receptionist at the lawyer's office both disapprove of her living there. On television every night, Lily sees stories of people beaten and killed because of their race.

By the end of the novel, Lily has grown into a person who understands the terrible nature of prejudice. When students at her school call her a “nigger lover,” she can withstand it with pride. When Zach says that some day they will be together because they love each other, she believes him and wants that day to come. And, finally, Lily chooses to stay at the Boatright house, realizing that it is a community she loves and that it does not matter that her “family” members are black and she is white.

## Black Mary/Female Power

Lily’s father has no respect for women (or children), and he regularly teaches Lily to be a victim. This leaves her with few role models. Lily’s teacher tries to encourage Lily in becoming a teacher, a profession open to women, and Rosaleen shows her love. But Lily’s guilt over her mother’s death, combined with a culture that has little regard for women, leaves her with scant understanding of what she might be able to do with her life. All that changes when she reaches the Boatright household.

Lily first begins to recognize her power when she hears the voice of her mother saying “her jar is open.” Later, she comes to realize that this is not her mother, but the voice of self-confidence within her. August defines it as the voice of Mary that is inside everyone. August’s religion—the Daughters of Mary—parallels her ideas about the power of women. The Daughters of Mary believe in the power that Mary can give them, and also in the idea that women can be free.

Until meeting August, Lily does not consider a life without men or marriage. But August explains that she had that choice and decided it was not for her. She wanted her freedom, a life with no one telling her what to do. August is an intelligent, educated, problem-solving, sensitive businesswoman, and Lily learns from her to appreciate the strength and power of women.

August also shows Lily how women can sensitively mourn and lay the dead away, explaining that death is a part of life and a normal part of life’s cycle. This is so different than the violent death of Lily’s mother. Lily learns an amazing lesson from a powerful woman.

The Daughters of Mary also influence Lily in her understanding of powerful women. They help each other, have fun together, worship together, and powerfully stand shoulder-to-shoulder. In the last chapter

of the novel, they are a potent symbol to T. Ray. They will not allow him to ever hurt Lily again, and they will raise her themselves in a much more empowering environment.

By the end of the novel, Lily has learned how powerful women can be, and she joyfully tells Rosaleen how proud she is of her voter registration. She doesn't let other students tell her with whom she can spend her time or how she can act. She has come into her own power as a human being, and the fact that she is female is now a plus.

## Mothers

The novel is a story about the powerful, magnetic pull of children to their mothers. From the very first chapter, Lily is looking for her mother—or at least to know her mother. Throughout the story, she discovers surrogate mothers, and finally reconnects with her own mother's story.

Her first yearning, however, is for her real mother, Deborah. When Lily finds her mother's things, she makes up all kinds of stories about what her mother would have been like. Lily harbors romantic ideas about her mother and how she would have treated Lily if she were still alive. Brushing Lily's hair, helping her pick out her first bra, and teaching her about dating and boys are all the kinds of events Lily pictures a mother doing. She feels bereft as a result of her position as a social pariah, often directly because she doesn't have a mother. Lily seeks her mother's forgiveness for killing her, but she also misses her mother's presence and wisdom.

Lily loves Rosaleen like a mother, but Rosaleen is not as cultivated or soft as Lily imagines her own mother to be. Rosaleen's lack of manners sometimes bothers Lily, but Rosaleen is the one who cleans Lily up when she has hurt herself after throwing the honey jars against the wall of the honey house; Rosaleen is the one who sometimes intercedes with Lily's father. And in the long run, Rosaleen is the one Lily applauds for having the courage and strength to register to vote.

August is Lily's second surrogate mother, and she gives Lily wisdom. She instinctively knows what Lily needs and realizes right away whose daughter Lily is. She waits patiently until Lily comes to her with the story of her real mother, and she holds Lily while she lets out all her pain and anger. August waits until the right moment to give Lily her mother's things, and she allows Lily to deal with her father in the climax of the

story. She also teaches Lily about beekeeping, a skill handed down from mother to daughter. Finally, August gives Lily the courage to listen to herself, the power of her spirituality with Mary, and the understanding that a woman can be a powerful person who does good in the world.

The Daughters of Mary also act as surrogate mothers to Lily. They take her into their circle, teach her about sisterhood and community, and allow her to become part of their religious service. In the end of the novel, they stand shoulder to shoulder when Lily's father attempts to take her away.

Deborah is the mother that Lily lost, and yet finds again at the end of the novel. It is from August that Lily learns that her mother truly loved her and was not going to abandon her. From August's stories about Deborah, Lily learns that no one is perfect and even mothers who love their daughters sometimes need help to find the strength to carry on. Lily also learns that her mother loves her even from beyond this life.

## Bees/Beehives

Bees operate on many levels in this story: The epigrams at the beginning of each chapter concern bees; the bees in Lily's room reach out to her and show her she must leave; and the bees at the Boatright house are instrumental in teaching about community, life, and death.

Each chapter begins with an epigram (short saying) from a book about bees, and each foreshadows what will happen in the chapter. Sometimes the quote is about Lily, sometimes about her mother, and other times about the community at the Boatright house. Despite the character described, the epigram gives the reader a feeling of whether the chapter will be factual or mournful. For example, in Chapter 1, the queenless hive is Lily's home, and the restlessness is the unhappiness of T. Ray, the abuse of Lily, and the loss of her mother's love and influence. In Chapter 14, however, the epigram describes a dying, queenless colony in this way: "But introduce a new queen and the most extravagant change takes place."

The bees in Lily's room illustrate who she is and what she must do. When Lily captures them in a jar, they do not leave the opened jar because they have become desensitized to their predicament. This is what has happened to Lily in her loveless home. Eventually, however, a bee she has captured does fly away, and Lily realizes she, too, must leave, save Rosaleen, and get away from her abusive father.

Interestingly, T. Ray can't see the bees; when Lily tries to show them to him they disappear. Perhaps she is more in tune with nature and the natural laws than he is.

The label on a honey jar leads her to the Boatright home, almost as if the bees are leading her to clues about her mother. At the Boatright house, the bees and their hives are both a way of life and a means of sustenance for the family. But the Boatrights also respect the bees and care for them because they realize all of nature is in harmony with mankind when treated this way. August uses the bees and their hives to illustrate to Lily how societies operate, explaining that they are a powerful symbol of women as leaders of the village. August explains to Lily that bees have secret lives, so much so that humans seldom realize how complicated a bee hive is. Lily sees the parallel between the bees and her own secret life. As the bees have a mother to care for them and provide sustenance, so Lily has a mother for whom she yearns. Each of the bees has a job to do, and Lily is learning her own job at the Boatright house.

The scene in which Lily is engulfed by bees and feels their mystery is a powerful picture of how all the Earth is inclusive. The bees have accepted her as a keeper, and she feels both a kinship with nature and the power of Mary within her. August explains that bees have always been powerful symbols of life and death, as far back as Biblical times.

Later, August uses the beehives to teach Lily that life is a cycle, one in which death and rebirth are an important part. Draping the beehives, tending to their needs, and getting another queen for a queenless hive are all part of taking care of nature, the needs of the bees, and the circle of life. Symbolically, the night of May's burial, the bees return in Lily's head and she hears their hum.

## **Appearances versus Reality**

The theme of appearances versus reality occurs in many places throughout the novel and plays a part in Lily's lying, her romantic illusions about her mother, and her dreams of what a happy home is like.

Early in the novel, Lily is an outsider and realizes she does not appear to be "respectable." Respectable means having two parents who love you, especially a mother who can take you to the women's club, girls who invite you to sleepovers, and pretty clothes and jewelry. Because Lily does not have any of these things, she faces a bleak social reality.

But she knows what her appearance *should* be in order to win the “respectable” label.

Lily knows that lies are necessary to give people what they believe to be true. They are also necessary, in some cases, just to help Lily survive. She lies to the owner of the grocery store near Tilburon, having him believe she is a young girl visiting her grandmother. He will accept that because it makes her “respectable.” She lies to August about her history and about Rosaleen’s bruises, because she knows she must appear a certain way for August to take them in. Each time she tells a lie to help them survive, she is playing on people’s understanding of how she appears to them.

The photo of Mr. Forrest and his daughter is a powerful example of appearance versus reality. Lily is so struck by the photo, in fact, that momentarily she believes her own family could be like this. After all, that photo is how parental love appears to the world. Lily calls her father in an attempt to reconnect and possibly discover that he does love her the way Mr. Forrest loves his daughter. But T. Ray undermines Lily’s longing for the appearance of family love by telling her that he does not love her and that he plans to punish her when he finds her. There will be no future photograph of T. Ray and Lily, announcing to the world that they are a loving family.

May’s death is a symbol of what happens when one can’t deal with reality. For May’s sake, everything had to appear happy at the Boatright house. The sisters knew that if anything sad or difficult disturbed that happy picture, May would not be able to deal with that reality. In the end, because she couldn’t deal with the reality of life’s sadness, she killed herself. Lily is saved from a similar fate because she is tougher and has weathered many storms already. August is wise enough to force Lily to face the ugly realities, and then build her back up and allow her to have both the knowledge of what it is like to be loved and dreams for the future.

## The Whale Pin and Photograph

The whale pin and photograph of Deborah and Lily are symbols that Lily’s mother truly did exist, that she lived at the Boatright house, and that she loved her daughter. The whale pin later becomes a hated object for T. Ray, who had given it to his wife when she turned twenty-two. The photograph of Lily and her mother symbolizes her mother’s love and the certain belief that she would have returned not only for her clothes, but also for her daughter she loved.





# **GLOSSARY**

**“American Bandstand”** A television show based in Philadelphia that ran from 1952 to 1989. It introduced new pop stars and dances. Dick Clark became the host in 1956. (9)

**Aristaeus** A minor Greek god who was connected with the useful arts, including beekeeping. (10)

**Birmingham, Sept. 15, four little angels dead** This is a reference to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. The church was used as a meeting place for Civil Rights Movement leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr., and others. On Sunday, September 15, the church was bombed and four children, ages 11 to 14, died while attending Sunday school classes. The case was unsolved until 1977, when Robert Chambliss, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, was found guilty. Three other men were named in the crime in 2000; at that time, one was dead and two others were arrested. One of those arrested, Thomas Blanton, was tried and convicted. (4)

**Castro’s sister** Juanita Castro, sister of Cuban president Fidel Castro, was rumored to have supplied the CIA with information prior to moving to the United States in the early 1960s. (3)

**Civil Rights Act** A law envisioned by John F. Kennedy and passed by Lyndon Johnson and Congress on June 15, 1964. It made discrimination in public buildings illegal, provided equal employment opportunities, and made it easier to register to vote. (1)

**Crystals, The** A 1960s girls’ singing group from New York City, whose big hits were “Then He Kissed Me,” “Da Doo Ron Ron,” and “He’s a Rebel.” (11)

**Goldwater for President sign** Barry M. Goldwater was a five-term senator from Arizona who ran for president on the conservative Republican ticket in 1964. (3)

**Grimm Brothers’ forest** Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were German brothers who wrote fairy tales and folk tales. Many, such as “Hansel and Gretel,” were set deep in a scary forest. (2)

**Gulf of Tonkin** The location of an incident in which North Vietnam attacked two U.S. destroyers on August 2 and 4, 1964. The U.S. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, giving President Lyndon Johnson justification for escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam. (9)

**herringbone** A zigzag pattern, knit into fabric. (1)

**"I Found My Thrill on Blueberry Hill"** The first line of the song "Blueberry Hill" recorded on Imperial Records by Fats Domino in 1956. (7)

**Jack Palance** An American actor, born Volodymyr Palahnyuk, who played mostly in Westerns. He won an Academy Award for *City Slickers* and an Emmy for his television work. (8)

**Jane Eyre** A popular British novel by Charlotte Bronte, published in 1847. It is the story of an English orphan who overcomes terrible experiences to finally marry the man she loves. (7)

**Lost Horizon** A novel popular in the 1950s by James Hilton. Four people escaping the Civil War are transported to the tranquil world of Shangri La in Tibet. It is an otherworldly place where dreams come true. (10)

**Malcolm X** A controversial American Black Muslim minister and spokesman for the Nation of Islam until 1964. He was allegedly shot by Nation of Islam assassins. (3)

**Marvelettes, The** A girl's singing group that preceded The Supremes and recorded for Motown from 1960 to 1969. Their number-one hit was "Please, Mr. Postman." (11)

**Mary Whites** The brand name for grits, which are made of coarsely ground corn and sold predominantly in southern states. (1)

**Miles Davis** An American jazz trumpet player and composer. He influenced musicians from World War II until the 1990s, especially in new developments in the world of jazz. (7)

**Mr. Khrushchev** Nikita Khrushchev was the leader of the Soviet Union from 1955 to 1964. He created some liberal reforms but was considered the enemy of democracy during the Cold War. (1)

**Nat King Cole** An American singer and pianist whose smooth voice won him fame. He had his own television show in 1956 and 1957 and was the father of singer Natalie Cole. (8)

**Pentecostal dresses** A reference to Apostolic Pentecostal Church rules that say women should wear dresses that cover them modestly from neck to foot. (1)

**Perry Mason** A fictional defense attorney created by author Erle Stanley Gardner. He was well known on television because of a popular series named for his character that ran from 1957 to 1966 and from 1973 to 1974. (7)

**“Queen for a Day”** One of the earliest prize-giveaway shows on the radio, and then later on television from 1945 to 1964. A female contestant in reduced circumstances would be brought on and given flowers and all kinds of prizes, thus making her “queen for a day.” (1)

**rabbit ears** Portable antennas set on top of early television sets so that reception was better. They are called rabbit ears because the antenna sticks out in two directions, like the ears of a rabbit. (1)

**Ralph Waldo Emerson** Famous American philosopher, lecturer, and poet who wrote about self-reliance. (1)

**Ranger 7** A U.S. rocket that launched to the moon on July 28, 1964. It was designed to fly to the moon and send images back prior to impact. (6)

**Saigon** The largest city in South Vietnam near the Mekong Delta. Renamed Ho Chi Minh City in 1975 after Americans left and the communists took it over. (3)

**Sam Cooke** A popular R & B, soul, and gospel singer and songwriter between 1957 and 1965. Cooke had twenty-nine Top 40 hits. (9)

**Spic And Span** A household cleaner invented in 1933 by two housewives. Later, the product was bought by Procter and Gamble. (13)

**“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”** A famous poem by Robert Frost that follows a narrator who has “miles to go before I sleep.” Those “miles” are often interpreted as goals he wants to accomplish before he dies. (12)

**“The Fugitive”** A television series that ran from 1963 to 1967. David Janssen played Dr. Richard Kimble, a man falsely convicted of his wife’s murder. He escaped a train that was taking him to prison and hunted for the real killer, a one-armed man. The series was the talk around the water cooler at work. (7)

**The Supremes** One of Motown Records’ most successful rock groups, featuring Florence Ballard, Mary Wilson, and Diana Ross. (2)

**Thoreau, Henry David** Author, critic, philosopher, and naturalist, who advocated simple living. He explored nature, simplicity, and resistance to immoral laws. His philosophy of civil disobedience influenced Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (3)

**Viva Las Vegas** A movie starring Elvis Presley and Ann-Margret that was produced by MGM in 1964. (7)

**wailing wall** A wall in the Old City of Jerusalem that is traditionally part of Solomon's Temple built in the tenth century B.C. Although the temple was later destroyed by the Romans, the West Wall stands. It is a holy place of pilgrimage for Jews. Many people who visit place a slip of paper with prayers into the cracks of the wall. (5)

**Walden, or Life in the Woods** A book written by Henry David Thoreau in 1854 that describes his two years of living near a pond outside Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau advocated living deliberately and in harmony with nature. (3)

**Welch's grape juice cans** Cans used for hair rollers; hair was rolled around the empty cans, and a bobby pin secured the hair. Sleeping was almost impossible. (1)

**Wilt Chamberlain** A 7-foot, 1-inch basketball player considered one of the greatest NBA players of all time. He played for Philadelphia and Los Angeles. (9)

**women's club** A cultural marker; around the country, these were small-town clubs for women who were homemakers. They could go there for a tea, piano recitals, and so on. (1)