

An American Marriage



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TAYARI JONES

Like the character of Celestial in *An American Marriage*, Tayari Jones received her undergraduate degree from Spelman College, a historically black college or university (HBCU) in Atlanta, Georgia. After graduating, she obtained a Master's degree in English at the University of Iowa as well as a Masters of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from Arizona State University. She taught creative writing at the University of Illinois and at George Washington University before joining the MFA faculty at Rutgers University Newark. She published three novels before *An American Marriage: Leaving Atlanta, The Untelling*, and *Silver Sparrow*. *An American Marriage* was selected as a pick for Oprah's Book Club in 2018.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

An American Marriage was published at a moment when concerns over the injustice of mass incarceration were at the forefront of civil rights discussions. Over the past 40 years the U.S. prison population has grown to make up nearly a quarter of the world's incarcerated people. A disproportionate number of those prisoners are black men, who are six times more likely than white men to be incarcerated. This is largely the result of racial bias in policing, harsher sentencing, and socioeconomic iniquity. The effects of such prejudice is not limited to those individuals placed behind bars but extends to hinder the growth and wellbeing of the families and communities of those incarcerated. Nationwide protests started by contemporary social justice groups like Black Lives Matter have drawn increased attention to the issue of racial disparities in mass incarceration and the ways in which the U.S. prison system contributes to a cycle of poverty and crime within communities of color.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jones' 2002 debut novel *Leaving Atlanta* is a coming of age story set during the Atlanta Child Murders of 1979-1981, and, like *An American Marriage*, takes place in the titular city. Her second novel, *The Untelling* (2005), is also set in Atlanta and tells the story of a character forced to redefine herself in her mid-twenties while reflecting on the members of her family she lost as a child. Like *An American Marriage*, Jones' third novel, *Silver Sparrow* (2011) focuses on leading a double life as it explores what happens when the daughters of a man with both a public family and a secret family meet and become friends. While Jones's previous works primarily focus on younger

protagonists, all four books closely dissect the intricacies of family life. Like Jones, contemporary African American writer Jesmyn Ward explores the effects of mass incarceration on black families in her 2017 novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Michelle Alexander's 2010 nonfiction book *The New Jim Crow* presents mass incarceration as a new form of slavery, while famed activist Angela Davis has written multiple books espousing the merits of prison abolition, including *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003) and *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture* (2004). Bryan Stevenson's 2014 *Just Mercy* tells the true story of a young black man sentenced to die for a murder he insisted he did not commit.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** An American Marriage
- **When Written:** 2011-2018
- **Where Written:** Newark, New Jersey
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Literary Fiction
- **Setting:** Atlanta, Georgia and Eloe, Louisiana
- **Climax:** Upon returning home after being wrongfully incarcerated for five years, Roy fights Andre for having a romantic relationship with Celestial but stops short of killing his friend.
- **Antagonist:** Mass incarceration, racism
- **Point of View:** First person alternating among three characters

EXTRA CREDIT

Inspiration at the Mall. Though Jones initially planned to write *An American Marriage* entirely from Celestial's perspective, she changed her mind after a conversation in an Atlanta mall revealed the urgency of the male character's situation. Jones overheard an elegant woman tell her male companion, "Roy, you know you wouldn't have waited on me for seven years!" To which he responded, "I don't know what you're talking about; this wouldn't have happened to you in the first place!"



PLOT SUMMARY

Roy, an up and coming executive from the small town of Eloe, Louisiana, and Celestial have been married for a year and a half. The two live in Atlanta, Georgia, where Celestial grew up. A burgeoning artist, Celestial models much of her work on her husband's likeness and has found success making artisan dolls.

Together with Roy, she plans to grow her art into a larger business.

Over Labor Day weekend the couple visit Roy's parents, Olive and Big Roy, in Eloe. Celestial is apprehensive about the trip; Olive has always believed that her daughter-in-law's comparatively cosmopolitan upbringing will cause issues for the couple. Celestial, meanwhile, believes that the only thing that will make Olive love her is if she has a baby. Celestial's apprehensions prove apt when Olive is dismissive of her artistic success. Celestial defends herself by showing Olive one of the dolls she was commissioned to make by the mayor of Atlanta. Olive marvels at its likeness to Roy but feels that Celestial is rubbing her success in her face.

Later, at the motel room Roy has booked for himself and Celestial, Roy reveals that Big Roy is not his biological father but rather adopted him as a baby; Celestial is offended that he hadn't shared this information with her sooner. After an argument, Roy leaves the room to get ice and runs into a woman with her arm in a sling. He helps her bring ice back to her own room before returning to Celestial, who has just hung up with her best friend, Andre—incidentally, the one who introduced her to Roy in college. Celestial and Roy talk more calmly about Roy's parents and then make love. That night, the police break down the door to their room while they are asleep and arrest Roy, accusing him of raping the woman he assisted earlier. The couple hires Uncle Banks to defend Roy, but he is sentenced to twelve years in jail.

Celestial and Roy write frequent letters to each other, in which Roy tells Celestial about his cellmate, Walter, and expresses how difficult life in jail is. He adds both her and Andre to his visitors' list. When Celestial visits Roy, however, they experience the strangeness of being monitored during their time together. Roy later questions Celestial about the pregnancy she aborted after Roy was arrested, wondering if they made the right choice. Celestial tells Roy that she is even sadder about their lost child than he is and asks him to stop questioning their decision. She's focused on her work, hoping to sell the poupées, or baby dolls, to young black girls as much as to art collectors. When Roy continues to question her, however, Celestial reveals that she was pushed into an abortion in college after having an affair with a professor. It was then that she transferred to Spelman College and also learned to make baby dolls as a way of assuaging her guilt.

Over the years Celestial opens a retail business with her father, Franklin Davenport, and has a solo show in which she exhibits all of the work made in Roy's likeness. Her fame grows after she wins a contest through the National Portrait Gallery and is featured in an article in *Ebony Magazine*. The contest-winning doll looks like baby Roy but wears prison johns and was inspired by a time she saw a little boy on the street and worried that he, like Roy, was destined to be imprisoned because of his skin color. Roy worries about why she didn't mention him in the

Ebony article, wondering if she is becoming romantic with Andre. Celestial defends herself, saying the story of Roy's incarceration is too personal to share. Roy apologizes, but Celestial doesn't write back. Roy then writes to Celestial to share that he has discovered that his cellmate is actually his biological father, and that he understands her earlier sense of betrayal upon discovering he hadn't told her about Big Roy. Celestial finally writes to ask Roy's forgiveness, saying she was at first angry, but then just busy, and that she'll visit soon. Roy says something seems different about Celestial, asking if she is seeing someone else, and also shares that Olive has lung cancer.

Olive dies, and after attending her funeral with Andre Celestial writes Roy to tell him she can no longer be his wife; seeing the dedication Big Roy displayed towards Olive only highlighted the weakness of their own marital connection. Roy writes back to Celestial asking her not to come visit him. Over the next few years, Celestial writes Roy on special occasions but Roy doesn't return her letters. At the five-year mark of his sentence, however, Roy writes Celestial to tell her he's being released and that he believes there's a reason she hasn't yet divorced him.

Andre, who reveals he has been involved with Celestial for the past three years, says he has loved her since they were children. Though he was genuinely happy when Roy and Celestial married, he won't apologize for their current relationship. He comes home one day soon after Celestial has finally agreed to file for divorce from Roy only to find out that Roy is being released. Andre proposes to Celestial, despite her insistence that she no longer believes in marriage. She ultimately agrees, and they announce their engagement at the Davenports' house on Thanksgiving.

Big Roy meets Roy at the prison on the day of his release, asking Roy if is sure that Celestial is still his wife. Roy isn't, and prays that Celestial will take him back. In Atlanta, meanwhile, Celestial thinks back to seeing Roy four years after college in New York. Roy remembers the same night, during which Celestial first told him about her dolls. He'd then chased down a man who'd burglarized Celestial's apartment. The thief kicked Roy in the mouth, causing him to lose a **tooth**.

Flashing back to shortly before Olive's funeral, Andre thinks about how Roy asked him to take his place and act as pallbearer for Olive's casket. After the funeral, Andre and Celestial went to a bar to drink. Celestial made an advance on Andre, but he told her she was drunk and that they made a conspicuous pair in the tiny town. They then returned to their hotel, however, where they finally consummated their love.

Back in present-day Eloe, Roy runs into Davina Hardrick, a classmate from high school. She invites him to dinner, makes a feast for him, and they sleep together. Later, Andre calls Big Roy's house and is surprised to find that Roy is already home. He tells Roy it will be a couple of days before he can come pick him up to bring him to Atlanta, and Roy realizes he'll need to get

to Celestial himself to see if he can save his marriage. He borrows Big Roy's car and withdraws money from a savings account Olive had made him while he was away. Roy figures out that Celestial told his parents that his cellmate was his biological father. Big Roy tells Roy that the news killed Olive.

Overwhelmed with the situation before him, Andre talks to his father, Carlos, despite the emotional distance between them. He tells Carlos about being engaged to Celestial, and that Roy has been released from prison. Carlos, at first judgmental, eventually expresses support for Andre and tells him that he'll need to accept the punishment Roy gives him for trying to steal his wife.

On his way out of town, Roy stops at Olive's grave to weep and then at Walmart to tell Davina he's leaving. Andre arrives in Eloë with the intention of telling Roy that he and Celestial are together, but that they still intend to help Roy get back up on his feet. When he arrives to Big Roy's house, however, he finds out Roy has already left. Big Roy tells Andre not to call home, so that Celestial can figure out her feelings for Roy without Andre's influence.

In Atlanta, Celestial finds Roy in her house. Roy asks if she still loves him and she can't answer. When he asks if she's with Andre, she says the answer is both yes and no. He continues to try to convince her that he's the same old Roy, eventually leading her to the bedroom. When Celestial asks Roy to use a condom, however, he is offended and goes to sleep in the sewing room with Celestial's dolls. Sure that Celestial has rejected him, he calls Davina and tells her that he remembers her son, from whom she is estranged, from prison. In Eloë, Andre Big Roy tries to convince Andre that while he wants Celestial, Roy needs her.

In the morning Roy tries to appeal to Celestial again, eventually asking if he can gather his things. He sifts through boxes Celestial has packed but can't find the tooth he lost on their first date. Overwhelmed with emotion, he begins attacking Celestial's car, and then attempting to chop down the **old hickory tree** in front of the house when Andre arrives. The two men try to talk about what's happened, but Andre insists that none of the details matter, only that he and Celestial are together now. Roy and Andre fight. Celestial threatens to call the police, but Andre talks her out of it. Roy bangs his head against the hickory tree and Andre goes back into his house, while Celestial tries to keep Roy awake, worried he's given himself a concussion.

Celestial goes to Andre's house in the middle of the night to tell him she has to try to be with Roy again. Roy wakes up to a Celestial who is tender to him. He asks for his tooth, which she retrieves from a box in her dresser. As they eat breakfast, Roy asks why Celestial told Olive about his biological father being his cellmate. Celestial claims that the news didn't kill Olive as Big Roy claimed, but rather released her from her worry about Roy because she knew there was someone taking care of him in

jail. When Roy calls Davina to wish her a merry Christmas, she asks if what they have is something or nothing. Roy responds that while he is still married, what they had is something. Celestial puts on lingerie to seduce Roy, but he can sense that she fears him now and that what they had is no more. Celestial tells him she tried, and they turn out the light, unable to fall asleep.

In an epilogue, Roy writes Celestial to tell her he's signed the divorce papers. Celestial writes back to say that she's pregnant with Andre's child, and asks for his prayers. Roy responds that he and Davina are getting married and that he and Big Roy have gone into business opening a barbershop together. He tells Celestial his life is good, though a different good than he expected.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Roy Hamilton Jr. – Roy Othaniel Hamilton Jr. is the husband of Celestial Davenport, the son of Olive, and the adopted son of Big Roy. Raised in the fictional rural town of Eloë, Louisiana, Roy attends Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, where he develops a reputation as a ladies' man. A promising marketing executive at the start of the novel, he has been married to Celestial for only a year and a half when he's wrongfully accused of attacking a woman at a motel and sentenced to twelve years in prison. There, he discovers that his cellmate, Walter, is his biological father. Roy tries to maintain good spirits while incarcerated, though he finds himself feeling betrayed by his wife as she focuses more on her art career and eventually develops a relationship with his former college classmate, Andre. Roy emerges from prison a changed man, having experienced unspeakable hardship while incarcerated. Though he comes close to reuniting with Celestial, he ultimately realizes that their relationship has been irrevocably broken and instead returns to Eloë engaged to his former high school classmate Davina Hardrick.

Celestial Davenport – Raised in Atlanta by wealthy parents Gloria and Franklin Davenport, Celestial is married to Roy at the beginning of the novel and is also the lifelong best friend of Andre, who lives next door to the couple in Atlanta. Celestial is a burgeoning artist who often makes **dolls** that draw from her husband's likeness. Soon after Roy is sent to prison, Celestial discovers she is pregnant; she and Roy decide it would be best to terminate the pregnancy. She later reveals in a letter to Roy that this is her second abortion, having been impregnated by one of her college professors at Howard University before transferring to Spelman College—incidentally, where she was originally introduced to Roy through Andre. Though she tries to remain faithful to and supportive of her husband throughout his sentence, as she grows more focused on her blossoming

artistic career she becomes lax in her visits and letters to Roy. When Roy eventually questions Celestial's dedication to him, she tells him she can no longer be his wife but also does not file for divorce. She becomes romantically involved with and eventually engaged to Andre. Though Celestial considers trying to remain married to Roy after he is released, both realize that too much has changed between them in the time Roy has been away. She and Andre remain together, though unmarried, and Celestial is pregnant at the end of the novel.

Andre – Celestial's best friend since childhood Roy's friend since college. Andre is shorter than Roy, with a slighter build and lighter skin. Though he has loved Celestial all his life, he is initially supportive of her relationship with Roy. He does not make the first move while Roy is in jail, instead allowing Celestial to pursue him. He has a fraught relationship with his father, Carlos, who abandoned him and his mother, Evie, when Andre was young. By the end of the novel, however, their relationship has healed somewhat, and Andre seeks his father's advice regarding his relationship with Celestial. Andre has a slightly more progressive view of relationships than Roy, understanding that no one will ever "possess" Celestial and supporting her independent streak even as he longs to be her husband.

Big Roy Hamilton – Big Roy is Roy's adoptive father, having married Olive and accepted Roy as his own when he was a baby. Though Roy was given his biological father's name, Othaniel, at birth, Big Roy changed his name to Roy upon adopting him. Big Roy is extremely supportive of Roy and welcoming to Celestial, despite Olive's skepticism of the latter. He also serves as a model of marital dedication in his relationship with Olive and is devastated when she dies of lung cancer while Roy is in prison.

Olive Hamilton – Roy's devoted mother, who has always been insistent on giving her child a better life than she had growing up. Seduced by Roy's biological father, Othaniel, as a teenager, Olive was abandoned by him when he discovered she was pregnant. Olive cleans hotel rooms until giving birth to Roy and eventually marries Big Roy, who readily accepts both her and her son as his true family. She is skeptical of Celestial, worried that her daughter-in-law's more privileged upbringing will cause problems for Roy. She dies of lung cancer while Roy is incarcerated.

Gloria Davenport – Celestial's mother and the wife of Franklin. Gloria is a school administrator and a woman committed to keeping up appearances, though she doesn't necessarily care about financial success. When she was a baby, a little white girl pointed at her and said, "Look! A baby maid!" After this, Gloria's mother committed to raising her daughter to be more than a maid.

Franklin Davenport – A successful scientist, father of Celestial, and husband to Gloria. He met Gloria while still married to his

first wife; the two had a relationship for three years before Franklin filed for divorce in order to marry Gloria. As a young man he taught chemistry and performed experiments in his basement, eventually inventing a chemical that prevented orange juice from separating. His subsequent financial success allowed his family to rise in social class. He sides with Roy when Celestial tells him she's leaving her husband for Andre.

Walter/Othaniel/Ghetto Yoda – Roy's biological father and his third cellmate while in prison, though the two live together for some time before Roy discovers Walter's true identity. Walter's nickname, Ghetto Yoda, comes from his tendency to dole out wisdom to the other inmates. He fathered many children with different women before being incarcerated, and many women from personal ads visit him in prison. He refers to Roy as his son, though Roy only refers to Walter as his father in a goodbye letter to him.

Davina Hardrick – A former high school classmate of Roy whom he runs into at Walmart after being released from prison. Davina invites Roy to dinner, and her care for him helps Roy transition back into outside life. She has a complicated relationship with her son, Hopper, who was incarcerated in the same prison as Roy. She and Roy end up marrying after Roy divorces Celestial, though she doesn't want to have more children.

Mr. Fontenot – Roy's high school French teacher who wanted to help him travel to France, giving him James Baldwin books and a journal to record his goals. When it became suspected that Mr. Fontenot was gay, Roy's parents forbade Roy from working with him. It is later revealed that Mr. Fontenot died in the 1990s from what is assumed to have been AIDS.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Uncle Banks – Celestial's de-facto uncle, Banks is a lawyer who acts to defend Roy in court and eventually successfully appeals his conviction. He is coupled with Aunt Sylvia, though they aren't married.

Aunt Sylvia – The partner of Uncle Banks, Aunt Sylvia is the one who comforts Celestial when she becomes pregnant by her college professor and has her first abortion. She also teaches Celestial to make **dolls** as a way of dealing with her grief at terminating her pregnancy.

Tamar – An employee in Celestial's store who resembles a young Celestial. Tamar makes quilts that are also sold in the store. She is also a single mother to Jelani, whom she gave birth to upon finishing a master's degree in art.

Carlos – Andre's father, who left Andre and Evie and fathered two children with another woman. Though he has a fraught relationship with Andre for much of his son's life, they slowly rebuild their connection over time. Nevertheless, Andre always feels that Carlos favors his half-siblings.

Evie – Andre’s mother, Evie was left by Andre’s father, Carlos, when Andre was young and died of lupus when Andre was a teenager.

Wickliffe – Big Roy’s neighbor who provides him friendship and support, especially after Olive’s death.



THEMES

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



LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN CRISIS

Tayari Jones’ 2018 novel *An American Marriage* expands upon one of the most common topics of modern literature: love and marriage. While many

stories of marriage focus on some of the more typical challenges faced by couples—such as infidelity, competition, or class differences between partners—Jones’ book centers on the repercussions of a world-shattering injustice on Roy and Celestial, a black couple living in Atlanta, Georgia: after having been married for just 18 months, Roy is wrongly convicted of a crime and sentenced to 12 years in prison. Told in intimate detail from the perspectives of both parties, *An American Marriage* reveals the ways in which this event exacerbates many pre-existing issues between Roy and Celestial. Despite the specificity of its tragedy, the novel makes the broader point that otherwise normal issues can quickly bring a marriage to its breaking point in times of crisis.

Roy and Celestial’s relationship is already showing common signs of distress at the time of the former’s conviction, but none of these issues on its own has been enough to divide the two. For example, before his incarceration, Roy accepts other women’s phone numbers when he goes out with friends—a fact that bothers Celestial and makes her suspicious of her husband’s commitment to her. Nevertheless, the two move past the issues created by such mistrust and to maintain a strong connection for some time, revealing the ability of their marriage to overcome suspicions of infidelity.

The two face professional tensions as well, in part because of their vastly different economic backgrounds: ambitious, small-town Roy defines himself as being “on the come-up,” while Celestial was raised in an upper-class, cosmopolitan family. Roy’s mother Olive is loudly skeptical of Celestial because of her prim and proper ways, creating added stress for their relationship. Celestial and Roy also disagree about the right way to grow the former’s artistic career. While Celestial imagines individually handcrafting her one-of-a-kind **dolls** for sale as fine art, Roy, who is working to establish himself in the

business world, dreams of creating a mass-manufactured luxury toy. At first, however, these issues don’t pose a significant challenge to their relationship—again underscoring the strength of this couple in the face of more or less typical marital strife. They are, in fact, in the process of establishing a business plan that is a compromise between their visions when their lives are upended by Roy’s imprisonment.

Once Roy is wrongfully convicted, all of these relatively common marital stresses in combination quickly bring the relationship to its breaking point. Though at first both parties express their sincere desire to remain together, this initial commitment proves naïve, as what were once seen as minor disagreements make the marriage seem utterly untenable. Roy resents Celestial’s seeming lack of loyalty, believing she should visit at least as often as the wives of those prisoners who, unlike Roy, are actually guilty of their crimes. Celestial, for her part, feels herself unjustly pitied and looked down upon by the outside world for remaining true to her incarcerated husband. The fact that they are denied physical contact and forced to communicate primarily through letters further allows both members of the couple to develop a one-sided idea of the relationship.

Perhaps the greatest factor in the disintegration of Roy and Celestial’s marriage, however, is its youth. As Celestial points out, she and Roy were hardly more than newlyweds when he was taken away; “I danced the line between wife and bride,” she says, adding that “marriage is like grafting a limb onto a tree trunk”—that is, it takes time for two people to bond as one. Their young marriage proves far more vulnerable to stressors—a limb far more easily snapped—than a marriage tested by time. Indeed, Celestial’s faith in her commitment to Roy is irreparably broken at Olive’s funeral, when she sees Big Roy, Roy’s adoptive father, display sincere devotion to his wife even after she has died. This pushes Celestial to realize the weaknesses of her own marriage, as she does not share this sense of commitment to Roy.

As a result, Celestial seeks comfort in a romantic relationship with her long-time friend Andre, who provides her the support and stability that Roy cannot. Not incidentally, she and Andre spent much of their youth sitting beneath **Old Hickey**, an ancient, sturdy hickory tree situated between their houses that acts as a physical representation of the deep roots of their relationship—and, it follows, the strength of their bond. Roy, meanwhile, finds much-needed comfort in the arms of his former high school classmate Davina. The fact that both Roy and Celestial ultimately end up with partners they have known nearly their entire lives suggests that, above all, even stronger than love is time. Celestial and Roy were denied the time necessary to graft their lives together, and, as such, their vows crumble beneath the weight of their separation. A longstanding, deeply-rooted partnership, on the other hand, can create bonds that no crisis can destroy.



PARENTHOOD AS A CHOICE

Beyond exploring the difficulties of love and marriage, Jones dissects the demands and expectations of parenthood throughout the novel.

Jones challenges and redefines conventional notions of parenting, ultimately presenting it a commitment that transcends bloodlines. In *An American Marriage*, parenthood requires conscious effort and great maturity. It is the mindful choice to provide for and support a child—and a choice that must be continually re-made.

Varying conceptions of fatherhood, in particular, are present throughout the novel. Roy is named for his biological father, Othaniel, at birth. When Othaniel then abandons Roy and his mother Olive, however, Roy is adopted by Big Roy, who changes his son's name to Roy Jr.—reflecting the seriousness with which he takes his newfound parental duties. Indeed, from childhood into adulthood, Big Roy is the most significant male figure in Roy's life.

In contrast, when Roy goes to prison and eventually realizes that his bunk mate is in fact his biological father, he refuses to call Othaniel “dad” until the latter has proven himself worthy of the title. While Othaniel was not a reliable parent to Roy as a child, however, he is able to provide Roy advice about the unfamiliar world of prison. Through this support, Roy eventually comes to see Othaniel as a father figure in his own right, as is evidenced by the fact that he signs his farewell letter to him as his “son.” Andre has a similarly fraught relationship with his father, Carlos, throughout his childhood that mends somewhat by the end of the novel. When Andre seeks his advice regarding his relationship with Celestial, Carlos supports his son as best he can and, in his own subtle way, reveals his desire to have a closer bond with Andre by promising to have a present for him under the tree that Christmas. Through these relationships, *An American Marriage* highlights the complicated humanity of even the most absent of fathers and suggests that it is never too late for these men to form strong bonds with their children if they step up and provide support in whatever ways they are able.

Motherhood, too, is presented as something that must be actively pursued throughout the novel. Just after Roy is incarcerated, Celestial discovers that she is pregnant. Though she is conflicted about what to do, she and Roy agree that it's best she not give birth to a child while Roy is in prison and she has an abortion. In later letters to Roy, Celestial implies that he forced her into this decision because he wouldn't be present to father the child. For his part, Roy seems to believe that Celestial made the decision because she did not want to raise a child as a single parent for what they assumed would be the first 12 years of the child's life. In either case, the decision to terminate the pregnancy was a conscious one, made in light of the serious responsibilities inherent to raising a child. Roy later laments that a child would likely have kept the couple together

throughout his sentence, but ultimately realizes that children must not be used as a means to cement a relationship. That is why he accepts his eventual fiancée Davina's wish to not have any more children at the end of the novel, given that she has already experienced the devastation of being estranged from her incarcerated son Hopper.

Celestial does become a parent during her time with Roy in one sense: she creates **dolls**, each crafted in the image of her husband, and, in many ways, as stand-ins for the child they didn't end up having. She devotes much of her energy to the dolls, as a mother would a child. Each is lovingly stitched by hand, and Celestial reveres them for both their beauty and their flaws, certain that the right adoptive parent will love each doll as much as she does. In this way, Celestial assumes a version of parenthood while Roy is incarcerated, creating “children” that she can mold as she sees fit before passing them on to others. In the novel's epilogue, Celestial reveals to Roy that she is pregnant with Andre's child—suggesting that she is finally ready to take on the responsibility of motherhood in a way she never was with Roy.

Through these relationships, *An American Marriage* shows that being a parent involves much more than simply producing a child; it requires care, compassion, and consistent effort. Parenthood comes with great responsibilities, and all parents risks losing their status if they fail to satisfy those conditions. In portraying the variety of shapes that parent-child relationships might take, Jones suggests that parenthood goes beyond blood and demands conscious dedication. The bond between parents and children is powerful but never a given; on the contrary, it's importance is reflected by the fact that it must continually be earned.



APPEARANCES VS. REALITY

In *An American Marriage*, Jones contrasts the reality of life with the appearances people choose to project. Throughout the novel it is possible to identify the ways in which characters shape the narratives of their lives to be more palatable to others. The novel suggests that this gap between appearances and reality can harm to the very thing a public image is supposed to represent.

Celestial's **dolls**—or *poupées*, as Roy suggests she call them—emblemize the gap between real life and its representation in art. While Celestial had found some success in the art world with her dolls before Roy goes to prison, it is only after he is incarcerated that she makes a doll with Roy's face wearing a prison uniform; it is this doll that is awarded a great deal of attention and praise. While doing an interview about her incarceration-focused art, however, Celestial fails to point out that her husband has been wrongfully imprisoned and that this situation was the inspiration for the doll. Roy feels betrayed by this narrative elision, believing that Celestial

mentioning his case might have brought it attention that could help overturn his conviction. Celestial, meanwhile, fears the stigma associated with having a husband in prison and fails to prioritize Roy's situation over her own career. Her refusal to publicly acknowledge Roy's wrongful conviction reveals how, in her art, she omits negative details about her personal life while enjoying the benefits of associating herself with a buzz-worthy political cause. This kind of picking and choosing is a privilege not available to Roy in his concrete cell.

Celestial continues to embrace the media attention she receives and spends time focusing on growing her career, even at the cost of visiting her husband in prison. In this way she turns away from the cause she supposedly supports in favor of embracing the ways she can personally benefit from aligning herself with that cause. Roy notices that Celestial slowly begins to withdraw from him—first by visiting and writing less, and eventually by ceasing to communicate with him at all—and angrily tells his wife in a letter that her dolls do nothing to actually fight the cause of incarceration. Celestial uses her art to benefit from the appearance of being an activist against mass incarceration even as she abandons her personal responsibilities to her husband—the source of her inspiration to become involved in the first place.

When Roy returns home, Celestial continues to try to hide the very real effects of Roy's incarceration, instead of allowing the messy truth to be out in the open. When Roy begins attacking Celestial's car to try to get her to answer his question of whether or not she still loves him, she would rather repeatedly bury the intensity of his attack by silencing the car's alarm than give him an answer she knows will be difficult for him to hear. Her concern about keeping up appearances with the neighbors proves ineffective, though, when the neighbors call the police to break up the fight between Andre and Roy. In this way, the book shows the dire consequences that can occur if one refuses to face the truth and attempts to maintain a façade.

The distance between Celestial's true situation and the public image she projects serves as a comment on the hypocritical actions that people sometimes take to preserve their self-interests. While Celestial was able to keep her real life and the life she preferred to present separate for much of the novel, this separation breaks down when Roy is released from jail and Celestial is forced to face the double life she's been living. If Celestial had allowed herself to integrate the two parts of her life from the beginning, she might have experienced greater success in both her marriage and her career, though this would have required a risk that she wasn't willing to take. Because Celestial wanted to present a clean image to the world, only her career succeeded, at the cost of her marriage.



THE EFFECTS OF INCARCERATION

In *An American Marriage*, Jones reveals the extraordinary effect mass incarceration has on the lives of black Americans. The tightly-focused narrative reveals how incarceration can destroy families, placing them at a social disadvantage from which it is difficult to recover. The novel further suggests that incarceration is a destructive force with little practical ties to justice, and which does more to harm society than it does to keep it safe.

Roy is a young, middle-class black man who falls prey to the codified racism of the American criminal justice system when he is wrongfully accused of a violent crime—something that happens disproportionately to black men—and sentenced to 12 years in prison. This sentence, of course, has a profound effect on Roy's life. He's forced to leave his job as a rising executive, stopping his budding career dead in its tracks. He is unable to attend the funeral of his mother Olive, who dies while he is in prison. He feels completely isolated from his family because none of them have experienced the pain and injustice with which he must contend on a daily basis. Even as a lawyer fights to get Roy's conviction overturned, Roy slowly begins to see that his life when he gets out will look nothing like it did before prison. Through the example of Roy, Jones underscores the fact that incarceration affects individuals' lives long after a sentence is served.

While Roy experiences the effects of incarceration personally, there are also repercussions of his incarceration on everyone around him. Aside from being separated from her husband, Celestial, who had at one point longed to have a child with Roy, decides it is no longer the right choice given their situation and has an abortion. Additionally, Roy had been integral in the development of her career as an artist, but his guiding presence is no longer possible as she develops and grows her business. Roy's incarceration forces Celestial into a lonely position as her world is turned upside down and she must learn to live as an effectively single woman.

Later in the novel, Roy finds out that Davina's son, Hopper, is also incarcerated. Hopper refuses to talk to his mother, showing the extreme breakdown in a parental relationship that can also happen when a child is incarcerated. Hopper's refusal to communicate with Davina causes her later lack of interest in having additional children with Roy. As Roy comes to realize, prisoners are rarely able to resume life as it was before their incarceration, even when they are exonerated—not just because of the ways in which society disadvantages ex-convicts, but also because of the ways in which incarceration drives people apart from their loved ones.

When Roy is ultimately released after serving five years of his sentence, it becomes clear that his time in prison has irrevocably changed him. He finds himself prone to bouts of violence and anger that frighten both himself and those around

him. At one point he even threatens to rape Celestial, telling her that he could “take it”—meaning her body—if he wanted to. Celestial braces herself for what she feels is an inevitable violation, but Roy stops himself. The following morning, he guiltily reflects on this moment as a mark of what prison has done to him. Later, when he and Andre fight over Celestial, the latter is surprised by Roy’s brutality, and wonders whether he learned to fight with such rage in prison. Through these examples, Jones highlights the deep, lasting effect of incarceration on a man’s psyche.

In this way, the book takes an extremely critical stance in its examination of the practice of incarceration in general, which Roy reflects too often has little to do with guilt or innocence. Distancing family members from one another reduces the possibility of a prisoner returning to a stable home life, placing not only the prisoner, but their entire family at a disadvantage. When such a practice is then echoed throughout a community, it can lead to a vicious cycle of crime and oppression. *An American Marriage* ultimately suggests that the prison system—ostensibly designed to keep a community safe—in reality destabilizes and disrupts the lives of everyone in its orbit.



RACE AND CLASS

In *An American Marriage*, Jones notably focuses on a well-educated, successful black couple to explore the tensions between partners of different

economic backgrounds as well as the broader intersection of race and class. The fact that Roy and Celestial’s upward mobility cannot shield them from the criminal justice system’s prejudicial assumptions about black people allows Jones to specifically highlight the insidious reach of racism.

Even before Roy’s arrest, much of the tension in Roy and Celestial’s relationship arises from their different upbringings. Roy, in fact, begins the novel by stating that Celestial views him as a “country boy,” a designation he “never cared for.” Roy is the first of his family to leave rural Louisiana to attend college, while Celestial grew up in relative privilege in Atlanta. Celestial believes that Roy’s mother, Olive, thinks she’s stuck up, and though Roy dismisses Celestial’s concern, this is in fact true. In the end of the novel Roy reads a letter his mother wrote to him years earlier, indicating that she believes Roy is marrying a woman who reflects the class he hopes to be a part of rather than a partner with whom he is truly compatible. Roy assures his wife that Olive will grow to like her with time, when she sees that Celestial is more down to earth than her background might suggest. Privately though, he knows that his mother criticizes his choice of a lighter-skinned black woman, a mindset reflective of societal associations of light skin with wealth and sophistication (and, in Olive’s mind, snobbery). Instead, Olive would prefer that her son pick a woman who is more like himself—and, it follows, like Olive: darker-skinned and from

their small town of Eloe, Louisiana; she sees Celestial as a rebuke of her own life and values.

Celestial’s parents, on the other hand, embrace Roy. Both Davenports are successful professionals—Gloria a school administrator and Franklin a scientist—who experienced an extra boost in fortune when Franklin was able to sell one of his inventions. Celestial, though, desires to remain tied to her earlier roots, at one point reminding Roy of her grandparents’ occupation as sharecroppers when he expresses concerns about not being high class enough to satisfy Celestial’s parents. This acknowledgement of their shared humble beginnings, rather than their current statuses, shows Celestial’s desire to meet her in-laws in the middle, drawing comparisons between their lives rather than establishing differences. The lower class, meanwhile, appears to resent the upper class for allegedly compromising their culture in an attempt to assimilate to the standards of white society.

The novel ultimately suggests that the issue of race, however, supersedes that of class. Prejudice is something both families experience regardless of their wealth or status. For example, when Andre goes to Eloe to find Roy, he drives carefully, well-aware that his nice car combined with the color of his skin make him suspicious to law enforcement. When Roy takes Celestial to spend the night at the Piney Inn, he reveals that Olive used to work as a maid there, at a time when Confederate flags hung in the rooms. Roy himself was almost born at the Inn, but Olive refused to let her son enter the world under a symbol of the Confederacy. Nevertheless, Roy is arrested in the same place his mother once cleaned rooms; the flags may have been removed, but the racist societal attitudes they represented live on.

The circumstance of Roy’s arrest creates a shocking reminder of the ever-present prejudice hovering over the characters’ lives. Seemingly aware of stereotypes of black men as dangerous, Roy is demonstrably polite in his interaction with the woman in the hotel who will go on to accuse him of rape. He goes above and beyond in helping the woman, carrying her ice bucket back to her room and even trying to fix the bathroom plumbing. He says he behaves as “the gentleman my mama raised me to be” and that he even “called her ma’am” before leaving. Nevertheless, he is immediately singled out as a suspect and ultimately convicted of attacking the woman. Given the time period of the novel’s writing and the reality of the extensive societal criminalization of black men, it is clear that Roy’s race factors into his conviction and sentence. Roy’s incarceration destabilizes his family’s hard-won conception of safety and stability. If this could happen to someone like Roy, Jones suggests, then those of a lower social class stand even less of a chance of being treated fairly by a prejudiced criminal justice system. The novel thus ultimately underscores the frequent inability of black Americans to completely extricate themselves from a system that seeks to keep them entrenched

in poverty and crime.



SYMBOLS

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



ROY'S TOOTH

Roy's tooth serves as a physical symbol of his relationship with Celestial. Roy loses the tooth on the night the two meet for the first time since college, after chasing down a young man who has just robbed Celestial's apartment; when Roy gets close enough to grab the man's leg, the thief kicks him in the mouth. Celestial suggests going to the emergency room to save the tooth, but Roy is too proud and focused on wooing Celestial to take her recommendation—foreshadowing his tendency to overlook his future wife's wants and the, perhaps preventable, pain their marriage will cause. The tooth is kept in a velvet box "like what a ring comes in," Roy says, directly connecting it to a symbol of marriage, fidelity, and dedication. After Roy is wrongfully convicted and imprisoned, the tooth reminds Celestial of his presence in her life. It, like Roy himself, is locked away yet still emits influence over Celestial. When Roy is finally released, the tooth is the only one of his belongings that he is intent on locating and taking with him back to Eloë. Upon failing to find it at Celestial's house, he grows angry—believing Celestial to have discarded it, and, it follows, the last remnant of their relationship. She reveals that she has kept it in a special place, however, suggesting that she does, in fact, care about Roy and consider their relationship to have been meaningful regardless of how it ended. While Roy thought he had been thoughtlessly tossed aside by his wife, she proves that she has always kept him close. In taking the tooth, a literal piece of himself, back from Celestial, Roy is able to accept that their relationship is truly over and to become whole once again.



OLD HICKEY

The hickory tree that stands between Celestial and Andre's houses serves as a symbol of the long history between the two, as well as of the deep roots of the racial discrimination that continues to affect black communities. At the end of the book, Old Hickey is revealed to be at least 128 years old, having begun to grow not long after the end of the Civil War. As such, the tree has stood witness to racial injustices since the time of Reconstruction. When Mr. Davenport signs his house over to Celestial, he stipulates only that the tree cannot be cut down—suggesting his commitment to remembering the horrors of the past in the hope that they will not be repeated. Roy, newly-returned from prison and

frustrated by what he interprets as Celestial's lack of care for him, begins to chop at Old Hickey's trunk with an ax and then slams his own head against its bark. This gesture is both an attack on the bond between Celestial and Andre and on the deep-seated racial prejudices that stole Roy's life from him for five years. In the end of the book, the tree, at once a symbol of the love between Andre and Celestial and racial injustice, remains strong. That fact that it has stood guard over Celestial and Andre's love, however, suggests that such relationships can ultimately be an antidote to hate.



DOLLS/POUPÉES

At first, the poupées, or baby dolls, that Celestial makes are a symbol of the way she tries to merge her artistic practice with her complicated feelings about motherhood. Initially, Celestial learns to make the dolls from Aunt Sylvia, who supports Celestial after she has an abortion during her first semester of college. Aunt Sylvia teaches Celestial to sew the dolls as a way of addressing her guilt around the terminated pregnancy and suggests they donate the dolls to needy babies at the hospital. As time passes, Celestial continues making the dolls and turns to Roy as her muse. Roy draws a direct comparison between the dolls and babies, saying, "The doll, swaddled in a soft blanket, looked like an actual infant. This was one of Celestial's quirks. For a woman who was, shall we say, apprehensive about motherhood, she was rather protective of these cloth creations." Celestial finds it difficult to part with the dolls on multiple occasions—first when sealing one up to send to the mayor of Atlanta, and later when a man attempts to buy one on Christmas Eve. This is in part because they are, in a sense, her children, and in part because she comes to closely associate the dolls with Roy's fate. Indeed, the doll that really launches Celestial's career is one she dresses in prison blues after having seen a young black boy on the street and catching herself thinking of him as a baby prisoner—someone destined to end up like Roy solely by nature of his skin color. This doll becomes a testament to the way in which the possibility of being caught up in a broken, prejudiced criminal justice system hangs over black communities, a cloud on the horizon of any child's future. Through this doll, Jones is able to suggest the deeply harmful psychological effects of mass incarceration on marginalized communities.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Algonquin edition of *An American Marriage* published in 2018.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ But home isn't where you *land*; home is where you *launch*. You can't pick your home any more than you can choose your family. In poker you get five cards. Three of them you can swap out, but two are yours to keep: family and native land.

Related Characters: Roy Hamilton Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 4



Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the novel, Roy reflects on home as a place to be left behind in favor of moving up in the world. These words give the reader the first introduction to Roy and reflect his values and ambition. As a young man, he leaves his rural home of Eloe, Louisiana for the far more cosmopolitan city of Atlanta, Georgia in an effort to “launch”—that is, to move past his humble beginnings and improve his lot in life. Nevertheless, Eloe forever remains Roy's home, and is the place to which he ultimately returns after his wrongful imprisonment; for him, home is both the point from where he launches *and* where he lands. Roy comes to accept his life in Eloe because he recognizes that his home has shaped who he is and, as such, is a part of him regardless of where he goes. Similarly, though his family is not his to “choose” it is his to “keep.” While he initially resents his abandonment by his biological father, for example, he eventually comes to accept him and decides to keep him in his life.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ Memory is a queer creature, an eccentric curator. I still look back on that night, although not as often as I once did. How long can you live with your face twisted over your shoulder? No matter what people may say, this was not a failure to remember. I'm not sure it is a failure at all.

Related Characters: Celestial Davenport (speaker), Roy Hamilton Jr.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 28


Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, which begins the first chapter told from Celestial's perspective, Celestial thinks about all that has

happened between her and Roy—both on the night that he is wrongfully accused and well before it—and wonders why her memory chooses to fixate on certain moments. She qualifies her admission that she no longer dwells on the night of Roy's arrest by questioning the value of living in the past. Her question regarding how long a person can live with their head looking over their shoulder resonates with her ultimate decisions to move forward with her own life while Roy's is stalled in prison.

☞ Did we love so forcefully that night because we knew or because we didn't? Was there an alarm from the future, a furious bell without its clapper? Did this hopeless bell manage to generate a breeze, causing me to reach to the floor to find my slip and use it to cover myself? Did some subtle warning cause Roy to turn and pin me to his side with his heavy arm?

Related Characters: Celestial Davenport (speaker), Roy Hamilton Jr.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Celestial reflects on the final moments she had with Roy before his wrongful arrest. Though they had fought about his keeping secrets from her earlier in the night, they made especially passionate love to each another after reconciling. In hindsight, she wonders whether this passion was the result of a sort of premonition that their world was about to come crashing down—reflective of Celestial's unease upon visiting Eloe in the first place—or because they were excited by their love and the prospect of their future together. Celestial feels that they both may have sensed a warning, and this knowledge drew them closer together in the moments before they would be forever torn apart.

☞ But what is real? Was it our uneventful first impression? Or the day in New York, of all places, where we found each other once again? Or did things “get real” when we married, or was it the day that the prosecutor in a little nowhere town declared Roy to be a flight risk? The state declared that though he may have roots in Louisiana, his home was in Atlanta, so he was held without bond or bail. At this pronouncement, Roy spat out a caustic laugh. “So *now* roots are irrelevant?”

Related Characters: Celestial Davenport (speaker), Roy Hamilton Jr.

Related Themes:    



Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Celestial reflects that the first time she met Roy in college he seemed dangerous, but when she met him again a few years later in New York, that danger had morphed into a sense of “realness.” Now, she interrogates that idea of realness and what it means to her—whether it is a marker of authenticity or an understanding of hardship. The inquiry as to roots evokes Roy’s earlier ideas of what constitutes home. It also could be interpreted as an ironic reference to the Fugitive Slave Act—pre-Civil War legislation that allowed for runaway slaves who crossed state borders to be seized and returned to their masters.

☛ Sleeping by myself didn’t kill me then and will not kill me now. But this is what loss has taught me of love. Our house isn’t simply *empty*, our home *has been emptied*. Love makes a place in your life, it makes a place for itself in your bed. Invisibly, it makes a place in your body, rerouting all your blood vessels, throbbing right alongside your heart. When it’s gone, nothing is whole again.

Related Characters: Celestial Davenport (speaker), Roy Hamilton Jr.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 41


Explanation and Analysis

Celestial writes to Roy following his imprisonment, expressing her sadness at returning home and going to bed at night without him there. She considers the difference between simply living alone and living in a home that once contained another person; the latter creates a distinct sense of absence. Roy’s love carved out space within Celestial, and the emptied house serves as a physical representation of everything she has lost. She is also right in feeling that her relationship with Roy will never be “whole again.” Even after Roy is released from prison, the house they once shared will feel strange to him, reflecting the fact that it has forever been emptied of his presence.

☛ Am I different? It has been close to three years, so I guess I have changed. Yesterday I sat under the hickory tree in the front yard. It’s the only place where I find rest and just feel fine. I know *fine* isn’t a lot, but it’s rare for me these days. Even when I’m happy, there is something in between me and whatever good news comes my way. It’s like eating a butterscotch still sealed in a wrapper. The tree is untouched by whatever worries we humans fret over. I think about how it was here before I was born and it will be here after we’re all gone. Maybe this should make me sad, but it doesn’t.

Related Characters: Celestial Davenport (speaker), Roy Hamilton Jr.

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

After Celestial visits Roy in prison for the first time in a while, he tells her there’s something different about her and implies that she might be seeing someone else. Celestial defends herself by saying that she has of course changed because it has been three years. She feels peaceful sitting under Old Hickey because it serves as a symbol of all that is constant in her life at a time when she is being confronted with so much upheaval. She also talks about the dulled way she lives her life with the awareness of Roy’s absence, which seems to cast a shadow over any small happiness that comes her way.

☛ Dear Celestial,
I am innocent.
Dear Roy,
I am innocent, too.

Related Characters: Roy Hamilton Jr., Celestial Davenport (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the novel, Celestial has already written Roy to tell him that she can no longer be his wife. Roy believes that because he is innocent of any crime, Celestial should remain faithful to and support him; he did nothing to



deserve the situation he has been put in. But though Roy does not deserve his punishment, neither does Celestial. She is also suffering the effects of Roy's incarceration, and wants her husband to understand that her life needs to continue even without him. This moment underscores the far-reaching effects of incarceration, which shapes the lives even of those who are not imprisoned.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ Grandmamma would tell Evie to hush and remind her that getting left by a man was not the worst thing that ever happened to somebody. And Evie would say, "It's the worst thing that ever happened to *me*." She said it so much that she came down with lupus. "God wanted me to see what misery really was," Evie said. I didn't like all this God talk, like He was up there toying with us. I preferred more of the tenderness and acceptance my grandmother promised in her hymns. I told this to Evie when I was a little boy and she said, "You got to work with the god you were given."

You also have to work with the love you are given, with all of the complications clanging behind it like tin cans tied to a bridal sedan.

Related Characters: Andre (speaker), Carlos, Evie, Celestial Davenport, Roy Hamilton Jr.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 102-103

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of the first chapter in the novel told from Andre's point of view. Andre reflects on the advice his mother and grandmother gave him as a child, and how apt it is for his situation with Celestial. He thinks about how his father left his mother for another woman, and how Celestial is doing something similar to Roy through her relationship with Andre. His desire to side with his grandmother's conception of loving god over Evie's reflects his hope that Roy will forgive him. At the same time, he compares his mother's belief in accepting god to his love for Celestial; just as Roy pointed out that one cannot choose their family, here Andre posits that one cannot choose who they love. Instead, they must accept and embrace love where they find it.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ "I'm ready. But I can't lie. Sometimes I feel guilty as hell for just being able to live my life."

I didn't have to tell him that I understood, because he knew that I did. There should be a word for this, the way it feels to steal something that's already yours.

Related Characters: Andre, Celestial Davenport (speaker), Roy Hamilton Jr., Franklin Davenport

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Celestial and Andre have this conversation at Celestial's parent's house on Thanksgiving Day, after noting that Franklin is wearing a t-shirt designed by Roy. Despite having learned that Roy will be released from prison earlier than expected, Celestial has accepted Andre's proposal for marriage. Upon seeing Franklin's shirt, however, Andre is made to feel fresh guilt for their relationship. Both he and Celestial understand the weight of simply going about their lives when someone they know and love is suffering. They feel somewhat ashamed of their happiness because those around them—including Celestial's father—suggest that they don't deserve it while Roy is in jail.

Part 2, Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ But that was when we thought incarceration had something to do with being guilty or at least being stupid.

Related Characters: Roy Hamilton Jr. (speaker), Big Roy Hamilton

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 127



Explanation and Analysis

Roy makes this observation after finally having been released from prison, when Big Roy meets him to bring him home. Roy reflects on how his father told him never to call to say he'd been arrested because Big Roy wouldn't come to his rescue. He points out the irony of Big Roy picking him up today, because they've come to understand that arrest is not necessarily a sign of guilt. They no longer associate incarceration with justice because Roy has clearly done nothing except be a black man in the rural south, present in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Part 2, Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ When I was twenty-four, living in New York City, I thought maybe black love went that way, too, integrated into extinction. Nikki Giovanni said, “Black love is Black wealth.”

Related Characters: Celestial Davenport (speaker), Roy Hamilton Jr.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Celestial reflects back on her life immediately post-college, before she was reunited with Roy, and how she worried that integration was diluting—if not outright erasing—black culture. Having gone to a historically black college, she felt it important to honor her roots by trying to have a relationship with a black man. She reflects on the words of famed black poet Nikki Giovanni, whose quotation suggests that black people loving other black people, romantically or otherwise, is a rejection of white supremacy and a powerful acknowledgment of the value of a historically-marginalized community. It’s in this state of mind that Celestial meets Roy again and sees him with new eyes. She believes him to be “real”—authentic and connected to what matters—as opposed to her earlier conception of him as dangerous.

Part 2, Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ We laughed, a real laugh, a shared laugh. This is when our life changed. We came to each other with joy on our lips. What came next may not have been legally binding; there was no clergyman or witness. But it was ours.

Related Characters: Andre (speaker), Celestial Davenport

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

Andre tells the story of the night he and Celestial finally succumb to their romantic desires. Earlier in the day, at Olive’s funeral, Celestial bore witness to the devotion Big Roy displayed towards his deceased wife, and this caused her to realize she didn’t possess the same dedication to Roy. After drinking together following the service, Celestial invites Andre into her hotel room. At first, the moment is awkward. Andre makes an inside joke about having misheard the lyrics to a Prince song when they were young,

and with that reminder of their shared past the tension breaks. They laugh, which leads Andre to believe it’s possible for them to find happiness together. Andre speaks of their union using language associated with marriage, suggesting that their bond is just as serious and committed as any legitimized by an official ceremony.

Part 2, Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ “I know,” she said. “Nobody around here thought you did it. It was just the wrong race and the wrong time. Police are shady as hell. That’s why everybody is locked up.”

Related Characters: Davina Hardrick (speaker), Roy Hamilton Jr.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

While reconnecting with his former high school classmate Davina over dinner, the conversation turns briefly to Roy’s incarceration. Davina immediately dismisses the possibility of Roy’s guilt, assuring him that other Elloe locals feel the same. Her comments reflect an awareness of the extent of racial prejudice; she, and most people in the rural southern town, know that black people are often disproportionately targeted by the police and face harsher sentences for their crimes. She brings a perspective to Roy’s position that Celestial, having grown up wealthy in comparatively liberal Atlanta, lacks. Davina’s immediate belief in Roy’s innocence also draws him closer to her and contrasts with the way in which Celestial falls short of his expectations of loyalty and support.

Part 2, Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Now Mr. Davenport was loyal to Roy above his own daughter. In a way, the whole black race was loyal to Roy, a man just down from the cross.

Related Characters: Andre (speaker), Roy Hamilton Jr., Celestial Davenport, Franklin Davenport

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

While on his way to Eloë to pick up Roy and bring him to Atlanta, Andre reflects on his desire to turn to a father-figure for advice. He knows that Celestial's father would not sympathize with his situation, however, and that many others would similarly take Roy's side. Andre's comments and evocation of religious imagery suggest that Roy has become a martyr-like figure, a representation of the ways in which a broken, racist justice system overly criminalizes black men and tears apart black communities. With his strong belief in social justice, even Franklin Davenport sides with his son-in-law over his daughter—in effect tying his belief in justice to a happy ending for Roy.

☝ “You say you want my advice. Here's what I have. Tell the truth. Don't try to cushion the blow. If you're bad enough to do it, you're bad enough to tell it. You can ask you mama. She'll tell you she was so unhappy because I didn't drop lies into her morning coffee. The whole time she knew exactly who she was married to.”

Related Characters: Carlos (speaker), Evie, Roy Hamilton Jr., Andre

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

Andre goes to visit his estranged father to ask for advice on how to tell Roy about his relationship with Celestial. Though Andre and Carlos are not particularly close, his father has told him he can stop by any time, and Andre takes him up on the offer. Carlos, who cheated on Andre's mother Evie, insists that honesty is the best policy. Even if Evie didn't like Carlos's actions, he says, deep down she at least appreciated that he never hid the truth from her. Andre will take his father's words to heart and accept much of the anger Roy throws his way upon their eventual confrontation.

Part 2, Chapter 12 Quotes

☝ “Is it love, or is it convenience?” Gloria asked me that Thanksgiving Day after my father had stormed upstairs and Andre went to gather our coats. She explained that convenience, habit, comfort, obligation—these are all things that wear the same clothing as love sometimes. Did I think this thing with Andre was maybe too easy? He is literally the boy next door.

Related Characters: Celestial Davenport (speaker), Andre, Gloria Davenport

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

After Celestial and Andre tell her parents that they're engaged, Gloria, worried about her daughter's happiness, checks in with Celestial privately about the decision she's made to leave Roy for Andre. While Celestial understands that it might appear her relationship with Andre is one of convenience—she has been lonely without Roy, and Andre has been a ready and willing source of comfort—she knows that convenience is only one piece of the puzzle making up adult romance. Gloria's question briefly rattles Celestial, however causing her to wonder if she is taking the easy way out by being with Andre—despite the fact that choosing to be with him actually makes her life much harder upon Roy's release.

Part 3, Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ You know what else they say? What do you call a black man with a PhD? The same thing you call one driving a high-end SUV.

Related Characters: Andre (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

When Andre pulls off the interstate on the way to pick up Roy in Eloë, he becomes sharply conscious of how, as a black man, he is perceived in rural Louisiana. He drives more carefully, aware that his fancy car makes him especially conspicuous in a society that stereotypically equates being black with poverty and criminality. In the rural south, Andre suggests, a black person's credentials will never be enough to overcome the racist assumptions projected onto them. Though Andre doesn't specify what word he is referring to, he likely means a racial slur or “thief,” indicating the frequent assumption that a well-off black man did not earn whatever he possesses.

Part 3, Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ The son that Celestial and I didn't have would have been four or five, I think. If a kindergartener slept in the backroom, there is no way Celestial would be talking about how she's with Andre now. I would say, "A boy need his father." This is a scientific fact. There wouldn't be anything else to talk about. But as things were, there was a lot to talk about, more words than could fit into my mouth.

Related Characters: Roy Hamilton Jr. (speaker), Andre, Celestial Davenport

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 244



Explanation and Analysis

When Tamar, Celestial's employee, stops by with her baby, Roy considers how their situation might be different if Celestial had chosen to have the child they'd conceived before he was sent to prison. He believes that a child would have prevented Celestial from starting things with Andre and that his argument about a child needing his father would end any talk of Celestial leaving Roy. He does not acknowledge the fact that having a child did little to keep his own biological parents, nor Andre's parents, together. He will also acknowledge in the novel's epilogue that a child should not be the only thing binding a couple to each another.

Part 3, Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ "I accidentally killed a man," he told me. "I've been through a lot, Celestial. Even if you go in innocent, you don't come out that way. So, please?"

Related Characters: Roy Hamilton Jr., Celestial Davenport (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

Celestial and Roy come close to sleeping together after he shows up at her house unannounced, but she stops things by asking if he has a condom. The question rattles Roy, who views it as a sign of Celestial's lack of trust and dedication. Upset and angry, Roy tells Celestial that he traded a man a plastic garbage bag in prison without realizing what the bag would be used for. When he found out the man had hanged


himself with it, Roy couldn't believe how foolish he had been. Roy tells Celestial all of this to make her understand the horror of life in prison, and to appeal to her sense of pity and duty. He is desperate and believes Celestial owes it to him to support him as he recovers from everything he has been through.

Part 3, Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ All I wanted to take with me was my tooth. For years, I stored it in a velvet box, like what a ring comes in. I couldn't tell her because she would think that I was being sentimental, that I was turning the memory of our first date over in my mouth like a mint. She wouldn't understand that I couldn't leave without the rest of my body.

Related Characters: Roy Hamilton Jr. (speaker), Celestial Davenport

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

When Roy begins to accept that his relationship with Celestial can't be salvaged, he goes through all of his belongings that Celestial has boxed up and placed in her garage. He wants only one thing: the tooth he lost defending Celestial from a thief on the night their romance began. It is fitting that the tooth has been stored in a box typically used for a ring, because it is a symbol of their bond and the sacrifices they have made for each other. In taking it back, Roy is reclaiming the part of himself he gave to Celestial—attempting to make his body whole and, in a way, to move on.

Part 3, Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Have you ever stared fury in its eyes? There is no saving yourself from a man in its throes. Roy's face was haunted and wild. The cords of his neck muscles were like cables; his lips made a hard gash. The unceasing blows were fueled by a need to hurt me that was greater than his own need for oxygen or even freedom. His need to hurt me was greater even than my own desire to survive. My efforts to protect myself were ritualistic, mannered, and symbolic, while his fists, feet, and needs were operating from a brutal code.

Related Characters: Andre (speaker), Roy Hamilton Jr.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

Andre recounts the fight he has with Roy upon meeting him outside Celestial's house for the first time since Roy's imprisonment. Even while being beaten up, Andre tries to understand Roy's perspective. He recalls what his father told him about accepting whatever punishment Roy doles out and doesn't fight back as hard as he could. He is still fearful, however, recognizing that Roy gained quite a bit of physical prowess while in prison. Roy's pain causes him to act with a brute strength, fighting for his life, while Andre is able to maintain a sense of distance. Andre has not been faced with the hardship Roy has, and as such lacks his anger and desperation.

●● But I was sorry. Not for what was between Celestial and me, I would never regret that. I was sorry for a lot of things. I was sorry for Evie, suffering from lupus for so many years. I was sorry for elephants killed for their ivory. I was sorry for Carlos, who traded one family for another. I was sorry for everyone in the world because we all had to die and nobody knew what happened after that. I was sorry for Celestial, who was probably watching from the window. Most of all, I was sorry for Roy. The last time I saw him on that morning before his mother's wake, he said, "I never had a chance, did I? I only thought I did."

Related Characters: Andre (speaker), Evie , Roy Hamilton Jr., Carlos , Celestial Davenport

Related Themes:      

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of their physical fight, Roy asks Andre to apologize for stealing Celestial from him. Andre refuses,


because to do so would be to deny the validity of his love for Celestial. At the same time, he understands Roy's pain and laments the injustices he has had to suffer. Roy, like many people, does not deserve what has happened to him. Roy's words about never having had a chance could refer to the fact that he never had a chance at keeping Celestial when Andre was always so close to her. He could also be referencing the precariousness of his position as a black man trying to succeed within a racist society.

Part 3, Chapter 11 Quotes

●● But he only turned toward Old Hickey. "It's too much." Then quickly—it must have been quickly—but I somehow took notice of each move, Roy tucked his lips against his teeth, gripped the tree like a brother, and then tipped his head back, presenting his face to the sky before driving his forehead against the ancient bark. The sound was muted, like the wet crack of an egg against the kitchen floor. He did it again, harder this time.

Related Characters: Celestial Davenport (speaker), Andre, Roy Hamilton Jr.

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

After fighting Andre and realizing that Celestial is unlikely to change her mind about their marriage, Roy is overcome with grief and anger at all that he has lost. In his desperation he attempts to injure himself by smashing his head against the tree that stands in Celestial's yard—a symbol of both the bond between Celestial and Andre and, having stood since the Reconstruction Era, a witness to the deep roots of the prejudice that ultimately contributed to Roy's imprisonment. The tree is stronger than Roy, however, suggesting his futility in the face of either reality that the tree represents.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

Roy believes he falls into the category of people who have left home, as opposed to those who have not. Though his wife Celestial refers to him as a country boy, he sees his home of Eloe, Louisiana as a small town. Celestial, meanwhile, is from Atlanta and thinks of herself as cosmopolitan, though she still lives in the house she grew up in.

Roy attended Morehouse College, becoming the first of his family to get an undergraduate education. He thinks of home as the place one launches from, not where one lands. His parents worked hard so that they were never poor, but they did struggle. He reflects that, ten years after arriving in Atlanta, the city had become his home and Celestial his family. At that point, they'd been happily married for a year and a half. Celestial was an artist—a “shooting star” woman—and Roy was “on the come-up” in business.

Roy recalls, in flashback, how his girlfriend before Celestial was also a “proper” girl from Atlanta yet pulled a gun on him at a gala, accusing him of cheating on her. After breaking up, Roy went to visit his parents, Big Roy and Olive, in Eloe. There, Olive told him that his girlfriend was probably already with someone else because no one would dump him without an alternative in place. Roy confirmed that his ex immediately began dating a lawyer after they broke up. Olive then told him that he should be with someone from their hometown, rather than attempting to romance light-skinned women in Atlanta.

Roy believes that Olive should have liked Celestial from the beginning because they had so much in common, but Olive has always believed Celestial is from another world. Celestial says that the only thing that might make Olive love her would be a baby. Roy is ready to start a family and thinks about how, unlike his own parents did, he won't constantly remind his children of the slaves who lost their lives so that they could live the way they do. Celestial vows to never tell their children they have to be “twice as good to have half as much.” Celestial is a refined woman who bears her height as if she chose to be tall. Roy considers asking if they can name their child Future.

Roy and Celestial come from very different backgrounds. These differences highlight the way that Roy wants to rise above his lower-class roots, while Celestial is content to remain in the upper-class world in which she was raised.



Roy's ambition is evidenced by his attending a historically black college and establishing a life with Celestial in urban Atlanta. Their success in their respective careers is a point of pride for Roy, as is their happy marriage. These details underscore the promise and potential of the young couple.



Olive's conjecture that the woman must already have had a back-up man waiting in the wings foreshadows the fact that when Celestial tells Roy she can no longer be married to him, romance is already blossoming with their mutual friend Andre. Olive's judgment of Roy courting light-skinned city women reflects different assumptions and prejudices within the black community, wherein lighter skin is stereotypically associated with wealth and class.



Olive worries that Celestial thinks she's better than Roy and his family. This isn't the case, but Olive's assumption shows the insidious reach of prejudice. Despite their class differences, however, Roy and Celestial have both grown up aware of societal racism. This evidences that such prejudice crosses class boundaries, and highlights that no one is immune from its danger. The two hope they can create a life without these burdens for their children.



At their wedding, Celestial makes it clear to Roy that all of the pomp and circumstance are just for show. In Bali on their honeymoon, Roy suggests they make a baby, but Celestial tells him it's not time yet. On their first wedding anniversary, they agree it's time to start trying, but Celestial discovers a woman's phone number in Roy's wallet. Though he says that nothing happened, Celestial is angry. They make love, but Celestial insists he wear a condom.

Roy is Celestial's muse. Her first award-winning sculpture is a work in glass that looks like a large marble with Roy's face swirled inside. Roy's goal is to work hard so that Celestial can stay home making her art, primarily **dolls**. Roy has a plan for making a wholesale business of the dolls, and he notes that the plan works out in the end.

Something terrible happens when the couple visits Roy's parents in Eloë over Labor Day weekend. Roy has just made some big sales, and he hopes to buy a new home because their current home was deeded from Celestial's parents to her alone. As they approach Eloë, Celestial tells Roy she has a bad feeling about the visit, adding that she gets nervous around his parents. To Roy, however, it's Celestial's parents who are wealthy and unapproachable, having earned a considerable fortune a decade before when her father invented a compound to keep orange juice from separating.

Roy tries to calm Celestial's nerves, but she suggests they return home, encouraging Roy to blame their absence on her. Roy notes that, looking back, he wishes he would have paid attention to the danger signs, but, in the moment, he hoped that Celestial was being overemotional because maybe she was pregnant—something that would have “locked up” their relationship.

Upon arriving at his parents' home, Roy bounds out of the car and Olive is elated to see him. Celestial remains in the car at first, until Roy returns to help her out. After ushering her inside, Roy hangs back with Big Roy who tells him that the dynamic between Celestial, Roy and Olive is a “triangle.” Roy says that the women will eventually warm up to one another.

Roy later reflects that, if he and Celestial had had a baby right away, then their relationship might have weathered Roy's incarceration differently. The threat of infidelity in the marriage shows that the relationship was not perfect even before Roy was incarcerated.



Even before Celestial's fame gets a boost from her making a doll dressed like an incarcerated Roy, she used her husband as her subject matter. This is important in light of later considerations as to whether Celestial is taking advantage of Roy's misfortune to further her artistic career.



Roy is self-conscious about the fact that only Celestial owns their current home. While Roy isn't uncomfortable around Celestial's parents, he does clearly harbor some resentment for the way the Davenports seem to guard their wealth and fail to than include him as true family.



Celestial's premonition about something being off forebodes tragedy. Roy's choice of words when discussing a potential pregnancy foreshadow his impending incarceration, as well as the fact that, without a child to bond them, their marriage will not weather what is to come.



Celestial's reluctance to be in Eloë stops her from exiting the car immediately, but Olive interprets this as Celestial being prissy and wanting her door opened for her. By calling their dynamic a “triangle,” Big Roy implies that Roy loves Celestial and Olive, but that Celestial and Olive love only Roy. The idea of a triangle echoes Celestial later developing a romance with Andre while still married to Roy.



When the women join them in the kitchen, Olive tells Celestial that she hears her daughter-in-law is famous; Roy had sent his mother a copy of Celestial's college alumni bulletin featuring an article about her **dolls**. Olive asks if people really pay \$5,000 for the dolls and Celestial demurs, but Roy proudly confirms that this is true. Olive conjectures that it must be white folks who are willing to pay that much. Celestial steps up to defend herself, saying the dolls are intricately made works of art. Big Roy says perhaps they need to see one in person and Celestial goes to the car to get one.

Celestial brings in a **doll** swaddled like a baby, a commission for the mayor of Atlanta. Olive gasps when she sees the doll, recognizing its likeness to Roy. With Olive rendered speechless, Celestial describes the care she put into the doll's construction. Olive asks if she can have it, but Roy tells her it's already sold for \$10,000. Celestial says Olive can have it and that she will simply make another one for the mayor. Thinking Celestial is rubbing in her success in her face by mentioning the mayor, Olive refuses the doll.

The groups eats dinner together quietly. Roy sips his iced tea and realizes Olive was so angry she mistakenly seasoned it with salt instead of sugar. His diploma then falls off the wall and the glass of the frame cracks. In hindsight, Roy wonders whether these were signs.

After dinner, Big Roy offers to bring their bags into the house, but Roy says he's booked them a room at the Piney Woods. Olive asks if this was Celestial's idea, but Roy takes full credit. It takes them a long while to leave the house for the hotel. Olive tells Celestial she would accept another **doll** that Celestial might make especially for Olive and Big Roy notes that a live grandchild would be even better.

On their way to the hotel, Roy pulls over near a bridge. He carries Celestial down the embankment, grateful to be stronger than her. As they sit near the bank of the stream, Roy tells her about fishing here with Big Roy when he was younger. He says that the cars passing on the bridge overhead sound like a song. Roy admires his wife's scent and beauty and calls her "Georgia," her pet name, and they kiss passionately.

The hotel where they stay is not particularly nice. Roy tells Celestial that Olive worked there as a cleaner when the place was called The Rebel's Roost and a Confederate flag hung in each room. Olive went into labor while working but refused to let Roy be born under that flag, so the motel owner drove her to Alexandria.

Olive's dismissive comments to Celestial suggest she is intimidated by her daughter-in-law's success. While Celestial attempts to remain humble, Roy freely expresses how proud he is of his wife's work—which will contrast with his later resentment of her devotion to the dolls. Celestial's assertion that the dolls are not simply toys for white people hints at her later activism.



Olive's positive reaction to the doll seems to be primarily related to its likeness to Roy, rather than the intricacy of the art. Once again, it's Roy who steps in to point out the worth of the doll, while Celestial freely offers it to Olive. Olive, however, again misconstrues Celestial's generosity for pretension, further reflecting the class anxiety that exists between the families.



The tea being seasoned with salt instead of sugar echoes how the family is attempting to cover up their disagreements by pretending all is well, when in fact their relations are distinctly unpalatable.



While it's Roy's decision to stay at a hotel instead of with his parents, they again assume that this was Celestial's idea, putting her at a further disadvantage in their judgmental eyes.



Roy shares an important place from his youth with Celestial, a testament to his love for her. Roy will continue to refer to Celestial as Georgia in his letters to her once incarcerated, a reminder of where she is from and the state in which they built their home together.



The fact that Roy will soon be arrested in the motel where he was almost born reflects the inability of Olive—or anyone—to protect her son from the injustice of racism. Like the Confederate South before the Civil War, the prison system is often referred to as a modern form of slavery.



When Celestial asks if his father was working at the time, Roy reveals that Big Roy is not his biological father. Instead, he adopted Roy when he was a baby and changed his name. Celestial asks why Roy is only telling her this now, a year after they've been married. Roy asks what difference it makes who his father is, but Celestial is hurt at the deception rather than the news itself. He says he knows who his father is, he just doesn't know him.

Roy stops Celestial from saying more by speaking the words "November 17." They use this code, the anniversary of their first date, as a way to stop fighting. They agree to take a break from arguing for fifteen minutes and Roy goes to fill the ice bucket. He knows that in the meantime Celestial will call her childhood friend Andre, who introduced Roy to Celestial in college.

At the ice machine, Roy meets a woman about Olive's age, heavyset, with her arm in a sling. In an attempt to be courteous, he carries her ice to her room for her and then props her window open with a bible. The woman asks if he can look at the runny toilet and he fixes it, leaving with a warning that she should double-check the lock on her room's loose doorknob. He leaves the room at exactly 8:48 p.m. and at taps on the door to his own room at 8:53 p.m. Celestial makes them drinks and Roy notes that this is the last happy evening he'd experience for a long time.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2

Celestial says that the night at the motel continues to haunt her memory, but that no fight can be fought with the past. In flashback, Celestial tells the story of Roy calling out their safe word and leaving the room, and her subsequent call to Andre. He tells her not to be angry every time Roy tries to come clean. Celestial is still smiling from the call when Roy returns. He apologizes to Celestial, saying he'd been embarrassed about his history because Celestial's family is so seemingly perfect. Celestial remembers her mother warning her that she will always have to remind Roy that they are equals because of the insecurity caused by the difference in their backgrounds.

Celestial cares only that he kept a secret from her, but Roy misunderstands and thinks that she would have judged Olive for being a teenage mother. Roy won't understand her anger until he unknowingly encounters his biological father later in the novel.



Roy and Celestial have had enough fights to have devised a "safe word" to prevent either of them from saying something they'd regret, indicating that their marriage is not perfect but that they care for one another. Celestial's close friendship with Andre is integral to the love triangle that develops later in the story.



Roy is careful to note his politeness and the exact time of his encounter with the woman at the ice machine to counteract any suggestion that he did something to scare her or could possibly have been involved with her rape later that evening. By the time he returns to the room, Celestial is in a better mood, presumably because she has been talking to Andre, underscoring their deep connection.



Andre's advice to Celestial—to not get angry with Roy when he tries to share his secrets with her—resonates with later events when Celestial must come clean with Roy for her own indiscretions while he's been in jail. This moment again underscores the closeness of Celestial and Andre, as well as the tensions created by the class difference between Roy and Celestial.



Roy says that he didn't want Celestial's parents to know that Olive was a teenager when he was born. Celestial reminds Roy that her own mother, Gloria, was her father, Franklin's, second wife, and reveals that she was in fact his mistress for three years while he was still married to his first wife. By the time her parents married, her mother was already pregnant with Celestial. Her father hadn't told her mother he was already married until they'd been dating a whole month. Celestial tells Roy that her mother was grateful her father didn't tell her this, however, because she wouldn't have dated a married man and he turned out to be "the One." Celestial tells Roy that she never wants to benefit from deception and that she doesn't want their child to inherit their secrets.

Celestial and Roy make love, and Celestial cries, believing that her tears are caused by "passion rather than premonition." Afterwards, Celestial basks in her gratitude and affection for Roy as he drifts off to sleep. Suddenly, the door bursts open. Celestial remembers the door being kicked in, though the later police report claims a key unlocked the door. The woman Roy met earlier that evening has claimed that a man had tried the door to her room and, finding it open, raped her; she believed it was Roy. Celestial claims Roy was with her all night.

Celestial tells the story, in flashback, of how she met Roy in college. After one bad year at Howard, Celestial transfers to Spelman. Roy and Andre are next door neighbors in their dorm room at Morehouse, and Celestial sometimes sleeps over in Andre's room, though the relationship is strictly platonic. One night she and Andre hear a breathy voice calling out, "Roy. Othaniel. Hamilton." Andre and Celestial joke about what they hear, with Celestial conjecturing that the woman is faking her orgasm and Andre countering that if she is, then all of the other girls Roy has brought home are too.

Celestial doesn't meet Roy until a month later when he barges into Andre's room unannounced. He is cordial, but Celestial notes that something about Roy is dangerous and that she doesn't want anything to do with danger after what happened at Howard. They don't speak again for four years, by which point Roy seems marked less by danger and more by "realness," a quality Celestial now craves even as she questions what it means to be "real."

Celestial reassures Roy by drawing his attention to the parallels in their upbringing, highlighting that complicated relationships exist in any social class. Even as Celestial claims that she wouldn't want to benefit from deception in the same way her mother did, in later dating Andrew while still married she deceives Roy much like father did his first wife.



The resolution of Celestial and Roy's argument is sealed with a physical gesture of their love. The differing versions of the way their door is broken down shows the subjectivity of testimony and lived experience—or, perhaps, the attempt by the police to soften the account of Roy's arrest. The fact that a woman Roy went out of his way to help accuses him of rape highlights the blinding power of racism.



Though Celestial has known Andre all her life, and they have a clearly intimate relationship, their friendship is mostly platonic. Celestial's first exposure to Roy is overhearing him having sex with a woman in the dorm room next to Andre's, and though they make fun of the women who call him by his full name, the consistency with which he is able to make his sexual partners exclaim seems to confirm his romantic skills.



Here, Celestial alludes to an incident that caused her to leave her first college, Howard University, though she does not yet explain what that is. When Celestial encounters Roy again in New York City, her idea of "realness" seems to suggest Roy's strength of character and ambition in contrast to the phoniness of others.



Back in the narrative present, they hire a family friend named Uncle Banks to defend Roy, but he sits in jail for 100 days before his case goes to trial. Celestial remains in Louisiana for a month. When she sends the mayor the **doll** she made him, she is unable to seal the box to ship it to him. Roy tells Celestial that if he doesn't win the case, he doesn't want her to wait for him, but Celestial refuses to believe that things won't work out in Roy's favor.

The day before the trial, Celestial cuts off Andre's dreadlocks. Everyone in the family dresses to look their most "innocent" during the trial. When Celestial is on the witness stand, the prosecutor asks what she and Roy had been fighting about that evening. Celestial pauses, and though Banks objects so she doesn't need to answer, the pause casts doubt on her testimony, as though she's hiding something. Banks has coached Celestial to show her passion for Roy, but she doesn't know how to be anything but well-spoken in front of strangers. She reflects that none of the twelve jury members took her for her word.

Roy sobs upon being sentenced to twelve years in jail. In his weeping, Celestial recognizes all the tears he wasn't allowed to cry before. She reflects on the night of the attack, remembering being pulled from the bed and Roy being dragged into the parking lot. On that night at the hotel someone pushed Celestial to the ground and she hit her chin on the pavement, leaving a scar. She and Roy lay beside each other on the ground as if in their burial plots.

Celestial writes Roy a letter saying that she didn't think it was possible he would be put in jail. She doesn't recognize herself because she feels so much has changed so suddenly, and she experiences the house as not "simply empty" but "emptied." She tells him that, despite knowing he won't receive mail for a month, she'll write him every night.

Roy writes to Celestial saying that he hasn't written a letter since high school and that this will be his first love letter. He tells her he wants to write something that will remind her of her love for him, but he feels his words are inadequate. He reminds her of the time she thought the **hickory tree** in the front yard was sick and so he hired a tree doctor to help it, reflecting that he shows his love through action. He also says that when he told her to make her art and he would worry about providing for them, that was another love letter.

Even a skilled lawyer is no match for a criminal justice system stacked against black men, and Roy's case crawls through the process. Celestial's inability to close the box containing the doll for the mayor reflects her worry that sealing up a doll that resembles Roy will seal his fate, sentencing him to a longer period of containment.



Aware of societal prejudice that often deems black people to be dangerous, the characters in the novel feel the need to make themselves appear distinctly nonthreatening. Like Roy's immediate arrest, this is part of a continuum of racism levied against black Americans. Celestial pauses in her testimony so as not to betray the fact that Roy told her about his biological parentage, but the jury is too quick to take Celestial's hesitancy as a sign of untruth.



In keeping with expectations of masculinity, Roy has been taught not to display his emotions over the years. When he finds out his life is being unjustly stolen from him, he cries all the tears he's been denied. The way they lie beside one another that night shows how this event is essentially the end of their marriage.



At this point the narrative switches to an epistolary form, meaning the next section of the novel is told in letters between characters. Celestial's initial dedication to Roy is clear. The distinction she makes between "empty" and "emptied" is a poetic one, noting that while she was fine living alone before, she now feels the absence of Roy.



Roy is less comfortable writing to Celestial than she is to him, but he embraces the form. Previously he expressed his love through actions that benefitted Celestial, but that is no longer possible. His prior promise that he would provide for them so that she could focus on her art reflects his initial support of Celestial's career, and underscores that she must now sustain herself financially.



Roy writes to Celestial again to tell her he received all her letters. In three months, he has had three cell partners. His current cellmate is Walter, an older man who has been incarcerated for most of his life. Roy writes letters for Walter in exchange for cigarettes that he then trades for other goods. The letters are mostly to women Walter meets through personal ads. Walter also lived in Eloë and wants to hear all about it and about Roy's college life. He asks Roy how he got his name and Roy says he got the name from his father. The inmates call Walter "Ghetto Yoda" because of his tendency to advise other inmates. He tells Roy that they need to stick together because they're both bow-legged.

Roy tells Celestial that it's bad in jail and that no one, not even a murderer, deserves to spend more than a couple years there. The number of men in the jail is equivalent to the male population of Morehouse. He tells Celestial he put her on the top of his visitors list and that he'll put Dre (a nickname for Andre) on the list, too. He thanks her for putting money in his commissary account and calls Celestial "Georgia" because he misses his home with her.

Celestial tells Roy that she will have visited by the time he gets this letter and that she's already memorized the strict guidelines about how visitors should dress. She remembers seeing a wrongly-accused man and his accuser speak in college, but she can't remember what they said. Celestial didn't think that such a thing could happen to her or her loved ones, and she wishes she could sit down with the woman who accused Roy. Uncle Banks is preparing his appeal, and he reminds Celestial that things could be worse—Roy could have been shot during the arrest. She prays for him every night and says she wrote down every word of their conversation in the hotel room that night so that, when Roy returns, they can pick up where they left off. She tells Roy that she's nervous to see him, but that she loves him as much as ever.

Roy thanks Celestial for visiting. He writes that he felt weird seeing her for the first time in front of so many people, and then begins to reveal something that has been kept secret to the readers up until now. Insinuating that Celestial was pregnant upon his sentencing but had an abortion, Roy tells his wife that their child would have had all of their family to help raise him until Roy was free, and that the child would have been something for him to look forward to upon his release. He then says what's done is done, and that when they decided to have an abortion it was as though they were resigning themselves to the fact that things wouldn't work out in the courtroom. He asks Celestial who else knows about the abortion and tells her he loves her.

Though Roy hasn't written many letters in his own life, he proves still a skilled writer compared to the other prisoners—a testament to the education he sought for himself. Walter's ability to connect with women via personal ads suggests his womanizing nature. Roy is skeptical of the interest Walter takes in his life, though the reasoning behind his specific questions are made clear when his true identity is later revealed.



Roy's comparison of a single jail's population to the student body at his historically black university reflects the racialized nature of criminal justice. Mass incarceration robs many young black men of the chance to receive a proper education and participate in society.



Celestial writes to Roy even though they'll have the time to catch up before this letter arrives because she knows how much the letters mean to him. She tries to gain perspective on the situation by consoling herself that Roy lived through his wrongful arrest, reflecting the fact that many black men do not survive such encounters with the police. Her hopes that she and Roy might resume their lives as though none of this has happened will soon prove misguided and naïve.



The revelation that Celestial had an abortion is a shock to the reader at this point. This is another way in which his wrongful incarceration has forever shaped Roy's life and altered their marriage. Disagreements over the abortion will ultimately prove to drive a wedge between Celestial and Roy.



Celestial tells Roy that she tries to force herself not to think about the abortion all the time, but that she feels sadness more than regret. She asks him not to send another letter like the last one and reminds him what it would be like to bring a child into the disgusting county jail to visit him. She reminds him how he told her she couldn't have the child in this situation, and that whatever Roy is feeling about the abortion, she feels it more.

Celestial throws herself into her work of making the **dolls**. They remind her of a baby doll shop she went to as a child, and the sadness she felt at the idea the dolls didn't have homes. She wants to sell her dolls to children because she can't handle them looking at her, but she also can't stop making them. She tells Roy that only Andre knows about the abortion. He took her to the appointment and reminded her that this wasn't their last chance to have a baby, and she promises him that they can have as many babies as he wants when he gets out of jail.

Roy writes back to deny that he forced her into anything. Celestial is a strong woman who wouldn't just follow anyone's orders. Celestial was relieved at the thought of not keeping the baby and didn't argue with the suggestion. They both have responsibility for the decision.

Celestial tells Roy she left Howard University for Spelman after just a year because she had an affair with the teacher of her Art of the African Diaspora class. He was forty and married, while Celestial was eighteen. They were unofficially engaged, but he still needed to divorce his wife when Celestial discovered she was pregnant. He talked her into having an abortion to protect his wife from the embarrassment. After the abortion, the teacher broke up with Celestial.

Celestial stopped going to classes and the college called her parents, who filed a suit against the professor. Celestial returned home to Atlanta, where only her Aunt Sylvia was able to snap her out of her depression. Sylvia convinced Celestial that she didn't want the baby to begin with and taught her how to make **dolls** out of socks to donate to the "crack babies" in the hospital. For Celestial, the dolls were a way to atone for aborting her own child. In her letter to Roy, she tells him that she promised herself that she wouldn't put herself in that situation again. She sees the abortion of their child more as a miscarriage because, despite her body being fertile, her life was not. She again asks him not to bring up the subject.

Roy's letter to Celestial implies that the decision to have an abortion was Celestial's alone, but she begs Roy to consider his own insistence that they couldn't birth their first child in the midst of this situation. Celestial tells Roy that she feels the weight of their decision more than he does, but her reasons for this will only become clear later.



Celestial throwing herself into her work has multiple implications. For one, Roy promised her she could focus on her art and he would worry about their finances. Once Roy is no longer the breadwinner, Celestial seeks a way to earn her own living through her art. Her obsession with the dolls, though, is not simply a matter of making money, but also of obsessing over Roy, her muse, who is now physically absent from her life. The baby dolls she's making are also a parallel for the pregnancy she aborted.



Roy feels that Celestial is placing the blame for the abortion on him, but he sees the decision as having been primarily hers. He wants her to take some of the burden of their decision because he's already bearing the burden of this wrongful conviction.



Celestial reveals the source of her complex feelings around the abortion. Celestial had kept her past romantic history from Roy, never telling him that she had been pregnant before. She has a history of having been shamed for the decision to terminate a pregnancy, and she won't accept the same treatment from Roy.



While Celestial had previously given Roy a hard time for not revealing his secrets to her, now it is Celestial's turn to share a secret of her past, explaining why she's particularly sensitive around the subject of their aborted child. Celestial explains the deep depression she suffered because of the loss of her lover and pregnancy in college, and reveals to Roy the provenance of the baby dolls. This clarifies why Celestial has trouble letting go of the dolls she makes now in Roy's likeness.



Roy writes that he has two years done and ten more to go. Uncle Banks finally moves forward with the appeal. Roy dislikes how much money Celestial's parents are paying Banks, and he vows to pay them back. He likes handwritten letters more than email because they're like receipts, and he tells Celestial that he wrote an email for another inmate recently in exchange for an onion. He thanks Celestial for always writing him back, though he notes that most people don't respond to paper letters. He asks for some photos, both old and new.

Celestial writes back to Roy and encloses a few photos: some old photos and some new ones taken by Andre. Dre has a new girlfriend who is only twenty-one. She tells Roy that she's put on some weight and secured a retail space to sell the **dolls** as high-end toys or low-end art, because she loves watching little brown girls receive the dolls. She has accepted Franklin as an investor instead of opening the business with Roy as they planned. She tells Roy that she's kept all the pictures PG-rated but hopes that he'll keep the new ones to himself and share only the older ones with his friends. She offers to put some money on Walter's books, a.k.a. his commissary account too.

Roy writes to Celestial, telling her he misses everything about her and he can't believe how much time they wasted fighting. He asks her to forgive him for all the times he could have made her feel more secure. He feels demoralized that he has nothing to offer her for all she does for him, and he tells her that he touches her with his mind and asks if she'll try to do the same to him.

Roy writes to apologize for the last letter being a little "out there" and asks Celestial to write him back. Celestial writes to tell him he didn't freak her out, but that she's been very busy. She has a solo show coming up in which she will exhibit all of the portraits she's made of Roy over the years. She tells him that working with images of him all day makes her feel as though she is spending time with him, and it causes her to forget to write.

Roy writes Celestial to ask if Olive is correct that Celestial is now famous. Celestial writes that she was featured in an article in *Ebony* and her **doll** won a contest at the National Portrait Museum. She'd made this doll for Olive based on one of Roy's baby pictures and it was supposed to be dressed in Roy's baby clothes, but Celestial couldn't let it go.

Roy's comments reveal that significant time has passed, though the letters are undated. Roy provides a detail into the economy of the prison system, revealing how a service can be traded for a good. Such an exchange will prove important later when we hear of the range of Roy's experience in jail. His desire for photographs both old and new reflects that he wants to both remember Celestial as she was and be part of her life now.



The fact that Celestial feels self-conscious about Roy sharing the newer photos suggests her belief that Roy only has a true claim over Celestial's old self rather than her present one. Though suspicions might be raised by it being Andre who took Celestial's picture, Celestial quickly explains that Dre has a new girlfriend. Celestial displays her generosity in supporting Roy's cellmate because he doesn't seem to have the same family network Roy does.



Roy is so hungry for affection that he turns to metaphysical communication. This underscores the isolating nature of prison and the psychological toll it is taking on Roy.



This letter hints at the growing distance between Roy and Celestial's and the tension her artistic success will ultimately cause. Her excuse that her spending time with his image makes her feel as though she's spending time with him is an insult to how Roy is unable to similarly distract himself within the prison walls.



While previously Olive had been informed of Celestial's growing success by Roy, the roles have reversed. Again, Celestial had been unable to part with a doll based on Roy's likeness.



Celestial tells Roy the story of how her mother's family came to Atlanta. One day, at the general store, Celestial's grandmother, pushing the baby Gloria in a pram, crossed paths with a white lady and her child. The little girl pointed at Gloria and said, "Look, Mommy! A baby maid!" Immediately after that, her grandparents moved to Atlanta to avoid that fate for their daughter.

Celestial tells Roy that about a year ago she had an incident that she didn't tell him about because she didn't want to worry him. She and Andre were walking to get food after setting up a show, and she was tired and hungry. She passed a little boy on the street who reminded her of Roy, and thought, "A baby prisoner." She thought it really was Roy for a moment and broke down. Andre called Gloria and they calmed Celestial down, but Celestial couldn't shake the idea. She made prison clothing for the **doll**, transforming it from a toy into art. This was her prize-winning doll, but when interviewed about it, she didn't mention Roy, instead talking about her mother and Angela Davis's protest of prisons.

Roy writes to Celestial that the idea of a shop was his idea, while she always dreamed of placing her work in galleries. He accuses her of being ashamed of him. He asks to see a picture of the **doll**, hoping he'll like it more when he sees it. He tells her that her dolls might help raise awareness, but they don't actually help anyone who is incarcerated. He tells her that if she doesn't want to tell people her husband is wrongfully incarcerated, she can tell them that he was recently promoted from picking soybeans to picking up trash. He asks if Andre was at the award ceremony.

Celestial tells Roy his last letter upset her. She tells him that even when she tells people he's innocent, all they focus on is the fact that he's incarcerated, and she wanted to enjoy the honor that she was being awarded. She tells him she won't dignify his question about Andre with a response.

Roy tells Celestial that his cellmate Walter took Celestial's side in the argument. Walter sees the negative association of incarceration with African American life and reminds Roy that it's a miracle Celestial has already overcome all of the other negative stereotypes she could have fallen prey to. Roy apologizes to Celestial. He pulled up the article about her at the library and was happy to see she still wore his ring on her finger. He writes her another letter asking if she received his apology and asking her to please write back.

Celestial's story shows that, class-wise, she and Roy's parents are not that far apart after all. Just as Olive refused to let Roy be born under a Confederate flag, Celestial's grandmother attempted to shield Gloria from racial prejudice.



Celestial uses the story of her grandmother to parallel the feeling she had about a little black boy she passed on the street, imagining him the worst of fates despite the best of circumstances. Instead of sending the doll she'd made to Olive, she made it prison blues and talked only about this story, rather than her personal connection to incarceration via Roy—something Roy will come to resent.



Roy calls "nonsense" on Celestial starting a doll business with her father, because that was never her dream, but Roy's. This admonishment might be dictated by his anger at Celestial for not having visited recently. Her gaining recognition for her doll is not a replacement for the real good it does to visit prisoners. His inferiority complex compared to Celestial's recent accomplishments is reflected in the way he mocks his own advancement within the prison system and his implication that something might be going on with Andre.



Celestial wants to defend Roy, but she feels the judgement from others when she brings him up in conversation. While she has suffered the effects of Roy's incarceration for the last two years, she felt she deserved to experience the joy of the recognition awarded her on this night without the pity and suspicion Roy's incarceration arouses.



Walter is able to help Roy understand that incarceration is already doing its damage to Roy's life, and that he shouldn't let it do damage to Celestial's. While Roy had been offended by Celestial's not mentioning his incarceration in the article about her, he views the fact that she still wears her wedding ring as a sign of her continued devotion.



Roy writes to Celestial's father, saying that he feels he has a lot in common with Mr. Davenport. He recalls the day he asked permission to propose to Celestial, and the way "Mr. D" told him her hand wasn't his to give—and that Roy might not know Celestial as well as he thought if he believed that approach might work. Now, Roy tells him that Celestial hasn't visited in two months and he hasn't heard from her either. Roy asks his father-in-law if he will talk to Celestial on his behalf. He knows that being married to an incarcerated man is a sacrifice and that all he has to offer her is his character. He asks that Mr. Davenport keep the letter to himself.

Mr. Davenport writes Roy to tell him that Gloria prays for him every day. He revises Roy's story about asking him for Celestial's hand in marriage, saying that he only told Roy that Celestial had a mind of her own. He tells Roy that he proposed to Gloria three times before she accepted. He tells Roy that he'll ask Celestial why she hasn't visited, but that a marriage is between two people. He adds that he is sure his daughter will be loyal to Roy in the same way Gloria has always been loyal to himself.

Roy writes to Celestial, mentioning that he wrote to Franklin to ask him to talk to her. He recalls the first time he visited Celestial's parents' home and the way they sat on the porch as her father rolled a blunt, and how he felt welcomed into the family. He shares his shock to discover that his cellmate is actually his biological father. When Roy was helping Walter with something, he saw his full name on his face sheet, Othaniel Walter Jenkins, and knew in that moment that he must be his father. People in prison had called him Roy's pops, but he'd just assumed it was a joke.

Roy backtracks to explain that Olive knew Walter had fathered quite a few children already, and when he found out Olive was pregnant he left her, too. When she went out looking for him, someone told her he was in Eloë, but he was already gone. She did find a job and a husband there, though. Roy tells Celestial that he felt like a sucker when he found out the truth about his cellmate, and that he understands now how Celestial felt upon learning that Roy hadn't told her about his being adopted by Big Roy.

Walter tells Roy that his first instinct when Olive told him she was pregnant was to run, and Roy worries he reacted similarly when Celestial told him she was pregnant. Walter forces Roy to admit that life in prison improved once Walter became his cellmate. He says while Big Roy will always be his father, Walter is his "old man" while in prison. He asks once more for Celestial to come visit him.

Roy's appeal to Mr. Davenport reveals how desperate he is to hear from Celestial. Roy takes a position of humility in acknowledging that he doesn't have much to offer Celestial at this point, but he remains worried enough about his pride that he asks that Franklin keep the letter to himself.



This letter from Mr. Davenport reveals his less traditional side, showing that when he told Roy he couldn't approve of the marriage he meant only that the decision was Celestial's alone. This letter marks a moment where Mr. Davenport and Roy begin to develop a rapport. Mr. Davenport, despite his past, believes that his daughter will act as faithfully as his own wife did to him, rather than as faithfully as he did to his first wife.



Here it is revealed that one of the reasons that Roy wants Celestial to reply to his letters is because he has received quite a shock in finding out that his cellmate is his father. While there had been a few clues that this was the case, Roy hadn't considered this even the slightest possibility, thinking the clues odd, but not indicative of actual parentage.



Roy provides more detail about Olive and Walter's relations. This return to the story of Roy's biological parentage is important because it helps Roy recognize the similarity between Walter having concealed his identity from him while living in the same cell, and Roy keeping his own secrets from Celestial.



Roy's worry about his reaction to Celestial's pregnancy implies that he is finally taking responsibility for his part in the decision to have an abortion. Roy admits that Walter is helping look out for him in prison, showing the way his once estranged father has shown up for him in a different situation.



Celestial writes to Roy to ask for his forgiveness. She says that initially she didn't visit because she was going through a lot, but recently she had just been busy with work. Her employee Tamar is going to mind the shop soon so that Celestial can visit. She asks if she'll be allowed to meet Walter as well as for his commissary information, so that she can put money in for the holidays.

Roy writes to Celestial to thank her for visiting. He tells her that something about her seems different and asks if she is all right. He says he's not asking if she's seeing someone else. Celestial is uncertain how to respond to Roy's question. She says change can be expected, as he's been away for three years and they're growing older. Celestial confirms that Roy's ring is on her finger.

Roy writes to tell Celestial that Olive has lung cancer. He asks if Celestial will visit Olive, apologizing for running up his list of debts with her. He can tell she feels obligated by all that he requires of her, but he needs to know Celestial's opinion of the situation because he believes Big Roy is withholding information from him.

Celestial writes to Roy to apologize for writing a letter she promised herself she would never write. She says she can no longer be his wife, though she feels like she was never given a chance to fully occupy the role. After seeing the way Big Roy behaved at Olive's funeral, Celestial saw how weak her connection with Roy was. They aren't able to share their lives with each other, both unable to bear hearing about the other's days even when they visit. She tells him she'll continue to support and visit him, but she can't do so as his wife.

Roy tells Celestial she should do what she has to do, but that plenty of women are more dedicated to their incarcerated men than Celestial is. He tells her not to visit as a friend. Celestial asks that Roy consider her perspective, and how things like being strip-searched each time she visits are slowly diminishing her spirit. Roy writes back that he is innocent, and Celestial says that she is, too.

Celestial's letter shows how her anger and sadness pushed her to take solace in her work, rather than facing her situation head-on. In asking for Roy's forgiveness and to donate money to Walter's account, Celestial seems to want to repair her and Roy's relationship.



When Roy and Celestial see one another after a long period of not having visited, Roy senses a change in Celestial. He's careful to indicate he's not implying that she's seeing someone else, though his mentioning this as a possibility for the change isn't the most eloquent way to express his concern. Celestial, perhaps having felt time pass and the world change more acutely than Roy has in his cell, thinks change is only logical. Though she doesn't deny that she's seeing someone, she says Roy's ring is on her finger, a symbol that implies her fidelity.



Roy sees asking his wife to visit his sick mother as one more favor owed, a toxic way of viewing a life of partnership that evidences his growing insecurity in their marriage.



Though Celestial doesn't explain Big Roy's behavior at the funeral, the implication is that he acted with a considerable amount of devotion that dwarfed her own feelings for Roy. Celestial feels that love is a day-to-day connection, and she and Roy don't have that right now. While Celestial still loves Roy as a friend, the feelings she has for him no longer seem sufficient for her to continue being his wife.



Roy replies to Celestial's difficult declaration with passive aggression, implying that Walter's acquaintances from the personal ads are more dedicated to Walter than Celestial is to Roy. Celestial attempts to make a case for how miserable it is for her to visit Roy in prison but fails to understand how her experience is far less extreme than his. Their declarations that they are both innocent reflects the ways in which incarceration affects far more than the incarcerated.



Roy writes Celestial formally discontinuing their relationship. He asks that she not come to visit him. He then writes to Uncle Banks, telling him to release him as his attorney and to remove Celestial from his visitors list. Uncle Banks writes back to say that the Davenports intend to retain him so he may continue his lawyerly duties. He urges Roy to reconsider removing Celestial from his list, adding that Roy's case has been the most upsetting of any he has worked on and that he believes they possess the same determination. He acknowledges that the appeal being denied was a disheartening setback, but that there is still hope. He recommends that Roy stay connected with those people who remind him he had a life outside the prison.

Roy writes Banks to accept his continued services and to say he'll leave Celestial on his list, but to please not tell her that this is the case. Roy promises to repay the Davenports and Banks for all he has done, saying he is Roy's only hope.

Celestial writes Roy on their anniversary to tell him she's thinking of him. She mentions that, while married, they used "November 17" as a safe word to halt a fight, and hopes that maybe now they can use it to resume communication. She writes him again to wish him a merry Christmas. She writes once more to say that she finds his refusal to see her unkind. He writes her back to ask that she please respect his wishes. Celestial writes to wish Roy a happy birthday. She writes again around the anniversary of Olive's death to say she's thinking of him.

Roy writes Celestial after having been incarcerated for five years to say that he is coming home, since his conviction has been vacated. He tells her he should be free in time for Christmas and regrets not answering her letters, saying that he hasn't heard from her in more than a year. He says that while he knows they can't start over, he believes there's a reason she hasn't divorced him. Roy tells Celestial this note is a love letter.

PART 2, CHAPTER 1

Andre believes that his current situation is comparable to being married to a widow. He knows it's not reasonable to be jealous of the past, in the form of Roy, and stakes his claim to Celestial by saying he has loved her for his whole life, having grown up next door to each other beneath the centuries-old **Old Hickey** tree. He knows Celestial is not really his, but he also knows she is not Roy's either. Andre feels that starting a romantic relationship with Celestial at this point is wrong, but he also can't deny his feelings.

Uncle Banks denies Roy's request to discontinue his service and tries to show Roy the mistake he'd be making in removing Celestial from his list of approved visitors—effectively robbing himself of reminders of his life in the outside world, and the hope such reminders encourage. This case is particularly affecting for Banks, who has worked on many criminal cases, because of the way he identifies with Roy and can see how it was chance and prejudice that landed Roy in this position.



Roy likely accepts Banks' suggestions because he appreciates the way Banks identified with him and expressed continued faith in his innocence.



Celestial, in trying to revive her correspondence with her husband, tries to evoke their old safe word to appeal to Roy's sentimentality, but his lack of response indicates the gesture doesn't work. Celestial's writing around the anniversary of Olive's death also marks a year having passed since Celestial told Roy she no longer wanted to be married.



This letter reveals how much time has passed and suggests that, despite their lack of communication, Celestial has not filed for divorce because part of her is still tied to Roy. The revelation that Roy's case has been overturned and he will be set free earlier than planned pushes Roy into reconsidering their relationship.



This moment reveals that, as Roy subtly suggested, a romantic relationship has indeed developed between Andre and Celestial. Andre's comparison of Celestial to a widow reinforces the idea that prison is a sort of death for Roy, truncating all his individual dreams and also causing the demise of his marriage. Andre tries to prove the validity of his relationship with Celestial by pointing to their shared history.



Andre reflects on how, upon his parents divorcing when he was seven, Celestial volunteered Franklin to be Andre's new daddy, though Mr. Davenport never quite felt like a father to him. They went to a dance together in high school for lack of other options, kissing on the way home and then again in the basement of Celestial's house. When he told his mother Evie the next day, she said that he had to go next door and ask Celestial to be his girlfriend. Celestial asked if they could forget what they'd done, though, which broke Andre's heart. He says he shares all of this to establish that they had a history, as opposed to a random "accident of time and place."

After high school, they went to separate schools: Andre to Morehouse in Atlanta and Celestial to Howard in D.C., before Celestial returned home from college prematurely and transferred to Spelman. She would visit his dorm room at Morehouse and ask to spend the night, but they'd sleep with the covers between them for modesty. When Roy burst into Andre's dorm room that first time, it seemed clear that Celestial was totally uninterested, seeing through his clodhopper way of being harmlessly seductive.

Roy asked Andre if there was anything happening between him and Celestial and Andre confirmed there was not. Andre refused to clue Roy into any intel regarding Celestial, but the two found each other again on their own three or four years later. Andre's happiness for Roy and Celestial at their wedding was genuine, but Andre acknowledges how circumstances can change, and he can't apologize for the nearly three years he and Celestial have been partnered at this point. They have pursued their feelings despite the ghost of Roy always being nearby.

In the present, Andre comes home from work one day to find Celestial drinking wine at the kitchen table. She tells him that Roy is being released, and they toast to Uncle Banks. She asks Andre if he thinks Roy wants to return home to Atlanta, and she suggests that she and Andre live in her house while setting up Roy in Andre's house. Andre knows this could never work. The month before, Celestial had finally agreed to discuss divorce papers and Andre had purchased a ring. He'd planned to wake her up the next morning, on Thanksgiving, with the ruby ring, despite her assertion that she no longer believes in marriage.

Andre's introduction of his parents' divorce foreshadows the story he will later share about the effect this separation had on him. Andre gives evidence that he and Celestial felt romance blossoming between them even in their youth as a means to legitimize their current relationship, asserting that their bond runs deep and their coupling is much more than a random coincidence.



Andre continues to track the development of his relationship with Celestial, identifying the intimacy of sleeping in the same bed even as he points out the chasteness of such encounters. Andre tells again the way that Celestial expressed littler interest in Roy at their first meeting as a sign that they were not destined for each other.



Andre has clearly always been protective of Celestial. Though he was happy for Roy and Celestial when they married, he points out how feelings can change; in doing so, however, he diminishes the efforts he's shown to prove that the link between himself and Celestial has remained constant over the years.



Andre and Celestial toasting to Banks instead of Roy indicates the way they choose to celebrate the correction of the error made by the criminal justice system, rather than the return of Celestial's husband. While Celestial had previously agreed to finally move forward with the divorce, she hadn't yet taken action—suggesting her continued reluctance to confront the end of her relationship with Roy and complicating Andre's intention to propose.



Celestial asks Andre what they'll do, and Andre says their first obligation is to tell Roy. They have four weeks to work out their plan. Andre offers to go talk to Roy, but Celestial believes that Roy deserves to hear the news of their coupling from her. Andre shows Celestial the ring he's bought, and she asks if it's a proposal; he says it's a promise. Celestial tells him it's all too much for her right now and goes to her room. He doesn't follow, instead pouring himself some scotch and sitting under **Old Hickey**, thinking about all the **dolls** that look like Roy.

While Celestial's question over what they will do now that Roy is coming home might include whether or not she will reunite with Roy, Andre seems to interpret the question as being purely about how they will move forward with their own relationship. Celestial wants to share the news herself, but Andre fights her for the opportunity, perhaps sensing how things might turn if the married couple discusses the situation on their own. Andre's focus on the dolls further suggests that he feels threatened by Roy and Celestial's past, even as he sits beneath a symbol of his own history with Celestial.



Later that night, Celestial finally calls out to Andre. She tells him to come to bed, and he embraces her. He asks her what her answer is, but she refuses to respond and they go to bed, although they can't sleep. Early the next morning they make love, and Andre accepts this as a sign that Celestial wants to be with him. He tells her they aren't together only because Roy was locked up, and she says she knows. He begs her to marry him and she responds so close that Andre can "taste" her words.

Celestial still won't give Andre an answer about his proposal, but he searches each of her actions for clues that she won't return to Roy now that he is being released. Though we're informed that Celestial responds to Andre's proposal, we're not told what that response is, creating a sense of suspense and tension.



PART 2, CHAPTER 2

Celestial says that she was barely married when she and Roy were pulled apart from each another. She says that marriage is like grafting a limb onto a tree trunk: it can take two years for the plants to fully join. On Thanksgiving, she wakes up wearing Andre's ring, making her a woman with both a husband and a fiancé. She can't bear to subject Roy to another document stating what she believes he already knows, but she also wonders if her refusal to move forward with the divorce papers is cowardice on her part. She thinks about how holidays are measuring sticks against which adults always seem to fall short. She compares the two rings on her hand and thinks also of Roy's **tooth** that sits in her jewelry box.

Celestial's comparison of marriage to the grafting of a limb onto a tree trunk again recalls the symbol of the hickory tree in the front yard, an image that recalls the relationship between Celestial and Andre, rather than Celestial and Roy. Her wearing Andre's ring indicates that her response to his proposal was a yes. While a ring is a typical symbol of love and devotion, Celestial turns her thoughts to a more salient object in her marriage to Roy: his lost tooth that proved his devotion to her from the start.



Celestial's parents live in a mansion built after the Civil War. As a child, passing the house before it was theirs, Celestial worried it was haunted. Franklin told her it was haunted only by the ghost of history and he promised they'd fix it up and live there some day. The white family who lived there couldn't bear to live in an all black part of town, and as such sold it when Franklin, having come into money from his invention, showed up with a briefcase full of cash.

The position of the Davenport house in a predominantly black neighborhood shows the family's commitment to their culture and roots. The white family's leaving, meanwhile, is an example of "white flight," or the evacuation of white residents from a neighborhood that has come to be inhabited by a majority black community.



Celestial reflects on Franklin's dedication to his experiments and his stubborn opposition to her and Andre. While he had initially favored Dre for Celestial over Roy, he can't support the way that Celestial has taken up with Andre while Roy is in jail. On Thanksgiving Day, they arrive at Celestial's parents' house carrying a bottle of scotch, though Celestial had promised to bring two desserts. Her father is putting up Christmas decorations while wearing a shirt that says, "ONLY IN ATLANTA," an entrepreneurial venture Roy had attempted. Her father has four sets of wise men figurines, but he takes out only the black one, Balthazar. Uncle Banks is putting lights on the house. Franklin is less than welcoming to Andre.

As Andre and Celestial climb the stairs of the porch, Aunt Sylvia comes outside. Though technically not married to Uncle Banks, she had been matron of honor at Celestial's wedding to Roy. Sylvia takes Dre inside and Celestial hangs back. Uncle Banks says he didn't tell her parents about Roy, and Celestial thanks him for all his hard work.

They eat dinner at the well-worn heavy oak table, a gift to Celestial's parents from her grandmother, and an heirloom that will eventually be passed down to Celestial herself. Celestial and Uncle Banks can't eat because they both know the truth that hangs in the air. Celestial knows that Uncle Banks deserves thanks and congratulations today for all he's done.

For dessert, they have a blackberry jam cake that Gloria had made and soaked in rum, a treat she'd once given Franklin at the start of their courtship. Gloria can tell that Celestial has something to say, and when she serves the cake she tells her daughter, "Whatever it is, you know I'll always be your mother." When Roy had asked for this dessert as his groom's cake at the rehearsal dinner, Gloria had pulled Celestial aside to tell her that she was happy as long as Celestial was happy. Celestial hopes for the same generosity today.

Celestial raises her glass in a toast to Uncle Banks, announcing that Roy will be released before Christmas. Sylvia, Uncle Banks, and Gloria celebrate, but Franklin says nothing. Andre stands to announce that he's asked Celestial to marry him. Franklin asks her what she said, and Celestial says she said yes. Despite the difficulty of sharing this news, Celestial finds comfort in the truth being out in the open. Celestial tries to argue that the conditions of her parents' marriage were also less than ideal, but her father counters that the situation was different.

Celestial knows that it will be difficult to share the news of her engagement with her father, who has shown more dedication to Roy's incarceration than to Celestial's romantic happiness. The fact that Mr. Davenport wears a shirt reminding everyone of Roy is no accident, proven by the cold way he receives Andre when they arrive. Celestial and Andre showing up with liquor rather than dessert is perhaps an attempt to make their announcement go down more easily.



The fact that Uncle Banks and Aunt Sylvia are not officially married provides yet another example of the way a couple can choose to live in partnership. Sylvia shows warmth to Dre, knowing the way Celestial has struggled with her situation.



While most of the furnishings in the Davenport household are of the finest quality, the well-loved table, where they gathers together to pray and eat, shows signs use and wear. The fact that they still use it evidences their commitment to family.



The cake is a symbol of love between Gloria and Franklin. Gloria also affirms her love and support for Celestial today just as she did years ago at her rehearsal dinner, assuring daughter that her primary interest is Celestial's happiness.



Celestial toasts Uncle Banks first, not wanting to taint their celebration of his hard work, and also knowing that this is the less controversial of the pieces of news she has to share. Even before Andre shares that he and Celestial have become engaged though, Mr. Davenport sees the issues posed by Roy's release because of Andre and Celestial's relationship.



Franklin chastises Andre for taking advantage of a situation where his friend Roy is being held as a hostage of the state. Gloria asks Franklin to apologize, arguing that they raised Celestial to know her own mind. Franklin says it's not fair to punish Roy for being a black man in the wrong place at the wrong time, but Sylvia changes the subject to say that they should all be focusing on the incredible work Banks put in to make this happen. Then she turns to Franklin and tells him it's not his place to insert his opinion about who Celestial should be with.

Mr. Davenport shows no support of Celestial and Andre, instead focusing on their proposal being an additional wrong being done to Roy when he has already suffered so much. Sylvia, a source of strength and support for Celestial all her life, refocuses the attention onto the miracle that Banks has worked, while also chastising Franklin for thinking he has a say in who his daughter married, a responsibility he's previously denied.



PART 2, CHAPTER 3

Since Roy has learned that he will be released, Walter has been sharing non-stop advice. He reminds Roy that Celestial has been living her life all the time that Roy's has been on hold. He tells Roy to think only of the future, rather than the past he left behind. Roy thinks back on how his life was perfectly set up before his sentence with family, work, and home, but Walter recommends Roy think of the world like a newborn baby instead. Roy knows he won't receive a formal apology for the wrongful conviction, but he's surprised that he's not even allowed to exit through the front door of the prison.

Walter's words of wisdom indicate that Roy shouldn't count on anything to be the same as before he went into prison, instead lowering his expectations and encouraging him to experience the world as brand new in order to avoid disappointment. The fact that Roy's exoneration is given little attention by the prison, implies how common the situation might be.



When Roy is released, Big Roy meets him in the parking lot. As a young man, Big Roy had told Roy not to call him if he got arrested, but that was when they thought being arrested had something to do with being guilty. Roy reflects on the woman who accused him, knowing someone attacked her, but knowing it wasn't him. He wonders if she or anyone he knew before would recognize him now.

Both Big Roy and Roy have realized that guilt and incarceration are not necessarily related. Roy is able to feel pity for the woman who was attacked because he doesn't question that part of her story, showing the strength of his empathy even when she has so badly wronged him.



Big Roy tells Roy that he's early, having been released five days ahead of schedule, and Roy says that Big Roy is the one who told him five minutes early is late. Big Roy says he's glad Roy was listening and then asks if he would like to visit Olive, but Roy says he's not ready to confront his mother's grave. Big Roy then asks when Roy will visit Celestial, and Roy says in a couple days, though she doesn't know his date of release had been moved up. When Big Roy asks if Roy knows for sure Celestial is still his wife, Roy replies that he thinks it must mean something that she hasn't divorced him.

Big Roy's first thought is for father and son to visit Olive's grave, again showing her devotion to his wife, but Roy is overwhelmed by being released. Big Roy implies that he knows that something has been going on between Celestial and Andre—or at least that things remain unclear between Celestial and Roy—in his question about whether Celestial is still Roy's wife.



Big Roy says he hasn't seen Celestial since she attended Olive's funeral with Andre. Roy mentions that his cellmate was an older man named Walter who looked out for him, and Big Roy expresses his thanks for anyone who helped Roy. Big Roy tells his son that crime in Elloe has been bad. Someone tried to steal his car, but his neighbor Wickliffe ran the thief off with a pistol.

Big Roy mentioning Andre's presence at the funeral hints at his relationship with Celestial. Roy keeps Walter's true identity secret from his father, perhaps to protect his feelings, not knowing that Big Roy is already aware.



When they arrive home, everything is the same as before Roy went into jail. The house smells freshly cleaned and Big Roy tells Roy that the ladies from church came to prepare the house for his homecoming. Roy asks if there's any church lady in particular, meaning a romantic interest for Big Roy, but Big Roy says it's too soon for that. Big Roy tells him some essentials are on his bed. Roy responds, "Thank you, Daddy," and thinks about how he never called Walter that, though he sensed Walter would have liked it. Together they eat the dishes that the church ladies often served for funerals, balancing their plates on their laps in the living room. Roy says a blessing and Big Roy stifles tears at how Olive only wanted to see this day, and how it's not right that she missed it. They go to bed at seven o'clock.

Every night, Roy chants Celestial's name like a plea. He thinks of her vision board that held pictures of art in the Smithsonian, a cottage on Amelia Island, and an image of Earth from space. The board held no engagement ring or wedding dress. Roy, though, pictured two kids, a boy named Trey and a girl. A year earlier Roy destroyed all of Celestial's letters, except for the letter where she ended the marriage. He takes out the letter to read it again, looking for hope.

PART 2, CHAPTER 4

Celestial reflects that love stories like hers aren't supposed to happen anymore. She thinks back to when she was younger, living in New York City, sure that it had become the norm for black people to date people of other races, to the point that it was almost uncommon for two black people to be in a romantic relationship. In flashback she tells the story of waiting tables and studying art in grad school while Roy was living in Atlanta working a cubicle job that required travel. One day, Celestial waits on a large table that includes a young man whom she thinks will hit on her. Roy is the only black person at the table, and, thinking him to be "that kind of brother," behaves coolly towards him. He believes he hears her accent, but the rest of the table of Georgians think she sounds like a northerner. Upon realizing Roy is there on business, Celestial softens toward him.

Roy asks if Celestial went to Spelman and introduces himself as Roy, her Morehouse brother. He asks her name, and when he says his own middle name, Celestial remembers who he is. They talk to each other outside the restaurant that night. Back in the present, Celestial reflects that they were both alone and adrift, and they both reminded each other of Atlanta.

While much might have changed for Roy since he was imprisoned, his father's house remains the same, granting him a gentle re-entry into regular life. He reflects on how, despite his father-son relationship with Walter, he only calls Big Roy "Daddy"—a term of endearment he knows would have meant a lot to Walter but that Roy denied him, perhaps as punishment for his abandonment. The meal prepared by the church ladies resembling that served at a funeral luncheon reflects how Roy's old life has died and he must start anew now.



Roy hopes Celestial will take him back while simultaneously thinking about how different their dreams were: his mostly focused on family while hers centered on her artistic career and the larger world. His destruction of their letters except the one in which Celestial ended the marriage reflects that this is the only letter that matters; all their good times are no longer enough to keep the marriage alive.



Knowing Roy is coming home soon, Celestial reflects on their history. She thinks about how special it was to connect with someone she'd known when she was younger and to find a young, professional black man. Her initial judgment of Roy reflects her belief that, by surrounding himself with white people, Roy was implicitly rejecting his own racial identity. Upon learning that this is not the case—that the arrangement is strictly business—she is able to relax. The fact that Roy's colleagues are all white further suggests that difficulty and isolation of being a young black professional at the time.



This scene provides backstory for Roy's pet name for Celestial, "Georgia." Celestial reasons that their attraction had to do with their reminding each other of home, an observation that indicates that she might have fallen for someone else from Atlanta if she'd met that person instead—maybe even Andre.



PART 2, CHAPTER 5

In a parallel flashback, Roy remembers the same night outside the restaurant, in which he stands memorizing Celestial's face. She asks him if he wants to go to a bar where her roommate works so they can drink for free. Roy wants to tell her it isn't a problem for him to pay for his drinks, but he agrees to go along and suggests they get a taxi. Celestial tells him he won't get a taxi because of his skin color and the snow coming down. She pays for them to take the subway instead. Roy dislikes public transportation, seeing it as a sign of poverty. He asks Celestial how she can live up in New York, and she says she's paying her dues.

Roy asks Celestial what she's studying and she tells him about the **dolls** she makes. She says the company is called Babydolls and he tells her it sounds like a strip club, noting that he has a degree in marketing. He recommends the name Poupées, which is French for dolls. Celestial questions whether he knows French and mentions her Haitian college supervisor, giving Roy pause. Roy admires the snow as Celestial points out her apartment. Suddenly noticing something, she says "not again" and starts running down the street. When Roy follows her, he realizes they're chasing a burglar. Celestial trips but Roy pushes ahead, catching the young man as he stumbles. The thief asks Roy what would happen if he had a gun and kicks Roy in the face hard enough to loosen a **tooth**.

The thief gets away, and, instead of continuing the chase, Celestial stops to make sure Roy is okay. She tells him he is her hero and recommends that he go to the hospital, but he refuses. Instead, they go to her apartment and wait two hours for the police to show up. Later, while fitting Roy for a bridge, a dentist tells Roy that the **tooth** could have been saved if he'd gone straight to the hospital.

PART 2, CHAPTER 6

In a flashback to the Sunday before Olive's funeral, Andre goes to visit Roy in prison while Celestial stays with Big Roy. There, Roy asks Andre to take his place carrying his mother's casket at the funeral. They shake on it. When Roy points out Walter as his biological father, Andre is shocked. This surprises Roy, since it proves that Celestial kept his secret. Andre reflects on the complicated relationships both he and Roy have with their fathers. Andre's father, Carlos, met another woman at a trade show and left Andre and his mother to start a new family with her. Before leaving the prison, Roy reminds Dre that Celestial is his wife, but then claims that he's just kidding.

Here we get Roy's alternative perspective on the night, showing the way Celestial is willing to take charge of their plans. Despite her family's wealth, she is living the life of an artist and, perhaps because of the financial safety net she has, is not self-conscious about suggesting a dive bar where they can drink for free. Roy, on the other hand, having come from nothing, is anxious to prove his worth, arguing that he can pay for his own drinks as well as a taxi.



When Celestial begins telling Roy about her art, he immediately involves himself by suggesting an alternate name. This foreshadows the ways in which he will later become involved with the business side of the company. Celestial subtly alludes to her affair with the professor here, though Roy will not understand what really happened for years. This scene also gives more background to the story of Roy's lost tooth, underscoring it as a reminder of their early courtship and the lengths to which Roy would go to protect Celestial.



Roy's giddiness at Celestial's admiration and his refusal to take her advice causes him to lose his tooth. He has sacrificed for Celestial, but ultimately did not need to do so. The tooth—a symbol of their relationship—forebodes unnecessary pain.



Roy's friendship with Andre is solid enough at the point of Olive's death that he asks his friend to stand in for him as pallbearer. Andre visiting Roy in jail on this trip, rather than Celestial, foreshadows the later decision to send Andre to break the news of their relationship. Though Andre's genuine shock at the news of Roy's biological father causes Roy to believe Celestial told no one what he shared with her, it is later revealed that Celestial told Olive before she died.



At Roy's request, Celestial sings a hymn at Olive's funeral. In the limo on the way to the cemetery, Celestial takes Andre's hand, prompting Big Roy to ask that they not do that. He says he loved Olive in ways they can't imagine. All three linger after Olive's casket is lowered into the ground, and Celestial and Andre urge Big Roy to return to the church for the luncheon. Big Roy tells Celestial that she'll need to be the one to care for and support Roy now, doing all that Olive used to do for him. Celestial says she understands, but Big Roy implies that she does not. Big Roy picks up a shovel to fill Olive's grave with dirt himself. He tells Andre and Celestial to go and he'll meet them later.

In the limo, Celestial talks about how, although she hasn't thought about or touched another man since Roy was put in jail, seeing Big Roy's behavior made her realize she doesn't know what it means to be truly committed to someone. She and Andre return to the church and eat the meal prepared by the congregation. They sense people talking about them and stay long enough to realize Big Roy isn't going to return to the church. They move to a bar, where they drink screwdrivers out of plastic cups and sense the other patrons speculating about their relationship.

Celestial tells Andre that Olive would hit her when she went too long without visiting Roy. She says that her face stung from that slap all through the funeral service. Andre tells Celestial she's drunk and she reaches for his hand. He reminds her that everyone is watching them and asks for their check. Celestial complains of the burden of visiting Roy in prison, where she's treated like a delusional victim who could do better.

The two arrive at a hotel, where a woman refers to Andre and Celestial as newlyweds because of the way they hold one another. Celestial invites Andre into her room and, though he protests at first, he steps inside. They sit on the bed, looking at one another, before Dre moves closer and Celestial says they've always been together. They kiss, and Dre notes that their lives change in that moment.

Big Roy senses that Celestial holding Andre's hand in the limo might be a sign of something going on between them. This moment clarifies Celestial's earlier statements to Roy about the extreme devotion Big Roy displayed at Olive's funeral. It is clear through Big Roy's insistence that Celestial doesn't understand what taking care of someone really means that he suspects she does not have the same devotion to Roy that he had to Olive, nor that Olive had to her son.



The start of Celestial and Andre's romance becomes clear, revealed as something borne of grief and slow-burning desire. The disparity between Big Roy's dedication to Olive and Celestial's dedication to Roy displayed on this day causes Celestial to question her entire marriage, while the small town atmosphere of Eloe make Andre and Celestial feel conspicuous even before they cross any romantic lines.



Olive expressed her displeasure at Celestial's level of commitment to Roy. With Olive gone, Celestial feels her slap as a visceral reminder of the increased level of responsibility falling on her now. Celestial shares with Andre the difficulty she has being the recipient of people's pity when she visits the prison, but is unable to connect her own feelings to those that Roy may experience for the rest of his life when people learn he was once in jail.



Andre and Celestial's physical behavior has betrayed their mutual desire to those around them, and in this moment they finally act on their feelings. Andre's note that Celestial made the first move is a means to deflect some responsibility and perhaps assuage his guilt about the relationship.



PART 2, CHAPTER 7

Back in the present Roy looks at his family bible, which contains a small family tree that does not include Celestial's name. At Walmart Roy runs into Davina Hardrick, a woman with deep Eloë roots whom he remembers from high school. Davina invites Roy over for dinner. He arrives early, saying hello through the door, and she asks for a moment to fix her hair. He looks at the streets so familiar to him from his childhood, but they don't feel like home.

When Davina finally invites him in, Roy admires her figure. She asks if he's still married and he replies that he doesn't know. Sitting with Davina, Roy thinks of his wife. He recalls the time she found a receipt for two pieces of lingerie, having only received one. He'd resolved the situation by promising Celestial that he loved only her.

Davina reveals that her father ran off before she was five years old. Looking out the window at the house next door, Roy recalls his French teacher, Mr. Fontenot, who once lived there and with whom Roy grew close. He promised to help sponsor a trip to Paris for Roy if he learned the language and also gave him a book by James Baldwin. Three things prevented Roy from going on the trip, however: Big Roy thought him being the only black kid in the group could cause trouble, the cost was still too high, and Mr. Fontenot was gay; Roy's parents worried he was taking too much of an interest in Roy. Roy asks Davina what happened to Mr. Fontenot and she replies that he passed away in the early nineties, and that Roy knows how.

Roy tries to say a blessing before the meal, but he chokes up and Davina takes over. She simply says, "Bon appétit," and Roy again thinks of Celestial, who always said the same. Davina asks for a third time if Roy is still married. Roy tells her that he was married when he went to jail and that Celestial hasn't divorced him, but that he hasn't seen her in two years. She asks Roy if he knew her son Antoine Guillory when he was in prison. Roy says no, but then Davina mentions his nickname, Hopper. Roy remembers a young man named Hopper, but again says he didn't know him.

Celestial's absence from the family bible suggests that Olive and Big Roy never accepted her as a permanent part of the family. Roy, hungry for socialization, accepts Davina's invitation, though it's clear that she has more romantic intentions than he does. Roy reflects that Eloë no longer feels like home, suggesting how much his time in prison has changed him.



Despite admiring Davina's figure, Roy remains preoccupied with Celestial and reminded of what can be assumed to be a time he was caught cheating. His excuse implies that he loved Celestial while still feeling desire for other women.



Davina's father having run off echoes both Roy and Andre's experiences with their biological fathers. Roy's story of the school trip reveals more ways in which his race and class limited his opportunities growing up. James Baldwin was a famed black writer and social critic who was also gay. Despite Mr. Fontenot supporting Roy's intellectual development, Roy's parents' discomfort with their bond underscores the prevalence of homophobia in their community. Davina implies that the teacher died from AIDS complications.



The fact that the attempt to say grace, a prayer of thanks, chokes up Roy indicates the difficulty of being thankful in a moment where so much hardship is still being worked through. Despite Davina's hospitality, Roy can't get his mind off Celestial. Roy keeps his knowledge of Hopper a secret from Davina because he doesn't want to spoil the evening by telling her that her son is having a hard time in jail.



Davina tells Roy that she won't pour him another drink because the area has become dangerous and she doesn't want him walking home drunk, but Roy insists he can hold his own after where he's been. She pours them another drink, puts on some music and sits on the couch with him. She asks if he is okay and he says he is not. She consoles him, and he leans in to kiss her. They go to bed and apologize to one another for what they've lost: a son and a mother. Roy senses the pity in her making love to a man newly out of jail, and he wishes for his old power, as a young man on the rise. In her arms, however, Roy feels taken care of. She calls him "baby" and he asks if she has a condom. Then he begs her not to wear it and Davina relents, telling him she's safe.

Davina's care for Roy is evident in her initial refusal to make him another drink. When Davina asks if Roy is ok, he finally breaks down, finding an opportunity to be vulnerable with someone. Roy feels emasculated by his time in prison, but he appreciates the kindness that Davina shows him, allowing him to lower his guards. Davina's treatment of Roy like a baby echoes the baby dolls that Celestial makes with Roy's likeness.



PART 2, CHAPTER 8

Celestial reflects on how her mother Gloria taught her to pray as a child in Atlanta, though her father was "godless." They said their bedtime prayers, but when her mother left, Celestial would recant and "keep" her soul for herself. Though she stopped attending church with her mother as a young woman, Celestial continues to say her prayers into adulthood. She prays for Roy and for forgiveness. She thinks of Roy's **tooth** in her jewelry box and its strong energy.

Celestial continues to believe that prayer can have a positive effect on her life. Alongside these more typical Christian beliefs, though, Celestial can also sense an almost cosmic energy coming from Roy's tooth—a symbol of their relationship that continues to hold sway over Celestial.



PART 2, CHAPTER 9

Roy spends about thirty-six hours at Davina's house, finally leaving when she has to go to work. Big Roy waits for his son on the front porch, asking if he's alive when he finally returns. Roy wonders whether he's cheating on Celestial or just his memories of her. The way Davina treated him helped to salvage his spirit. Big Roy tells Roy that he needs to be better about keeping in touch, considering all that's happened. Roy apologizes, and Big Roy tells him that he needs to call Celestial today.

Roy soaks up all of the love and care Davina has to give him but fails to think about the fact that his father might be worrying about his not coming home, in an area where he's experienced discrimination before and where crime has only gotten worse. Roy, still fixated on Celestial, fears the answer he'll receive when he tries to find out if they are still married.



Andre calls Big Roy's house and is surprised when Roy answers. When he says, "We weren't expecting you for a few more days," Roy bristles at the use of "we." Andre tells Roy that he's driving down in a couple days to pick him up. Big Roy tells Roy he better get to Atlanta himself to see if he's still married. The phone rings again, but Roy knows it's Celestial and doesn't pick up.

Andre's use of the word "we" indicates to Roy that Andre and Celestial are now a couple. Instead of waiting for Andre to come pick Roy up, Roy decides he better go talk to Celestial himself, hoping that he might have a better result if he communicates with her directly.



Roy cleans up and changes his clothes with the intention of going to Atlanta. Big Roy tells his son he can take his car, since he can get rides from his friend Wickliffe. Big Roy makes them mediocre salmon croquettes for breakfast. Roy says, “Bon appétit,” and Big Roy says grace. He tells his son he needs a haircut before he goes and offers to cut it himself, reminding Roy that he used to cut hair on weekends when he was little.

Though Big Roy never cooked for himself while Olive was alive, he’s had to adapt to her absence, an adjustment similar to the way Roy may need to change his expectations of the way his life will be from this point on. Big Roy’s offer to cut his son’s hair foreshadows the business that father and son will open later in the book.



Roy tells Big Roy about trading goods in prison. In an effort to get six dollars for a pear, he sold a garbage bag to another inmate, though he didn’t realize why the man wanted it. The man then used the garbage bag to hang himself, and when Roy tried to share the pear with Walter he refused, knowing the true cost of the fruit. Big Roy insist it was not Roy’s fault. The phone begins to ring again in Big Roy’s house, but neither man answers. Roy wants to see Celestial in person to talk to her. Big Roy offers his son money for the trip, but Roy declines.

Roy’s story underscores the desperation and horror of life in prison, while Big Roy’s response highlights his love and devotion to his son. Their continued refusal to answer the phone is prompted by Roy’s desire to talk to Celestial in person.



Big Roy reminds Roy about the account in his name that Olive opened when he was born and contributed to over the years. He looks for the bankbook in Olive’s dresser drawer and her scent floods him with memories. With all of the deposits and withdrawals over the years, Roy guesses he’ll have a little more than \$187, enough to get him to Atlanta. On the bottom of the stack of papers, he finds the journal Mr. Fontenot had given him, on the last page of which he’d written, “Dear History, The world needs to get ready for Roy Othaniel Hamilton Jr.!”

Olive is able to provide for her son even in death. The message Roy finds inside is bittersweet, full of all that Roy believed was possible before his dreams were compromised by his wrongful imprisonment.



Big Roy cuts his son’s hair. He tells Roy about courting his mother, and how ornery Roy was as a child. Saying Roy will always be his son, Big Roy asks if he ever felt like he didn’t have a father. Roy can tell that Big Roy knows about Walter, and the latter admits that Olive told him and Celestial told her. On Celestial’s last visit before Olive died, she asked to be alone with her. When she left, Big Roy gave Olive some morphine and she told Big Roy that Othaniel was in prison with Roy. Two days later she gave up her fight. Roy wonders why Celestial would do such a thing and Big Roy says he has no idea.

Big Roy cutting his son’s hair echoes the way Celestial cut Andre’s hair before Roy’s trial, and also foreshadows the barbershop Big and Little Roy will later open together. Their bond is so strong that Roy can sense that Big Roy knows about Walter being his cellmate. Big Roy blames Celestial for Olive’s death because she gave up her grasp on life just after she received the news of Roy’s cellmate.



PART 2, CHAPTER 10

Andre tells the story, in flashback, of when he was sixteen and thought his mother Evie was dying of lupus. Full of anger, he went to his father Carlos's house to fight him. He was resentful to find Carlos showing more affection towards his half-brother than Andre ever received himself. After stopping Andre from hitting him, Carlos asked what his son wanted. Dre asked his father to say that he didn't want Evie to die. Carlos said that of course he didn't want that, and that Evie was a remarkable woman for many reasons—including raising Andre. Carlos sent her flowers in the hospital. After that, Andre and Carlos's relationship improved.

On his way to pick up Roy, Andre wishes he could talk to Carlos. He thinks about Mr. Davenport and how he's been more loyal to Roy than to Celestial in this situation, and how this mirrors the whole black race's support of Roy following his wrongful conviction. He even compares Roy to a "man just down from the cross." When Andre ran into his father earlier that year, Carlos had said that Andre was welcome in his home any time, and Andre decides to take him up on this offer.

Andre stops at Carlos's house and reminds him of what he'd said about visiting. Though Carlos is just getting dressed, he welcomes Andre, who spots the Christmas tree and knows that none of the gifts beneath it are for him. Carlos's wife Jeanette asks Dre if he'll join them for breakfast and he declines, calling her ma'am. Dre asks where the kids are, and Carlos says they're away at college, Oberlin and Duke, arriving home that night.

Andre tells Carlos that he's getting married. His father asks who he's marrying, and Andre is surprised he can't guess it's Celestial. Carlos asks about Roy, assuming he was guilty, and Andre defends him, informing Carlos that Roy has been released. Carlos says that it's a bad idea for Andre to try to marry Celestial and Andre asks for advice about the decision he's already made. Carlos defends his lack of contact with Andre, saying it was Evie who put Carlos out because he'd had an affair, and he needed to stay loyal to his new wife.

This story provides insight into Andre's complex feelings about his romantic relationship with Celestial when she is still technically committed to Roy. While there's no child involved, Roy is in a vulnerable position, much like Andre and his mother were when his father left them. Though their relationship improved after Carlos showed support for Evie during her illness, Andre still didn't feel as close to his father as did before he left.



Andre's comments suggest that Roy has become a martyr-like figure in the black community and a catalyst for broader activism. Having just informed us of his history with his dad and their less-than-perfect relationship, Andre still needs some fatherly advice. He knows that his surrogate father, Mr. Davenport, is devoted to Roy's plight and will not listen to him openly.



Though Carlos seems at first put out by Andre's arriving unannounced, he lets Andre in when Andre reminds him of his offer, showing that he has become a man of his word. Dre's sense of being second to Carlos's other kids is apparent in the way he eyes the gifts under the tree and resents that his children are allowed to go to any school they please.



Even Carlos seems surprised at the news that Andre has seen fit to propose to Celestial while she's still married to Roy. This, however, isn't the advice Andrew wants to hear from his father, who, in taking up with another woman while still married to Evie, took the opposite course in his own life.



Carlos tells Andre that he has to be honest with Roy. Guessing that Roy will get physical, he advises Andre to take the blows and then get on with his life. Carlos wishes Andre well with Celestial. As Andre gets ready to go, Carlos tells him to come back on Christmas and they'll have a gift for him under the tree. He adds that he never forgets about Andre and lifts the St. Christopher medal necklace off of his head to give to his son. He tells Andre that St. Christopher is for "safe travels and *buena suerte* for bachelors." He regrets that Andre never got to meet his Puerto Rican grandmother, and forces the medal into Andre's hand, squeezing his fingers so hard it hurts.

Aware now that Andre's decision is made, Carlos offers the best advice he can. With Andre effectively in the wrong, he must accept Roy's inevitable anger. Carlos takes off a medal that was given to him by his own mother in the hopes it will protect his son and give him good luck in his endeavor; this action is clearly emotionally painful for Carlos, whose comment about Andre not meeting his grandmother reveals Carlos's regret about missing much of his son's life.



PART 2, CHAPTER 11

Roy notes that goodbyes aren't his strong suit, recalling that he didn't even say goodbye to Walter when he left prison. Instead, while Walter was out of their cell, he left him a note in which he finally called Walter "his father" and referring to himself as Walter's son, a gift he knows will please him. He leaves a picture of him and Celestial.

Roy's lingering resentments had previously barred him from referring to Walter as his father. The care Walter provided for Roy in prison, however, prompts Roy to offer this letter as a kindness and suggests that much of Roy's anger towards Walter is gone.



Roy goes to the cemetery to pay his respects to Olive. He reflects that it used to be called the "colored cemetery," and that many of the graves are for young men; Walter once told him that black men could expect only two fates—being "carried by six or judged by twelve." The grave marker bears both Olive's name and "Roy," and for a moment Roy thinks it refers to him before realizing it is the future marker for Big Roy. Roy weeps on Olive's grave, like he did the day he received his sentence in court. He thanks her for all her love and care and says goodbye. As he stops to fill the tank of the car, he thinks he hears his mama's voice tell him, "Any fool can up and go." He fills in the rest of her meaning and heads to Davina's house, but she's not home.

Roy understands that the prevalence of graves for young men in a traditionally black cemetery reflects their lack of opportunities and the way prejudice shapes their lives; they can expect to die young or be sentenced to prison. Roy seeing his father's name on the grave marker provides another echo of the way in which Roy is experiencing the death of his former self. Olive's words prompt Roy to more thoughtfully consider what he had with Davina.



Roy goes to Walmart to see Davina. He apologizes to her for leaving town abruptly and not sticking around to see what might develop between them. She asks if his plan was to return to his wife all along, and he avoids her question, instead thanking her. She curses him, though he insists he cares about her. She tells him she wants two things: that he not spread rumors about her around town and that he doesn't come knocking on her door again.

Roy never technically lied to Davina about his intentions to reunite with Celestial, though his actions were arguably misleading. Davina is understandably annoyed by Roy skipping town, and her request indicates she predicts that things won't work out with Celestial but doesn't want to be Roy's second choice.



PART 2, CHAPTER 12

On Thanksgiving, Gloria asked Celestial if her decision to be with Andre is based on love or convenience. Celestial views the situation as anything but convenient. Andre rehearses what he'll say to Roy and Celestial looks at **Old Hickey** out front, thinking about how it's been there longer than anything else in the neighborhood. Andre gets ready to go and Celestial hugs him. She shakes with nerves and reiterates to him that their love is real. Andre tells her love should be convenient, too. She asks Andre if he thinks Roy will come back with him and Dre isn't sure.

Celestial thinks back to Gloria telling her that she's like her father, impulsive and little bit selfish, but that not enough women have these qualities. Andre empathizes with Roy's position, knowing he won't be able to walk back into his professional life and that he'll probably hope he at least has his wife to rely on. Andre sees it as his job to take that fantasy away from Roy. Both he and Celestial feel guilty, however: Andre for taking Celestial from Roy, and Celestial because she's always had an easy life. Dre tells her that she deserves all she has, and that there are no accidents. They kiss and Dre leaves for Louisiana.

Celestial seems to need to reassure herself that her relationship with Andre is based on love. Old Hickey serves as a touchstone for their relationship, and in looking at the tree she is reminded of their deep, abiding connection. This helps Celestial understand that her love for Andre is not just about convenience.



While Celestial's strength and dedication to her goals might be unusual, her mother cherishes these qualities in her daughter. Andre and Celestial reassure one another that they are doing the right thing and shouldn't be made to feel guilty for following their true feelings.



PART 2, CHAPTER 13

Roy writes to Walter to say he's in Mississippi on his way to see Celestial. When he went to the bank he discovered that Olive had started adding the money she would have put into his commissary account into his bank account when she found out Celestial was providing him more than enough money. She put more than \$3,500 she made in bake sales into Roy's account. He tells Walter that he hopes he'll have two days with Celestial without Andre there so that they can figure out what to do. He tells Walter he's putting some money on his books.

Roy's writing to Walter suggests that their bond is strong enough to endure even now that they are not living together. Olive's wise planning was perhaps based on the assumption that Celestial wouldn't fully embrace Roy upon his return. Roy reveals his generosity in sharing some of the benefits of Olive's financial foresight with his biological father, even though Walter never supported Olive or Roy.



PART 3, CHAPTER 1

Andre's plan is to make it clear that he and Celestial aren't abandoning Roy, even as he breaks the news that they are now engaged. They'll help him get on his feet in Atlanta. Celestial had wanted Andre to ask for forgiveness, but Andre refuses, preferring to ask for understanding. Andre drives carefully in Louisiana, knowing his nice car combined with the color of his skin make him suspicious to law enforcement.

Andre's refusal to ask Roy's forgiveness underscores that he does not believe what he and Celestial are doing is wrong. His apprehension about driving in Louisiana reveals that he is all too aware of the ways black people are discriminated against, especially in light of Roy's conviction.



Andre has trouble finding the house without Big Roy's car parked out front. When he finally does, Big Roy invites him in to eat and tells Andre that Roy has already left for Atlanta. Andre doesn't have cell service and asks to use Big Roy's phone, but Big Roy says service was shut off because he was having trouble making ends meet. Big Roy tells Andre he'll have to stay the night and offers him a drink. He then says it took a year after Olive died for him to be able to sleep through the night.

Andre asks after Roy, and Big Roy says he's been doing as well as can be expected. Andre asks why Roy left when he knew Andre was coming for him, and Big Roy says he knows what Andre was coming to tell Roy. Andre says that it's between him and Roy, but Big Roy says the matter is between Roy and Celestial. Andre claims to know where things stand between him and Celestial, but Big Roy argues that Andre doesn't know where things stand between Celestial and Roy.

The phone rings and Andre asks about it being disconnected. Big Roy says he lied, and mocks Andre for thinking he looks like someone who can't pay his bills. He then asks that Andre not use the phone while he's staying there so that Celestial has time to work out her feelings for Roy without his influence. He adds that if Celestial needs to talk to Andre, she knows the number.

PART 3, CHAPTER 2

Celestial used to think she saw Roy around when he was locked up and she became accustomed to his ghost. On Christmas Eve, Celestial goes to work after sending Andre to Atlanta to talk to Roy. Her store is located in a high-end area of Atlanta, and her assistant Tamar has already arrived. Celestial regards Tamar as a movie version of herself, younger and more beautiful. Tamar makes miniature quilts for the **poupées**, but they don't sell often because they're so expensive. Tamar gave birth to a son a week before receiving her master's degree, and Celestial notes that Tamar enjoys being "slightly to the left of respectability."

The **dolls** remaining in the store are some of the less conventionally beautiful ones, some purposefully flawed because Celestial believes that children need something not quite perfect to treasure. Only one perfect poupée remains, which Tamar dresses as an angel and hangs from the ceiling. They open the store and many people shop, but few buy anything. Celestial sends Tamar home to be with her son, saying she can handle the store alone. She tells Tamar to come by that night for a holiday toast and hands her a holiday bonus.

Roy has taken Big Roy's Chrysler to Atlanta, causing Andre's trouble in locating the house. Big Roy manipulates Andre into staying in Eloë and not contacting Celestial, preventing him from warning her that Roy is on his way. Big Roy invoking his dedication to Olive is meant to imply that Andre's dedication to Celestial doesn't compare.



While Andre remains strong in his dedication to Celestial, Big Roy explains that that his feelings are only one side of the love triangle and that Roy and Celestial need to figure out their feelings on their own.



Big Roy gives Andre a hard time for thinking that he might be financially hard-up, implying an assumed judgment of the way he lives. Big Roy's comment that Celestial will call Andre if she wants to talk to him underscores that he is not the only person dealing with a sensitive situation and should respect her autonomy.



Celestial's doll store is a clear continuation of the plan she and Roy developed together. "Ghosts" of both Celestial and Roy exist in the store: Roy in the form of the poupées and Celestial in the form her assistant, a doppelganger for a younger Celestial. Tamar, though, has gone a slightly different path in life; while she, too, is growing an art career, she opted to have a baby just as she was finishing up school, a reversal of the decision Celestial made while she found herself pregnant in college.



Celestial remains committed to each of the dolls being one of a kind, even if that means having slight imperfections. While Roy had wanted the dolls meant for children to eventually be mass-produced, Celestial's commitment to their being handmade is one way her realization of her dream has diverged from Roy's plan.



Celestial is almost ready to close the store several hours later when a well-dressed man walks in looking for a gift for his daughter for her birthday. He complains that the **dolls** all seem a little off. Celestial says they're all one of a kind, and the man tells her she can save that lie for the white people. He asks about the angel hanging from the ceiling. Out of the corner of her eye, Celestial sees what she thinks is a ghost of Roy across the street. Celestial reverts her attention to the customer and begins to wrap up the angel doll.

At the last moment, Celestial reopens the box and holds the **doll** to her chest. The customer asks if she's okay and she says she's not. She tells him that her husband is getting out of prison and adds, half-heartedly, that this is good news. He tells her that his marriage fell apart when he was away on business for just six months, and as such Celestial shouldn't get her hopes up for an easy reunion. He asks for the doll but Celestial ushers him out and closes the store early.

PART 3, CHAPTER 3

Roy reminisces about collecting keys as a kid, which he thought about every day in prison. He drives into Atlanta and notes that there are no skyscrapers, only sky-reachers. He knows Celestial's store is in the neighborhood he recommended she base it in. He drives there and looks at her store window from across the street for a while, reflecting that Celestial has worked hard and done well for herself. He sees Tamar and mistakes her for Celestial before realizing his error. He notes that Celestial has cut all of her hair off, and watches her help customers until he gets too cold and goes to take a nap in his car.

Roy returns to watch Celestial through the window as she helps the male customer. He thinks he feels her eyes on him eventually and tries to communicate to her to come outside, but Celestial looks away. Roy feels the keys in his pocket, one of which he hopes will let him into their home. When Mr. Davenport deeded the house to Celestial, he stipulated only that **Old Hickey** couldn't be cut down. Though the house was only in Celestial's name, she insisted it was a wedding gift to both of them.

Celestial believes she is seeing another ghost-Roy across the street, but this will later be revealed to actually be Roy himself. The man's joke about Celestial saving her theory about imperfect dolls for the white people echoes Olives earlier jab that white people are the only ones foolish enough to pay for Celestial's dolls.



Celestial declining to sell the doll at the last minute mirrors the way she couldn't bring herself to seal the box containing the doll for the mayor earlier in the book. Both times the dolls are associated in her mind with Roy; sealing the doll in the box reminded her of Roy being locked in prison, while selling the doll would be akin to accepting that he is really no longer part of her life.



Roy's thoughts about his childhood key collection reflect the intensity of his desperation to be free from prison. Despite the distance between them, he clearly respects and is proud of Celestial. Much like Celestial thinks she sees a ghost of Roy, Roy sees Tamar almost as a ghost of the Celestial he knew before he was incarcerated.



While Roy and Celestial had previously been able to communicate almost telepathically because they knew one another so well, that is no longer the case. Thoughts of keys again return, this time drawing his focus to the housekeys in his pocket that he hopes will let him into his house, rather than out of his cell.



PART 3, CHAPTER 4

Celestial knows her house so well that she can tell something is different about it even before she opens the door. She calls out when she enters, and a voice replies from the dining room. Roy tells her that she didn't change the locks. He helps her with her groceries and she tells him Andre is on his way to pick Roy up. Roy says that Dre isn't who he wants to talk to. Roy hugs Celestial and Celestial feels dizzy. He tells her that he missed her and has a lot of questions.

Roy leads Celestial to the living room, noting the different wall color and the African artifacts that Celestial's parents bought her as gifts from their travels. Roy asks Celestial to tell him whatever she needs to say. He asks if she loves him and she can't speak, so he says that she must love him because she didn't divorce him. He wants to hear the truth from her and he asks her if she is with Andre. Celestial replies that it isn't yes or no. Roy lays his head in her lap.

Roy interprets being able to enter the house as a sign that he still stands a chance of reconciling with Celestial, because she, like the door, is still open to him.



PART 3, CHAPTER 5

Roy notes that Celestial's looks are different—she's sadder, and her scent has changed too. He reflects on how welcoming and comforting Davina had been when he first got out. Celestial asks how he feels and he tells her she could say she's glad to see him. She tells him she's happy he's been released and asks if he's eaten, but she doesn't have anything to cook. Roy asks again about Andre and Celestial confirms that she is with Andre now. Roy says he doesn't care what happened while he was gone, but he does care about what their future is. Celestial lets Roy kiss her all over, and he says he'll forgive her if she asks him to.

Someone rings the doorbell and both Celestial and Roy jump. Tamar is at the door with her baby Jelani, saying he wants to see his uncle Andre. She asks if Celestial is all right and then sees Roy. Celestial introduces them before inviting Tamar inside and disappearing into the kitchen. Tamar tells Roy that Jelani taught himself to crawl and Roy asks if the baby takes after her husband. Tamar says she's single but that the baby looks very much like his father.

Roy asks if he can hold the baby and picks him up. He thinks about whether this is about how old he was when Big Roy made him his junior. Celestial returns with champagne flutes, and Celestial and Tamar talk about fabric while Roy entertains Jelani. He thinks about how his child with Celestial would be four or five now, and how Celestial wouldn't be with Andre if they'd had their baby.

While Big Roy's house went virtually unchanged in the time that Roy was in prison, Celestial's has changed quite a bit, suggesting that their marriage is not as steadfast as is Roy's relationship with Big Roy. When Celestial is unable to verbally confirm her love for Roy, he optimistically fills in what he hopes she feels. Celestial refuses to tell him if she's with Andre because she knows the situation is more complicated than a simple yes or no.



Like her house, Celestial's appearance is different, suggesting that the changes that have occurred in the time Roy has been gone are significant. Even when Celestial confirms that she is with Andre now, Roy continues to hope that their relationship might be reconciled moving forward, willing to overlook anything that happened in the time he was away. His brief recollection of the comfort of Davina, however, foreshadows his ultimate return to her.



The arrival of Tamar and Jelani is significant for the way it provides Roy and Celestial with an image of what their life might be like if they'd had the baby Celestial was pregnant with at the time of Roy's arrest.



Though Roy's own father ran away when Olive was pregnant, Roy believes that Celestial wouldn't have started an affair with Andre if she and Roy had had a child. Beyond thinking about his own potential child, he is reminded of the love and dedication that Big Roy showed in accepting Roy as his own son.



PART 3, CHAPTER 6

As Tamar is leaving with Jelani, Celestial imagines that Tamar is Roy and Celestial's successful daughter. When Celestial takes out her phone, Roy asks her not to call Andre yet so that he can speak his piece. He guides her hands around his face, asking if she recognizes him, and she nods and kisses his hands. He leads her through the house and understands why Andre raced out of town to see Roy first, to prevent her from making love to him. Celestial reflects that she is going along more out of a sense of duty and pity than love. As Roy leads her to the bedroom and removes her clothes, she feels that he is a stranger.

Celestial asks Roy if he has a condom and Roy is disheartened by the question. She tells him they need protection and traces a scar on his ribs where, he tells her, he was stabbed. He begs her to trust him, telling her how he accidentally killed a man by selling him a garbage bag. When he confesses that he is in pain, Celestial says she can tell. He asks if she's reluctant because she believes he has an STD or because she doesn't want to get pregnant. She doesn't answer and braces herself for what she feels has been inevitable since Roy entered the house. He tells her he could "take it" if he wanted to, but he won't.

PART 3, CHAPTER 7

Roy reflects on the fact that Davina didn't insist on wearing a condom. Instead, she opened her home and herself to him. He thinks that if he'd come with condoms, Celestial would have assumed that Roy had been sleeping around, and he storms off to the futon in the sewing room. He is disturbed by all the **poupées** with his face on them. He can't sleep and goes to Celestial's room, but he can't bear to try the knob in the event she's locked him out.

Roy goes back to his room and calls Davina. She asks if he's all right, and he tells her he doesn't know what to do. She tells him to sleep and asks if Andre and Celestial were together when he arrived, since she once saw them getting drunk at the bar in Eloë together. Celestial had leaned across the bar and told Davina, "I'm a terrible person," and then she and Andre had left. Roy tells Davina he remembers her son Hopper from prison, and Davina asks if he was doing okay. Roy says he was, and that's why he didn't remember him. He thinks, "Only in Atlanta," when he imagines Andre sleeping at his father's house and himself surrounded by **dolls** resembling him.

Rather than imagining Jelani as her own child, Celestial imagines a future in which she and Roy had a daughter who is as lovely and accomplished as Tamar. Even so, her and Roy's instincts are the same: to imagine a life that could have been, but that they cannot have. Despite still having affection for Roy, Celestial's physical discomfort reflects that the relationship has been forever altered.



Celestial's insistence on a condom is upsetting to Roy because it suggests she doesn't trust him. To gain her trust, he reveals his worst secret from his time away, and while Celestial sympathizes, she does not change her answer. In his anger, Roy threatens Celestial, implying he is strong enough to rape her, an outburst that could evidence increased aggression caused by Roy's time in prison.



While Davina opened herself to Roy, Celestial has closed herself off. Roy being surrounded by dolls made in his image are an extra slap in the face, a reminder of what he and Celestial used to have, their potential child, and his perception that Celestial has capitalized on his story while not personally supporting him.



Davina is once again a source of comfort for Roy, further setting the stage for their eventual relationship. Roy deciding to lie to Davina about her son's well-being is a gift to her, of sorts, and another example of the way people try to smooth things over with one another by telling lies that paint a rosier truth.



PART 3, CHAPTER 8

Andre sleeps on the couch and Big Roy on his recliner chair, as if Andre needs to be watched to prevent him escaping back to Atlanta. As Andre is falling asleep, Big Roy asks if Andre wants kids. Andre says yes, and Big Roy says Roy wants children, too, and that he deserves “that new beginning.” Andre says he isn’t sure Celestial wants kids and Big Roy speculates that she just thinks she doesn’t. Big Roy mentions that Olive had been afraid that if Big Roy had biological children of his own, he would forget about Roy, and so she had her tubes tied without even asking him.

In the morning, Big Roy tells Andre that Andre wants Celestial, but he doesn’t need her like Roy does. Big Roy recommends that Andre stay away for a year, and then if Celestial still wants him, Big Roy won’t object. Andre claims he does need her, but Big Roy responds Andre doesn’t know what need is. Andre says Big Roy doesn’t have the right to talk to him like this. He asks if he has to go to jail to have a right to be happy, but Big Roy says Andre needs to understand that Roy is his only son.

Big Roy equates having children with a new start in life. The conversation between him and Andre shows the many assumptions that are made about the decision to have children, and the compromises that must occur when people have differing opinions on the topic. This reflects the novel’s broader theme of the responsibilities and seriousness of parenthood.



Andre resents the fact that, because he hasn’t been to jail, people are making it seem as though he doesn’t have as much a right to happiness as Roy, whom everyone pities for the wrongs that have been done to him. Big Roy, meanwhile, reaffirms the bond between father and son in an attempt to help Andre understand why he is fighting for Roy’s chance to be with Celestial.



PART 3, CHAPTER 9

Roy wakes up the next morning, still with the **dolls** staring at him, though they seem less mocking now. Celestial asks if he’s hungry and he says he will be after bathing. Celestial has put his bag of clothes in the bathroom, which he sees as a sign of hope. He roots around in the cabinets, trying to find signs of Andre, but it’s clear he doesn’t live there. He scrubs himself.

Roy joins Celestial in the kitchen. She prepares breakfast for them and Roy asks that they say grace. He asks that their marriage be blessed and Celestial responds, “Bon appétit.” They eat, but Roy can’t taste anything. Celestial says she has to go to work, but Roy wants to talk before Andre returns home. Celestial says he already knows everything, but Roy protests that he knows what happened, but not what Celestial wants moving forward. He asks if he can gather his things, and Celestial replies that she donated his clothes and boxed up the rest of his belongings in the garage. She asks if he needs anything in particular and Roy thinks that all he wants is his **tooth**, but that he doesn’t want to tell Celestial because she’ll think he’s being sentimental.

A night’s sleep has softened the glare of the dolls, a symbol of the past and the disconnect Roy and Celestial have experienced. Roy naively reads Celestial’s every gesture as a sign that she wants to remain married to him and that she hasn’t fully committed herself to Andre.



Celestial continues her habit of saying “Bon appétit” before each meal. Roy’s commitment to finding his tooth represents his desire to reclaim a symbol of his relationship with Celestial and the sacrifice he once made for her. Additionally, his body is perhaps the one thing that has not been taken away from him in this ordeal.



Roy watches Celestial do the dishes and can tell by the set of her shoulders that she's decided what will happen between them, in the same way that the jury decided Roy's fate. Roy reflects that he has never before violated a woman, yet that the thought had crossed his mind for an instant the night before; he sees this as a mark of what prison did to him. Roy goes to the garage, where he sees the boxes labeled "Roy H., Misc." The impersonal nature of the label makes him think of this bag of belongings returned to him when he left jail. He drags the boxes out under **Old Hickey** to go through them. Celestial watches from inside.

Roy finds a letter from his mother and sits down to read it. Olive tells him that she's put this in a letter because he won't like what she has to say. She tells him she's proud of him, and that she's happy he's found someone to marry. She asks if Roy is sure Celestial is the right woman for him, however, and requests that he and Celestial visit so she and Big Roy can meet her before he makes his decision. She tells him she's had a dream that has caused her to worry about him.

Olive had tried to save Roy, but he wonders from what. Having not found the **tooth** in any of the boxes, he believes it must be lost. He spots his fancy tennis racket in the garage and calls out, saying that Celestial is not the only terrible person. He mimes a backhand and accidentally hits Celestial's car. Having hit it once though, he continues. Celestial emerges to ask if he's okay and Roy asks how he could be okay. She asks what he wants her to do and he suggests she spend some time in prison to understand where he's coming from. He continues beating the car with the tennis racket, but he doesn't do much damage. He notices an ax on the wall and he uses it to break the windows of the car. Celestial repeatedly silences the car alarm.

Roy approaches Celestial and he asks if she thinks he's dangerous now. He asks Celestial if she cares for him and promises to leave her life forever if she doesn't. She responds that Andre should be home any minute, and Roy says he didn't ask about Andre. She refuses to say whether she loves Roy or not and he bounds across the yard. He touches the ax to the wood of **Old Hickey**, thinking about how it bears nothing of use and that Celestial and maybe Andre are the only ones who could love such a tree. He begins to chop at the tree, asking Celestial to speak up to tell him if she loves him or not.

Roy feels though his life is out of his control, identifying the way that Celestial now has the power in their marriage much like the state had the power to put him away and then to release him. The deep, lasting effect of incarceration is clear in Roy's guilt over momentarily thinking he could take advantage of Celestial if he wanted to.



The letter from Olive reveals that all of Celestial's concerns about Roy's mother not liking her were warranted. Olive was convinced that Celestial was too different from Roy for them to be happily married. She thought Celestial seemed like the type of woman Roy thought he should be with, rather than a woman he knew he would be happy with. Though Olive doesn't tell Roy what her premonition is, it's worth noting that both Olive and Celestial have intuitive visions that prove true in during the novel.



Roy saw the tooth as a symbol of his relationship with Celestial and the way he protected her, and as such is angry upon thinking that she threw it away a thought. An accidental act of aggression prompts Roy to let out some of his anger at the situation and the way he feels he is being misunderstood by Celestial. Celestial's silencing the alarm suggest she does not want to get the police involved.



Celestial remains cool-headed despite the volatility of the situation, more concerned with not drawing the attention of the neighbors than she is with calming Roy down or protecting herself. Celestial has avoided most of Roy's questions about whether or not she still loves him, and his frustration at this causes him to take action to force her to respond. Roy notably takes his anger out on the tree that has always been important to Celestial and Andre, and as such serves as a symbol of their relationship.



PART 3, CHAPTER 10

Andre arrives home to find Roy chopping away at **Old Hickey**. Roy lodges the ax in the tree. Celestial goes to Andre and he asks her if she's okay. Roy answers for her that she's fine, and Andre asks how he and Roy can squash the conflict. Roy apologizes for hurting the tree and asks what it was that made Andre decide to pursue Celestial, disregarding his respect for Roy. Andre tells him that's not how it happened, but Roy responds that it's between him and Andre. Andre insists it is between the three of them. The neighbor pretends not to eavesdrop from across the street.

Celestial sits on the bench beneath **Old Hickey** between the two men. Andre puts his arm around her and Roy tells him that he doesn't need to mark his territory in this way. Celestial argues that she's not territory. Roy says he's trying to be fair, but he is fixated on his innocence and Andre and Celestial's apparent lack of sympathy for his situation. Andre says he knows this could happen to anyone. Celestial says they thought and talked about him every day.

Andre tells Roy that he has to accept that he and Celestial are together now. Roy tells Celestial to go inside, but she refuses, saying this is her life too. Andre says they don't keep secrets and Roy tells him to ask Celestial about last night. Her expression is blank, and they talk her into letting them speak privately. After she disappears inside, Roy accuses Andre of pursuing Celestial because she was convenient "pussy." Offended, Andre stands and tells Roy that's enough.

Andre says that Celestial doesn't belong to Roy and if he doesn't understand that, Roy should punch him and get it over with. Roy says that Celestial doesn't belong to Andre either, and Andre turns to walk away. Roy hits him from behind. Andre thinks about how Carlos told him to take the hits. They struggle with each other. Andre wonders if Roy learned to fight this way in prison. Andre falls to the ground and Roy tells him to apologize, his foot poised in the air.

Andre can't bring himself to apologize to Roy. He's not sorry for his love of Celestial, but he feels pity for all of the people who suffer in different ways, especially Roy. He reflects on how someone always pays for what happens, even if it's not the person who deserves to.

Celestial's allegiance seems to clearly lie with Andre upon his arrival. Andre tries to resolve the situation and Roy calms down enough to apologize for attacking Old Hickey, but he still addresses his feelings of Andre having betrayed him. Roy blames Andre entirely for his marriage being in tatters, but Andre knows that his relationship with Celestial started only when she made the first move. He doesn't tell Roy this, knowing it would hurt his friend, showing that Andre is still hoping to protect Roy.



Andre placing his arm around Celestial in front of Roy echoes the couple holding hands in Big Roy's company earlier, as well as Big Roy's asking them not to. Since the beginning of their relationship, Roy has seen Celestial as something he might possess, while Andre has seen Celestial as someone who would never be possessed by anyone—a sentiment more in line with Celestial's own strong conception of self.



While Roy continues to argue the details of why Andre and Celestial are together, Andre indicates that those details don't matter once two people have decided to be together. Love isn't something that you can reason your way out of. The implication of Roy's comment about the previous night indicates that they slept together, despite the fact that they did not consummate their reunion. Roy, still trying to save the marriage, begins to make insulting comments to get a rise out of Andre.



Roy's attack on Andre isn't a fair first shot, reflecting his immense anger and perhaps belief that Andre does not deserve an honorable fight. When Andre wonders if Roy learned to fight this way in prison, it's clear again that Andre, like Celestial, has made assumptions about how Roy has been changed by incarceration.



Andre's refusal to apologize resonates with his refusal of Celestial's earlier request that they ask Roy to forgive them. Instead of being sorry to Roy, he is sorry for him, refusing to accept that his love of Celestial could be wrong.



PART 3, CHAPTER 11

Celestial wonders why she left Roy and Andre outside. By the time she gets to the window, the men are wrestling each other on the lawn. She worries Roy will kill Andre and she emerges, shouting, “November 17!” Roy pauses but says that it’s too late for safe words. Celestial threatens to call the police. Roy asks if she’d really do that and tells her to go ahead. Andre begs her not to and she puts the phone down. Celestial goes to look at Andre’s injured eye and Roy draws attention to the fact that he stopped short of kicking Andre. Celestial asks him to look at what he *did* do, and Roy asks her the same question.

The police arrive anyway and ask Celestial if everything is all right. Celestial begs them not to hurt Roy and the cop asks who the men are. She refers to them as her husband and her neighbor, saying they had an accident but all is fine now. After the police leave, Roy tells Celestial that he’s hurting all over. She asks if he needs to go to the hospital and he says that he needs to sleep in his own bed. Roy says it’s all too much and bangs his head against the trunk of **Old Hickey**. Celestial blocks him from doing it again. He asks how all of this happened and what Andre and Celestial want him to do.

Andre tells Roy they’ll help him get set up and presents the option of Roy staying at Andre’s house, which Roy refuses. Celestial thinks about how before Roy returned he had seemed more like an idea than a real person for the last two years. Celestial asks Roy if he would have waited on her for five years and Roy says this wouldn’t have happened to Celestial in the first place. He tells Celestial that all he has to offer her is himself, which is better than he had for her a year ago. He asks Dre what he has to say for himself, and Dre says that Celestial already knows how he feels. He adds that there was a moment when they could have talked, but Roy opted to fight instead.

Roy asks if Celestial has anything else to say. She thinks about Big Roy at Olive’s funeral, and how that taught her about what true love was. Roy asks if this was a crime of passion or convenience, and Celestial thinks about how desire doesn’t work the way it did when she was younger. Her love for Andre is everyday, but significant. Roy asks how they ended up here, and Andre tells Celestial not to let Roy pressure her. He returns to his own house, warning Celestial that Roy might have a concussion, so she shouldn’t let him fall asleep.

Celestial attempts to use their safe word to stop the two men fighting, but the word lacks power now that so many promises she and Roy made to each another have been broken. Celestial’s threat to call the police is an extreme one that she immediately regrets, realizing that none of them want Roy to suffer more. Roy wants credit here for not going so far as to permanently injure or kill Andre, showing a desperate attempt to refocus the severity of his actions.



Roy’s fear and desperation, especially at the threat of returning to jail, are evidenced by the way he bashes his head into the tree, a symbol both of Andre and Celestial’s love and the history of oppression in this area. At a loss, Roy asks for an answer about what he can do, reflecting that he has little control over his own life anymore.



Andre again seeks to reassure Roy, offering to let him stay in Andre’s house, but, as Celestial predicted, this is insulting to Roy. While Celestial claimed to think of Roy every day, she realizes now that she had allowed Roy to become just a memory. Roy continues to try to wrap his mind around the situation but Dre refuses to answer his questions, reflecting the seemingly irreparable break in their relationship created by the fight.



Celestial reflects again on Big Roy’s dedication to Olive, and how her dedication to Roy does not compare and never has. Celestial’s earlier concerns about her love for Andre being a matter of convenience rather than passion come to life again when Roy suggests the same, but Andre, assured of his place in Celestial’s heart, steps away from the argument. His mention of the concussion betrays continued care for Roy despite all that has happened.



Celestial cleans Roy's wounds. He refuses to go to the hospital, saying he knows Celestial can care for him. She asks what he was looking for in the boxes, and he admits he was looking for his **tooth**. She says she still has it and Roy says that's because she loves him. She struggles to keep him awake and Roy says that would be a horrible tragedy—to be released from prison, win his wife back, and die in his sleep. He asks if he has actually won her back, but she doesn't answer.

Celestial's caring for Roy's wounds shows her continued concern and love for him as a friend, even if that's not what Roy wants. When Celestial gives Roy his tooth back, he again reads this as a sign that she loves him and always has, though Celestial refuses to confirm his assumption.



PART 3, CHAPTER 12

Celestial arrives at Andre's house at 1:00 a.m., wishing him a merry Christmas. He hands her a glass of scotch and asks her to lie beside him, but she says she needs to walk around. Andre's ribs ache and he asks if Roy is still alive. She tells Andre that they can't even imagine how much Roy has been through. Celestial lies beside Andre and tells him that she married Roy for a reason, and that she can't un-love him. She says that she and Dre have so much, but that Roy has nothing. She says she felt the sting of Olive's slap on her cheek the whole time she talked to Roy.

Roy's appeals to Celestial to remain married have worked well enough that Celestial feels obligated to give the relationship another chance. Still, the fact that Celestial's recommitment is based on pity for Roy and guilt at the promise she made to Olive doesn't seem like the right reason to move forward with a marriage.



Andre tells Celestial to go and reminds her that she's the one making the choice. He asks how she could do this to him and she says that she's doing it to herself as much as to him. He tells her he needs her, but she says she has to do this. He thinks back on a time when Celestial owed him nothing, no wrongs done between them. He holds onto her tight, knowing that when his muscles fail, she will be gone.

Instead of fighting Celestial's choice, Andre accepts it, hopeful that time will prove her decision wrong. Still, Andre is not perfect, selfishly looking at the choice as affecting only him and not Celestial and Roy, too.



PART 3, CHAPTER 13

Roy wakes up to Celestial being his "Georgia girl" again. They wish each other a merry Christmas and he thinks about how he doesn't have a gift for her. She says that his being safe is gift enough. All he wants for Christmas is his **tooth**, so she goes to her dresser and takes out the box holding the tooth, asking if he remembers that night. She tells him he rose to the occasion and he says he liked saving her. She says the thief could have killed Roy, but Roy says there's no use worrying about things that didn't happen—or things that did happen, for that matter, because today is a new day.

When Celestial finally procures the tooth, she and Roy recall how strong their bond once was. Roy's insistence on taking on the role of protector for Celestial, despite her not being the type of woman who wants to be protected, shows how they remain somewhat incompatible. While they better see the danger of that night looking back, they also know that what matters is how they will move forward. Roy has insisted on this point all along, and it seems that Celestial has finally been convinced.



They make breakfast together and Roy notices the ruby shining on Celestial's right hand. Celestial answers the phone and wishes her parents happy holidays, though she tells Roy she isn't ready to bring anyone else into their situation yet, so they won't go over to their house for dinner. Roy tells Celestial how Christmas is his favorite holiday. As a child Big Roy would receive only an apple, and so, when Roy was young, every Christmas morning he and his father would share an apple together. Celestial asks why he never told her that, and Roy says he didn't want her feeling sorry for him when that was one of his favorite memories.

Celestial makes Roy toast in the same way Olive used to do it, which Roy recognizes as a gesture toward making him feel at home. They share an apple together. She says, "Bon appétit," and Roy feels like they might actually be able to make up. He thinks about Big Roy, all alone on this day. Roy asks why Celestial told Olive about Walter being his cellmate, since Big Roy said the news had killed Olive. Celestial claims it didn't happen that way, that Olive was struggling because she thought the pain medication would kill her faster and she wanted to stay alive for Roy. She says that when she shared the news with Olive, she'd said God was funny for sending Othaniel to the rescue. Big Roy had seen Olive as giving up at the news, but Celestial believed Olive was able to let go knowing her son was taken care of.

While Celestial showers, Roy calls his father. He thinks Big Roy sounds sad, but his father says he just has some indigestion from eating a plate brought by one of the church ladies. Roy tells his father that it's okay to like the woman, and Big Roy jokes that his son is trying to marry him off so he won't have to return home to take care of him. Next, Roy phones Davina to wish her a merry Christmas. She asks him if what's between them is something or nothing. Roy answers, "Something?" He tells her that he found out he's still married, and she responds that she didn't ask about that. He confirms that their relationship is something, but he can't figure out what.

Celestial emerges from the bathroom in a negligée. She lies on the bed and calls Roy to her. He tells her he wants to be real with her, and he tells her that when he was home in Eloë he slept with a woman. Celestial says she's not mad because she's not a hypocrite. He asks how she couldn't care, and she says she's trying to be an adult. He tells her he called Davina a few minutes ago and that it wasn't purely sexual. Davina had helped him figure out who he was post-prison. Celestial kisses his body but Roy tells her she doesn't have to. Though she feels rigid under his hands, she offers herself, trying to make things right.

Roy notices the ring that Celestial is wearing, but doesn't ask about it, afraid to break the brittle bond they're beginning to rebuild. The Christmas memory Roy shares with Celestial is another example of a secret he has kept from her out of fear that she would judge the poverty in which he grew up.



Roy appreciates Celestial's attempts to make him feel comfortable. Celestial's summation of Olive's response to the news about Walter again reflects the ways in which one story can have two very different interpretations, neither of which is necessarily right or wrong. Celestial's view of the situation presents Olive as a deeply-committed mother, who felt free to die and end her pain only when she knew that Roy had another parent in close proximity to care for him.



Big Roy hides his emotions as he believes men should, a trait he passed down to Roy. Roy gives his father permission to like another woman in Olive's absence, but Big Roy's devotion to Olive has not yet subsided. This refusal on Big Roy's part contrasts with the way Celestial allowed herself to explore a romance with Andre while Roy was incarcerated. Roy's call to Davina, meanwhile, at a moment when he thinks he might still save his marriage, reflects that he may not be as committed as he appears.



Celestial's attempt at intimacy reflects the genuine effort on her part to make things work. When Celestial seems to brush off Roy's affair, Roy seems to want Celestial to be more upset as evidence of her love for him. Understanding that to chastise Roy for his actions would be hypocritical, Celestial moves forward to see if they still have the same sexual attraction to one another, despite her clear nerves and discomfort.



In prison, Olive had visited every weekend. Once she seemed different, probably aware of the cancer but not ready to tell Roy yet. She told him she knew the truth about his innocence, but wanted to hear from his own mouth that he didn't do it. He feels deeply offended but tells her he's not a rapist and that he doesn't want to talk anymore. She tells him she believes him, but he thinks only about all the things he didn't like about her in that moment.

Back in the bedroom, Celestial pulls Roy to her, telling him she wants him to be okay. He thinks about how he couldn't prove his accuser wrong, and Celestial tells him not to worry about that because the wrongful accusation and its repercussions are over. Roy tells her nothing is ever over, and that he can feel her fear of him when he touches her. She says she's scared to start over. He promises her he will never force himself on a woman, even if Celestial asked him to. He kisses her ring finger, absent of his ring, and she tells him she tried. He tells her to sleep, but neither can close their eyes against all that darkness.

EPILOGUE

Roy writes to Celestial saying that he was saved in the dark of their bedroom. He expresses his shame at hurting Andre, and says he knows Andre hadn't fought him back with all his strength—making him wonder if Andre hadn't thought him worth the fight. He says he was jealous of Celestial's care for Andre when it seemed like she didn't care for Roy, and he was even jealous of the tree. In that moment, he felt willing to kill himself and Dre. He has signed the divorce papers, sure it's the right thing to do, with Davina as notary. He asks if **Old Hickey** survived.

Celestial writes to Roy that she hopes they can get to know each other again some day. She tells Roy that she and Andre are in no rush to get married and are happy the way they are. Celestial doesn't want to be a wife and Dre doesn't want to marry a woman who doesn't want to be a wife. She tells Roy they had a specialist come look at **Old Hickey**, who said the tree was 128 years old and that it should survive. She tells Roy she is pregnant, adding she hasn't forgotten what they went through years ago and asking if Roy will pray for her.

In sensing Celestial's hesitancy to make love, Roy is reminded of the way that Olive asked for a confirmation that her son didn't do the crime of which he was accused. In this moment, he feels the same sense of uncertainty and fear radiating from Celestial, their dynamic changed because of both his threat the night before and Celestial's uncertainty about Roy after this much time apart.



Celestial does not tell Roy that she wants him or that she needs him, only that she wants him to be okay. In this statement, Roy understands what is motivating Celestial's actions. When he calls out the fear he can sense in her, Celestial claims it's only a fear of starting over, but Roy knows it's more than that. Roy and Celestial, while close to each another physically, can see that the distance between them once and for all.



The novel returns to the epistolary form in its last pages, resuming the letters between Roy and Celestial. Roy's first letter makes it clear that he and Celestial are now officially divorced. He expresses regret over his actions, providing his reasoning for having fought Andre in the way he did. Despite Old Hickey's being a symbol of the love between Andre and Celestial, he asks after it's well-being, showing that Roy and Celestial have found a way to accept their situation.



Celestial's statement that she hopes she and Roy might get to know each other indicates an understanding that they both are quite different people than they were before Roy went to jail. The survival of Old Hickey reflects the strength of Celestial's relationship with Andre. Celestial does want a child after all, but is finally able to have the child on her own terms.



Roy writes to say he and Davina are getting married. They're not trying to have a baby. He'd like to be a father, but Davina has a troubled son and doesn't want to start over. Roy doesn't want to risk what he has with Davina for a dream that might not fit him any longer. Roy tells Celestial he will pray for her family. He tells her he goes to the spot under the bridge each morning to pray and that he and Big Roy have gone into business as barbers. He prays that she will find peace, something "you have to make" yourself. These are words of wisdom from Walter, whom Roy still visits. His life is good, though a different version of good that he expected. When he talks about picking up and leaving Eloë, Davina smiles knowing he won't ever leave and he smiles back. He finally feels like he is home.

Roy has decided to start a new life with Davina. He has adjusted his professional goals, finding contentment in a simpler life in which he gets to work with his father back in his hometown. Though the aspirational side that wants to leave Eloë still lives inside of him, Davina is able to take his big talk in stride, knowing the strength of their bond and that they've created a solid home together. Roy's final letter reflects an acceptance that neither he nor Celestial can completely control their fates, but that it is still within their own power to find happiness.





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