

# Deacon King Kong



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES MCBRIDE

James McBride was born and raised in New York City. His father, an African American, died of cancer just before McBride was born, and so his mother, a Jewish immigrant from Poland, raised him. When he was born, McBride was one of eight children, and when his mother remarried, he became one of twelve. McBride grew up in the Red Hook housing projects of Brooklyn, and his experience has influenced much of his writing, including *Deacon King Kong* (2020). In the mid-1970s, McBride attended Oberlin College, where he received his bachelor's degree. He then immediately earned a master's degree in journalism at Columbia University, which he received in 1980. McBride's writing career took off in 1995 after the publication of his autobiography and memoir titled *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*. The book details McBride's upbringing in New York and received critical acclaim for its reflections on race in America. It is now considered a classic in the genre. McBride's next book was a novel, *Miracle at St. Anna* (2002), which tells the story of four African American soldiers fighting on the Italian front in WWII; Spike Lee later directed a film adaptation of the novel. McBride's greatest achievement in fiction didn't come until 2013 with the publication of *The Good Lord Bird*, which won the National Book Award in 2013. Later, in 2020, Ethan Hawke and Jason Blum adapted it for television. McBride has also published two other works of fiction, *Song Yet Sung* (2008) and *Five-Carat Soul* (2017). He has also written a work of experimental non-fiction—*Kill 'Em and Leave: Searching for James Brown and the American Soul* (2016). Currently, McBride is the Distinguished Writer in Residence at New York University.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Deacon King Kong* is set in late-1960s Brooklyn, New York and examines the racial tensions present during that time. The 1960s were a difficult time for African American people in the United States. Malcolm X, a prominent civil rights leader, was assassinated in 1964. Not long after, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968. These killings led to widespread despair among African American communities who understandably felt that their fight for equality had been stifled. Often, characters in *Deacon King Kong* will fatalistically refer to the oppressive forces in society meant to keep Black people down, and it's likely that the political assassinations of the 1960s contributed to their pessimism. Indeed, open and aggressive racism was common in the 1960s, even in multicultural areas such as Brooklyn. Additionally, the late

1960s saw the rise of heroin in America's major cities. Various mob associations—including the Italian mob in New York—introduced heroin to the most vulnerable populations in the inner cities. Heroin use rose significantly over the next decade, claiming many lives in the process. In *Deacon King Kong*, Deems, one of the main characters, sells heroin to his own community at the behest of Joe Peck, a local mob boss. The novel grapples with the legacy of drug distribution and drug use among minority communities during this period.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Deacon King Kong* is part of a strain of contemporary American fiction that looks back on historical events as a way of exploring the racial divide in the country. It is part of a contemporary tradition that includes the novels of Colson Whitehead such as *Harlem Shuffle* (2021) and Esi Edugyan's [Washington Black](#). Obvious precursors to *Deacon King Kong* include works by Toni Morrison, particularly [Beloved](#) and [The Bluest Eye](#), both of which are works of historical fiction and tackle the history of racism in America. McBride also examines race in America in many of his other works, including *Miracle at St. Anna*, which tells the story of four African American soldiers fighting on the Italian front in WWII; and *The Good Lord Bird*, a novel about an enslaved person who becomes an abolitionist. In addition to being a serious work of historical fiction, *Deacon King Kong* is also a work of farcical comedy. Its slapstick humor is more akin to what is normally found on the stage (Shakespeare) or the screen (The Three Stooges) than the novel. However, one obvious precursor is the fiction of Mark Twain. Another is Kurt Vonnegut's aptly titled *Slapstick*, which uses humor to examine difficult subjects like death and grief.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Deacon King Kong
- **Where Written:** New York, New York
- **When Published:** 2020
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary American Fiction
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Brooklyn, New York in 1969
- **Climax:** Sportcoat visits Deems in the hospital and almost smothers him to death after Deems treats him cruelly.
- **Antagonist:** Joe Peck and his associates
- **Point of View:** Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Musically Gifted** In addition to being an acclaimed author,

James McBride is a skilled saxophonist and composer. For several years, he played as part of the “Rock Bottom Remainers,” a charity supergroup made up of published writers including Stephen King and Barbara Kingsolver.

**Presidential Acclaim** Former president Barack Obama listed *Deacon King Kong* as one of his favorite books of 2020.



## PLOT SUMMARY

In the Causeway Projects, an impoverished section of late-1960s Brooklyn, Sportcoat, an elderly deacon, shoots Deems Clemens, a young man and vicious drug dealer. Seemingly, the act is unprovoked, and everyone in the Causeway (or “the Cause”) thinks Sportcoat—who is also an alcoholic—may have gone crazy. They know Deems’s reputation and think it likely that Deems’s associates will likely kill Sportcoat for his actions. A young, African American detective named Jet Hardman witnesses the shooting while working undercover, disguised as a janitor. Hartman’s job is to spy on Deems in order to gather information on Joe Peck, an Italian mobster who is responsible for introducing heroin to the Cause. As such, Jet spends much of his time by a flagpole that is part of the Cause’s central plaza where Deems does the majority of his selling.

One day, while watching Deems, Jet sees Sportcoat walk up to him with a gun in his pocket. Jet is concerned but doesn’t want to blow his cover. Sportcoat begins talking to Deems about getting back into **baseball**. Sportcoat was Deems’s former coach and doesn’t understand why Deems quit the game when he was so talented. At first, Sportcoat amuses Deems, but he quickly gets on Deems’s nerves. When Deems tries to dismiss Sportcoat, Sportcoat pulls out his gun and aims at Deems’s head. As he does so, Jet yells a warning to Deems, who is able to move just enough so that the shot isn’t fatal—Sportcoat hits Deems in the ear. Everyone in the plaza flees the scene, fearing danger and the police. However, when Sportcoat looks down at Deems, he has a sudden change of heart and decides to spare his life. Shortly after the shooting, the police arrive, though by the time they get there, the only people that remain are Jet and Deems. Deems is then rushed to the hospital.

In the aftermath of the shooting, the police send officers to the Cause to find the shooter. Potts, senior member of the force, leads the investigation. Despite being white, he is more sensitive than most to the concerns of the predominately African American residents of the Cause. Potts questions a woman named Sister Gee about the identity of the shooter. Sister Gee is the leader of the Five Ends Church, the most important social institution in the Cause. Sister Gee likes Potts, but she cares too much about her community to tell him the truth. She thinks handing Sportcoat over to the police will only make matters worse. Meanwhile, Sportcoat himself seems to

have forgotten the shooting took place. When his best friend, Hot Sausage tells Sportcoat what he’s done, he doesn’t believe him. He cannot imagine why he’d shoot Deems. Instead of worrying about the police or violent retaliation, Sportcoat spends his time doing two things: drinking and talking to his late wife, Hettie. Sportcoat drinks a special brand of moonshine known as “King Kong,” which his friend Rufus Harley makes. While drunk, Sportcoat often sees an imaginary version of Hettie who died a few years before the start of the story. Although the initial cause of her death is unclear, it eventually becomes apparent that Hettie drowned herself at the nearby docks. After Hettie’s death, Sportcoat was left to raise their son, Pudgy Fingers, who is thought to be intellectually disabled, by himself.

Usually when Sportcoat sees Hettie, the two of them argue about a missing Christmas Fund. Hettie, as a member of the Five Ends Church, was in charge of the Christmas Fund the church uses to buy gifts for the children of the community. After her death, Sportcoat was unable to find out where she stored the funds, leading to some anger in the community. This upsets Sportcoat, who doesn’t want the other residents of the Cause to think poorly of him. He cares about his community and makes a living by performing odd jobs for its residents. One such resident is Mrs. Elefante, an elderly Italian woman who lives near the Cause. Mrs. Elefante is the son of Tommy Elefante, who runs a smuggling ring out of the docks near the Cause. Although Tommy Elefante is no pushover, his criminal activities are relatively benign. The goods he smuggles into the Cause and its neighboring communities are all items that would normally be legal, such as TVs and cigarettes. He does not smuggle drugs and despises what they’ve done to the community. In fact, he repeatedly turns down an offer from Joe Peck to smuggle heroin, even though it would allow him to make a lot of money and retire.

However, early in the novel, Elefante happens upon a different money-making opportunity. A man known as “the Governor” tells Elefante about a small statue named the Venus of Willendorf that was in the possession of Elefante’s father before he died. The Governor knows this because he was an old friend of Elefante’s father—and he gave Elefante’s father the statue. Apparently, the Venus is worth millions of dollars and could make both men rich if they find it. Elefante desperately wants to find the statue because he dreams of retiring and getting away from a life of crime. He hopes to one day find a wife and settle down, but feels he is running out of time. Unfortunately, Elefante has no idea where the Venus could be. Then, one day not long after the shooting, Elefante runs into Sportcoat. Sportcoat says to Elefante, “I hope God holds you in the palm of His hand,” the motto of the Five Ends Church. This catches Elefante’s attention, because the Governor previously recited a poem to him that used the same phrase in relation to the Venus. Elefante wonders if the Five Ends Church has

something to do with the Venus.

While Elefante searches for the Venus, Sportcoat goes about his normal routine, while narrowly avoiding death. A man named Bunch Moon, who works for Joe Peck, has sent a man named Earl to hurt Sportcoat for shooting Deems. However, every time Earl gets close to Sportcoat, something thwarts his efforts. Meanwhile, Sportcoat remains safe and oblivious. After Earl fails for a third time, Bunch recruits a different hitman to carry out the job. Around the time the new hitman is supposed to arrive, Sportcoat, having realized he did shoot Deems, decides to make amends with Deems. In order to secure a safe meeting with Deems, Sportcoat sends Hot Sausage to talk to him. Hot Sausage finds Deems at the Causeway docks with a girl named Phyllis who is apparently new in town. Deems gets mad when Hot Sausage interrupts his date to ask him to meet with Sportcoat. However, before their conversation can get far, Phyllis pulls out a gun and shoots Deems, one of Deems's men, and Hot Sausage. Evidently, Phyllis is the new hitman. Hot Sausage goes down immediately, but Deems, who is hit in the arm, manages to get into the water. Sportcoat, who's been hiding underneath the dock, drags him to safety.

Meanwhile, Potts continues his investigation. He speaks with Sister Gee, who continues to be unhelpful, though she and Potts become increasingly infatuated with each other. In the meantime, Sportcoat hides out at Rufus's place, and Hot Sausage and Deems recover in the hospital. Sportcoat spends his time drinking and arguing with Hettie about the Christmas fund, which he still hasn't found. Hettie also berates him for his constant drinking. In hopes that he'll find the Christmas fund, Sportcoat decides to visit a woman named Sister Paul. Although she now lives in an old folks home, Sister Paul is one of the founding members of the Five Ends Church. Before he departs from Rufus's place, Sportcoat also swears off drinking.

Although Sister Paul doesn't know the location of the Christmas Fund, she does give Sportcoat other valuable information. Apparently, the Five Ends Church was built by Elefante's father after Sister Paul helped get him out of a difficult situation. His only stipulation in paying for the church was that he wanted to hide a small object in one of its walls. Although Sportcoat doesn't know it, that object is the Venus.

Sportcoat also goes to visit Hot Sausage and Deems in the hospital. However, Deems is still angry with Sportcoat and treats him cruelly. At first, Sportcoat is his normal self; he acts jovially and tries to get Deems to return to baseball. Eventually, though, Deems upsets Sportcoat, and Sportcoat responds by suffocating him. Sportcoat tells Deems that he knows now why he shot him: it would be better for Deems to die young and healthy than old and miserable after a life of crime. Ultimately, Sportcoat lets up before Deems dies, but he tells Deems never to come near him again.

Not long after the events in the hospital, Sportcoat tells Elefante that he should go see Sister Paul. Elefante, who is now

dating Melissa, the Governor's daughter, does as Sportcoat suggests. Sister Paul tells Elefante and Melissa about her relationship with Elefante's father and the location of the Venus. Elefante, Melissa, and Sportcoat go to the Five Ends Church and find the statue. Elefante thanks Sportcoat for his help and calls him "Mr. Sportcoat," which fills the old deacon with great joy.

Roughly two years after finding the statue, Sportcoat's funeral is held at the Five Ends Church. Many people attend the funeral, and the church has received some much-needed upgrades, all of which Elefante has funded. Most members of the Cause never saw Sportcoat after the shooting at the docks—only Hot Sausage has some insight into the last years of his life. Hot Sausage tells Sister Gee that Sportcoat managed to maintain his sobriety for the rest of his life. The last time Hot Sausage saw Sportcoat, he was walking into the water with a bottle of King Kong. Sportcoat wanted to drink it, but he didn't. As he made his way into the water, Sportcoat told Hot Sausage to take care of some **flowers** that he planted for Hettie near the Five Ends Church.

Meanwhile, Deems returns to baseball. He manages to make a minor league team, and people expect that he will move up to the major league. Also, Elefante and Melissa get married, and Elefante finally begins to live a new, crime-free life. Additionally, Sister Gee and Potts start a romantic relationship with each other. The novel ends as Sister Gee takes the Staten Island Ferry to go see Potts while thinking about Sportcoat and his impact on the community.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Sportcoat** – The novel's protagonist, Cuffy Lambkin (whom everyone calls "Sportcoat,") is an old deacon who attends the Five Ends Church and acts as the Cause's community **baseball** coach. He is also a notorious alcoholic who often forgets his actions because he is so intoxicated. At the start of the novel, while in one of his drunken stupors, Sportcoat shoots and injures a local drug dealer, Deems Clemens. Deems used to be on Sportcoat's baseball team and was his finest player before he started dealing drugs. Nonetheless, the two of them were on good terms and no one—not even Sportcoat himself—can figure out why Sportcoat shot Deems. While intoxicated, Sportcoat often has conversations with his deceased wife, Hettie. They frequently discuss the missing Five Ends Christmas fund, which the church uses to buy presents for the community's children. Hettie, who was in charge of the fund, is the only person who knows where it is; Sportcoat wants to find the fund because he knows how much it means to the community. Although Sportcoat is not always a model citizen, he loves his community and wants its residents to thrive. In fact, Sportcoat makes a

living by performing odd jobs around the community, such as planting **flowers** and unloading crates. In particular, he spends a lot of time gardening for Mrs. Elefante, the mother of Tommy Elefante. At the end of the novel, Sportcoat undergoes several important transformations. Most notably, he quits drinking and finally comes to terms with Hettie's death. He also figures out why he shot Deems: to prevent the young man from going down the same bad path that he went down when he was a young man. When Sportcoat tells this to Deems, it causes Deems to reform his life. The novel closes with Sportcoat's funeral. Hot Sausage, Sportcoat's best friend, was the last person to see Sportcoat alive; he tells Sister Gee that Sportcoat died after wading into the water with a bottle of King Kong in his hand. Sportcoat wanted to take a sip of the liquor, but he didn't—meaning he kept his promise to remain sober for the rest of his life.

**Deems Clemens** – Deems Clemens is a former **baseball** player who has since become a vicious drug dealer who sells heroin in the Causeway Projects. Deems is capable and intelligent, and he believes selling drugs will allow him to elevate his social and economic status in a way baseball never could. After Deems is dismissive toward Sportcoat's suggestion that he return to baseball, Sportcoat shoots him in the ear, wounding him and taking him off the streets. While recovering, Deems takes stock of the men around him and tries to figure out the best way to move up the drug-dealing ladder. Notably, Deems's perceptions and predictions about those around him prove true throughout the novel. He thinks Lightbulb will betray him, and he does. Similarly, he believes that Bunch and Earl are useless to him, and they are. However, Deems is caught by surprise when, Haroldeen a woman who seduces him, turns out to be an assassin Bunch hired to shoot him. Deems survives this second shooting, though he's injured and must return to the hospital. Eventually, Deems has a change of heart about dealing drugs after Sportcoat visits him at the hospital and almost smothers him to death out of anger at Deems for throwing his life away. In this moment, Deems realizes the pain and hurt he's caused Sportcoat, the Cause residents, and himself. At the end of the novel, he returns to baseball, reclaiming the promise he showed early on in his life.

**Tommy Elefante** – Tommy Elefante is an Italian man who runs a smuggling ring out of the docks at the Cause. Tommy inherited his business from his father, whom people call Mr. Elefante. Although Tommy can be a formidable man, he runs his business based on a strict set of morals and only imports items that would be legal under normal circumstances, like TVs and cigarettes. He also refuses to get involved with the drug trade, no matter how much money he is offered. Although he takes pride in how he runs his business, Elefante's dream is to retire and settle down with a woman. At the start of the novel, he is a lonely middle-aged man who lives with his elderly mother, Mrs. Elefante. However, Elefante's luck changes after the Governor

tells him about the Venus of Willendorf. Elefante quickly realizes that the Venus, a priceless statue, could allow him to retire and live the life of his dreams. With the help of Sportcoat, Elefante eventually finds the Venus. In the meantime, he also strikes up a relationship with (and eventually marries) Melissa, the Governor's daughter, who turns him into a kinder, gentler person. To show his thanks to Sportcoat and the people of the Five Ends Church, Elefante pays for a variety of upgrades and renovations for the church.

**Hettie** – Hettie is Sportcoat's deceased wife. She died after getting up in the middle of the night and walking into the harbor. Although Sportcoat says she was simply "following God's light," it becomes clear that she purposely committed suicide, in part because of her unsatisfactory marriage to Sportcoat. Throughout the novel, Sportcoat talks to an imaginary version of Hettie that he sees while he's drunk. This version of Hettie is angrier and more bitter than she was in life. Over the course of the novel, Sportcoat realizes that this version of Hettie is the unhappy person Hettie became as a result of Sportcoat's alcoholism. In order to make amends with this version of Hettie and to give himself closure in the aftermath of her death, Sportcoat gives up drinking.

**Hot Sausage** – Hot Sausage is Sportcoat's best friend. He is incredibly loyal and is always worried about Sportcoat's safety. After Sportcoat shoots Deems, Hot Sausage tries to give Sportcoat money to flee town, though Sportcoat refuses. Later in the novel, Hot Sausage goes to Deems to try to secure a meeting for Sportcoat, despite knowing that he could be putting his life in danger. Although Deems doesn't hurt Hot Sausage, the situation ends with Hot Sausage taking a bullet to the chest when a hired assassin Additionally, Hot Sausage is the only resident of the Cause with whom Sportcoat communicates in the final years of his life.

**The Governor** – The Governor is an old friend of Mr. Elefante. He comes to Elefante and tells him about the Venus of Willendorf, a rare object that could make the two of them rich. The Governor is a spirited old man who likes to sing and spend time with his family. He desires the Venus because he believes it will provide him and his family with safety and financial security. Additionally, the Governor is pleased by the budding relationship between his daughter, Melissa, and Elefante.

**Sister Gee** – Sister Gee is one of the nuns at the Five Ends Church. She is an intelligent and compassionate woman who looks out for her community and dedicates much of her time to the church. When Potts comes looking for information about who shot Deems, Sister Gee refuses to give him a clear answer. However, she enjoys Potts's company and repeatedly invites him back to the church, even though she doesn't plan on telling him anything. At the end of the novel, Sister Gee takes the Staten Island Ferry to see Potts, as the two of them plan to start a relationship. Sister Gee is nervous but hopeful about her future.

**Potts Mullen** – Potts is a middle-aged police officer who works in the Cause. Although he’s white, he’s more sensitive to the concerns of the Cause’s predominantly Black residents, and he is assigned to investigate Deems’s shooting. Potts repeatedly travels to the Cause to question Sister Gee about what’s happened. Although their conversations are official business, Potts is also attracted to Sister Gee, and by the end of the novel, the two of them strike up a romance. Unlike other police officers in the novel, Potts understands why Sister Gee would be skeptical of law enforcement, even if he thinks she is not doing the right thing by withholding information.

**Melissa** – Melissa is the daughter of the Governor. She is a plump woman who is reserved, yet caring and trustworthy when it counts. She is the boss of the bagel shop the Governor owns, and everyone who works there likes and respects her. Over the course of the novel, Melissa falls in love with Elefante, and the two of them eventually marry.

**Joe Peck** – Joe Peck is an Italian mob boss who is responsible for introducing heroin to the Cause. He is highly successful, even though (or perhaps because) he lacks a moral compass. Elefante dislikes him because of his cocksure attitude and bad temper. Peck is the boss of every character in the novel involved in the drug trade, including Deems and Bunch Moon.

**Bunch Moon** – Bunch Moon is a man who works for Joe Peck and takes care of any problems that would prevent the flow of drugs through the Cause. Bunch is ambitious, crude, and cruel, although Deems thinks he is useless. At the end of the novel, a group of Joe Peck’s men kill Bunch after Haroldeen lets them into Bunch’s apartment.

**Sister Paul** – Sister Paul is one of the founding members of the Five Ends Church, as well as the oldest. She is the only living person who knows the location of the Venus of Willendorf, which she eventually shares with Elefante. Despite her age, Sister Paul is still mentally sharp and demands respect from those who come to see her.

**Macy** – Macy is the Governor’s brother. He has a love of fine art. While fighting in World War II, he finds a lot of valuable artifacts in Italy, which he ships home to himself. At the end of his life, Macy sends most of the artifacts back to Italy, where they belong. The one exception is the Venus of Willendorf, which the Governor and Elefante conspire to find, hoping to strike it rich.

**Haroldeen/Phyllis** – Haroldeen, also known by her alias, Phyllis, is a young assassin Bunch Moon hires to kill Deems. Her assassination attempt fails, but she returns to Bunch anyway under the guise of collecting her payment. In reality, she is setting a trap for Bunch; when she leaves, she lets in Joe Peck’s men, who kill Bunch. Haroldeen hates the illegal drug trade because she was sexually abused as a child in order to feed her mother’s drug habit.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Jet Hardman** – Jet Hardman is an African American police officer who takes pride in breaking down racial barriers. He goes undercover to spy on Deems because he wants to be the first Black undercover agent in the Cause. It is Jet who warns Deems that Sportcoat is about to shoot him.

**Mr. Elefante** – Mr. Elefante is the deceased father of Tommy Elefante. A stoic and determined man, Mr. Elefante formed a smuggling ring in order to support his family. He hides a valuable artifact known as the Venus of Willendorf in the Five Ends Church, knowing Tommy will one day find it.

**Earl** – Earl is Bunch Moon’s right-hand man. He is an intelligent man who avoids violence when he can, though he is ultimately at the whim of Bunch’s demands. After Sportcoat shoots Deems, Earl is the man Bunch assigns to kill Sportcoat, though Earl repeatedly fails to carry out the hit.

**Rufus Harley** – Rufus Harley is one of Sportcoat’s oldest friends and one of the founding members of the Five Ends Church. He is also known for the strong and delectable moonshine he makes, which he calls “King Kong.”

**Bumps** – Bumps is one of the original members of Deems’s gang. While in prison, he brutally beats Deems after Deems refuses to share food with him. After Bumps gets out of prison, Deems brutally beats Bumps.

**Lightbulb** – Lightbulb is a member of Deems’s drug dealing circle. Although he claims to care about Deems, he sells him out to Joe Peck in an attempt to take over Deems’s flagpole.

**Pudgy Fingers** – Pudgy Fingers is the son of Sportcoat and Hettie, though not biologically. When he was an infant, his mother left him with Hettie and never came back.

**Mrs. Elefante** – Mrs. Elefante is Tommy Elefante’s mother. She is a spirited old woman who likes **plants** and employs Sportcoat to help her with her garden.

**Mr. Itkin** – Mr. Itkin is an old Jewish man who owns a liquor store. He occasionally employs Sportcoat to unload crates for him.

**Soup Lopez** – Soup Lopez is a man from the Cause who returns from prison early in the novel. Everyone is happy that Soup is back, and they throw him a big party.

**Sister T.J. Billings** – Sister T.J. Billings, also known as “Bum-Bum,” is the head usher at the Five Ends Church.

**Pastor Gee** – Pastor Gee is the husband of Sister Gee. He is known for his philandering and for making inappropriate remarks at church.

**Rooster** – Rooster is Deems’s cousin and the person who introduced Deems to drug dealing.

**Sugar** – Sugar is one of the original members of Deems’s gang.

**Beanie** – Beanie is one of the original members of Deems’s

gang.



## 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.



### SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The novel's title, *Deacon King Kong*, refers to the novel's protagonist, an old deacon nicknamed Sportcoat. Like many residents of the Causeway Projects in South Brooklyn, Sportcoat is addicted to alcohol; his favorite beverage is a potent blend of moonshine known as "King Kong." Sportcoat drinks so much that he often forgets significant moments in his life, including shooting a local drug dealer named Deems Clemens, an act which puts the rest of the story's events in motion. In addition to alcohol, thanks in part to Deems and his fellow drug dealers, heroin has recently become popular in the Causeway Projects (the novel is set in the late 1960s and depicts the rise in heroin that New York City experienced during that time). In a climactic moment toward the end of the novel, Sportcoat confronts Deems and tells him that he knows now why he shot him: he would rather Deems die young and healthy than old and broken by drug use and the drug trade. It is here that the novel's stance toward drugs and alcohol comes into focus.

The story is sympathetic to addicts of all kinds because it understands that drugs and alcohol are often coping mechanisms for people in desperate circumstances. For instance, Sportcoat uses alcohol to cope with the death of his wife, Hettie. The novel is even sympathetic to low-level drug dealers like Deems. Although the novel doesn't excuse Deems's actions, it does illuminate the social circumstances that gave rise to them. Deems is a young Black man who is raised in abject poverty; he does not have many options to raise his social standing. However, the introduction of drugs into his community gives him a chance to make real money. Deems convinces himself that selling drugs will lift himself and others out of poverty, which he thinks is a net win for the community. Of course, this is nothing but a pipe dream. It is only at the end of the novel, when Deems returns to his **baseball** career, that he's truly able to give back to his community. In addition, the novel also shows how people in positions of power, like the mob boss Joe Peck, intentionally place drugs and alcohol in impoverished, vulnerable communities, thereby taking advantage of and perpetuating poverty and suffering. In its critical examination of the ways that drugs enter impoverished communities, as well as its sympathetic portrayal of addiction, the novel frames substance abuse as a symptom rather than a

cause of suffering and hardship. *Deacon King Kong* shows that while drugs and alcohol may provide temporarily relief for those experiencing hardship, they in fact act as barriers to real social and moral progress.



### RACE AND POWER

Race is omnipresent in *Deacon King Kong*. Set in the Causeway Projects of 1960s Brooklyn, the novel features a diverse cast of characters including African Americans, Latino people, Italian people, and Irish people. Although all of these people live in close proximity to one another, and although the story depicts plenty of friendships between people of different racial backgrounds, there is still great animosity between the various racial groups.. The primary tension in the novel exists between African American characters and the white communities that surround and police the Causeway Projects. The residents of the Causeway Projects feel that their white neighbors do not understand them and attempt to disenfranchise them at every turn. This is apparent in the scenes where Sister Gee, an African American woman, speaks with Potts, a white police officer, about Deems's shooting. Potts means well and seems to genuinely want to help Sportcoat by keeping him out of harm's way; after all, because he shot Deems, there are high level drug dealers that want to see Sportcoat injured or dead. However, Sister Gee thinks that police involvement will only make matters worse for Sportcoat, whom she is trying to protect. Sister Gee is painfully aware of how law enforcement and the justice system treat black men, and she doesn't want Sportcoat subjected to it.

After all, the novel frequently depicts instances of police brutality and corruption. For instance, Elefante, a local Italian smuggler, has the police on his payroll; any time something happens in the Causeway Projects, a police officer comes and tells him about it. Additionally, Sister Gee herself is treated harshly by a young officer who comes to the Five Ends Church to question her about Sportcoat, even though she gives him no reason to. In addition, white people control all of the major systems of power the novel depicts: in addition to the legal system and the police force, the major mobsters running the city, like Elefante and Joe Peck, are also white. Ultimately, then, the novel shows how the power dynamic of 1960s Brooklyn largely broke down along racial lines. In particular, it examines how those who wielded their power and influence did so at the expense of minority communities they regularly exploited.



### COMMUNITY AND RELIGION

The Five Ends Church, which is a central feature of the Causeway Projects, is characters' primary source of social unity and cohesion. Although the church is, of course, a religious institution, the explicitly religious aspects of its teachings rarely enter into the minds of

those who live in the Causeway Projects. However, the sense of community that the church creates, along with its general teachings about acting as a force for good in the world, deeply informs the way the members of the Cause interact with one another. For instance, when Potts, the detective assigned to investigate Deems's shooting, suggests that Sportcoat may have stolen the missing Christmas fund, Sister Gee immediately rebukes him. She knows that Sportcoat is aware of how much the Christmas fund means to community and is resolute that he would never steal it. Even Deems, a sometimes-vicious drug dealer, keeps the teachings of the church in mind. Although the church isn't a strong enough force to keep Deems out of the drug business altogether, it does alter his selling habits. He refuses to sell to children or members of his congregation, and he does his best to keep his fellow churchgoers safe.

In other words, the church teachings strongly rebuke any notion of rugged individualism; in the Cause, no one can make it on their own—not even someone like Deems. Instead, a person must put the wants and needs of their community before their own needs and wants. Such teachings create a social ecosystem where people look out for one another because they have a shared interest in their community's collective success. For instance, Sportcoat knows that he will be happy if he finds Christmas Fund because of the immense joy it will bring to his community. This value system proves to be effective in the Cause because it mitigates selfish behavior while encouraging actions that promote the wellbeing of the community. In the novel, this system leads not only to a more stable and satisfied community, but also to the stability and satisfaction of the individual people within the community.



### PARENTAL FIGURES AND MASCULINITY

Parental relationships are a core feature of *Deacon King Kong*, and the novel highlights two such relationships in particular. The first is between

Sportcoat and Deems. Sportcoat and Deems have a somewhat unconventional relationship because Deems is not Sportcoat's son. Deems grew up without a father figure in his life, and so Sportcoat stepped in to fill that role. Sportcoat was Deems's Sunday school teacher in church, and he taught Deems everything he knows about **baseball**. However, their relationship becomes strained once Deems gives up baseball to start selling drugs. Not wanting Deems to continue down this destructive path, Sportcoat shoots Deems, though Deems ultimately survives the attack. At the end of the novel, Sportcoat explains to Deems that he shot him because he didn't want Deems to end up like him—old, alone, and destroyed by drugs. Although Sportcoat's extreme, Sportcoat's actions are motivated by his desire for Deems to have a better life. This is why he repeatedly comes to Deems and asks him to return to baseball, no matter how many times Deems rejects him and

treats him poorly.

Meanwhile, the relationship between Elefante and his deceased father (Mr. Elefante) more closely resembles a typical father-son relationship. Although Elefante's father was rather stoic and quiet, he always tried his best to show Elefante that he cares for him, and he always acted in the best interest of his family. Through his father, Elefante learns a moral code, not unlike the one the Five Ends Church preaches, that he uses to navigate the troubled world that is late-1960s Brooklyn. Like Sportcoat, Elefante's father makes sure his son is taken care of. Before he dies, he leaves the Venus statue—a valuable artifact that will ensure his family is financially stable for life—hidden in the Five Ends Church, knowing his son will find it one day, which will in turn allow Elefante to have a better life than he did. Ultimately, although these relationships are far from perfect, they point to a model of masculinity and male relationships that seeks moral improvement and stability in a chaotic and immoral world.



### LOVE, HOPE, AND REDEMPTION

*Deacon King Kong* is a fundamentally optimistic novel; it repeatedly depicts positive forces of love, hope, and redemption, even in the face of

oppressive forces such as racism, drug addiction, and violence. The redemptive arc of Deems Clemens is the most obvious example of the book's optimism. Deems began his life as a promising young **baseball** player. Sportcoat, his coach, believed the young man could play professionally if he put his mind to it. However, instead, Deems gets involved in the drug trade and temporarily loses his way. Nonetheless, Sportcoat never stops loving Deems, nor does he lose faith in him. Sportcoat constantly visits Deems, even when he thinks the young drug dealer might want him dead, because he is convinced that Deems can turn his life around and return to baseball. Eventually, Sportcoat gets through to Deems, and Deems does indeed become a semi-pro player with a chance to make it to the major leagues. This transformation redeems Deems in the eyes of the community and leads him to a better life.

Sportcoat's conversations with his deceased wife Hettie present a similar message of love and hope. Of course, Hettie is a figment of Sportcoat's imagination, but she comes from a part of his mind that still remembers the young man he used to be before he became addicted to alcohol. Eventually, Sportcoat's conversations with Hettie lead him to become sober after he realizes his drinking ruined their marriage. Because he loves Hettie and wants to honor her memory, he never touches another drop of alcohol, even though he wants to until his dying day. This transformation redeems Sportcoat in the eyes of the community and in his own mind, which was clearly tortured by his difficult past and the trauma of Hettie's death. *Deacon King Kong* takes place in an unforgiving setting where characters often must compromise their personal morals in order to

survive. However, the book suggests that even in the most trying circumstances, and even for its most morally comprised characters, redemption is always a possibility if they love, hope, and the support of their community.



## SYMBOLS

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



### FLOWERS

In *Deacon King Kong*, flowers and plants represent the persistence of love between people, as well as a person's capacity to persist and heal in the aftermath of hardship. Throughout the novel, Sportcoat is the character who is best with plants. However, Sportcoat has also been reeling with grief ever since the death of his wife, Hettie, who may have died by suicide (the novel never explicitly reveals whether Hettie's death by drowning was intentional or an accident). Throughout the novel, Sportcoat helps others with plants, particularly Mrs. Elefante, who claims that pokeweed, a plant she and Sportcoat gather together, is good for the heart. Notably, the heart, is the human organ that people conventionally associate with love. Thus, Mrs. Elefante's claim that pokeweed is good for the heart takes on literal and figurative meaning, referring both to its ability to improve a person's cardiovascular health and to improve their emotional wellbeing.

Although Sportcoat enjoys the time he spends gardening and searching for plants, he never maintains any plants of his own, suggesting that his heart is still broken. At the end of the novel, Sportcoat has a conversation with an imaginary version of Hettie who tells him that he disappointed her during their marriage because he stopped growing flowers and took up drinking instead. As he began to drink more and garden less, Hettie stopped loving Sportcoat and eventually died by suicide. However, after learning of Hettie's disappointment, Sportcoat swears off drinking and once again grows flowers in Hettie's honor, symbolizing his enduring love for Hettie and his capacity to heal in the aftermath of her death.



### BASEBALL

Baseball represents the realization of the American Dream to the residents of the Causeway Projects. Sportcoat is the best baseball coach in the Causeway Projects, and Deems is his greatest pupil. In *Deems*, Sportcoat sees someone who can transcend the poverty and brutality of the projects to achieve greatness in Major League Baseball. However, like many of Sportcoat's players, Deems gives up baseball to start dealing drugs. At the beginning of the novel, Deems thinks that dealing

drugs is the only possible way for him to achieve personal and economic freedom. Recognizing that dealing drugs will harm Deems and the Causeway community, Sportcoat comes to Deems repeatedly and asks him to return to baseball. Sportcoat knows that dealing drugs will harm Deems and the Causeway community. He even resorts to shooting Deems in an effort to stop Deems from ruining his life, though he doesn't succeed in killing him. Eventually, after Sportcoat makes a second attempt on Deems's life, Deems decides to return to baseball, and he becomes an instant success. By the end of the novel, he's made it to the minor league and may soon play in the major league. Instead of shying away from Deems like they did before, the community embraces this reformed version of Deems who has achieved their collective dream and made a better life for himself. Not only does Deems turn his life around, but he does so by playing the quintessential American sport, thus making him an embodiment of the American Dream.




## QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead Books edition of *Deacon King Kong* published in 2021.

### Chapter 1: Jesus's Cheese Quotes

“In the middle of the night, she shook me woke. I opened my eyes and seen a light floating 'round the room. It was like a little candlelight. 'Round and 'round it went, then out the door. Hettie said, 'That's God's light. I got to fetch some moonflowers out the harbor.' She put on her coat and followed it outside.”

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Hettie (speaker), Deems Clemens

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 3-4

#### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sportcoat describes the last time he saw his wife, Hettie, before she died. It is a story he often tells. At the start of the novel, where this quote appears, Hettie's death is a mystery. Her body is found floating in the harbor a few days after she left home, explaining to Sportcoat that she was going to chase “God's light.” However, later in the novel, it is implied that Hettie's death is a suicide, which calls this passage into question. Was Hettie's departure really so peaceful? Was there actually a light floating around the room? Throughout the novel, Sportcoat proves himself to



be an unreliable narrator. He is often drunk and cannot remember even substantial events such as shooting Deems. Therefore, the story he tells about Hettie's departure could be heavily altered or just purely fabricated. At the very least, he's attached a special significance to the light bouncing around the room that it does not deserve. After all, would God's light lead someone to their death?


Additionally, this passage mentions flowers, one of the key symbols in the novel. Moonflowers are Hettie's favorites, and Sportcoat plants some of them in her honor at the end of the novel. The flowers signify the continued existence of their love for each other, despite everything they've put each other through.

## Chapter 2: A Dead Man Quotes

☝️ Clemens was the New Breed of colored in the Cause. Deems wasn't some poor colored boy from down south or Puerto Rico or Barbados who arrived in New York with empty pockets and a Bible and a dream [...] Deems didn't give a shit about white people, or education, or sugarcane, or cotton, or even baseball, which he had once been a whiz at. None of the old ways meant a penny to him. He was a child of Cause, young, smart, and making money hand over fist slinging dope at a level never before seen in the Cause Houses. He had high friends and high connections from East New York all the way to Far Rockaway, Queens, and any fool in the Cause stupid enough to open their mouth in his direction ended up hurt bad or buried in an urn in an alley someplace.

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Deems Clemens

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 20

### Explanation and Analysis

This early passage offers background information about Deems's upbringing. From the time he was a young boy, he's seen the cruelty of the projects, which have only grown more hardcore since the introduction of hard drugs. As Deems grows up, he doesn't see any real way to advance his social position that doesn't involve dealing drugs. After all, playing baseball, like Sportcoat wants him to, seems like a pipe dream. Meanwhile, the option to sell drugs is right in front of him; he can start immediately and make more money than he's ever seen in his life.

Not only does dealing drugs give Deems money, but it also


gives him power. Even as a teenager, he's made connections all over the city, and the people of the Cause fear him. In one sense, he is on the top of the world. However, what Deems doesn't think about is how long his money will last and how helpful his connections will be. By attempting to bypass more honest ways of making a living, Deems is alienating and harming his community in the process.

## Chapter 3: Jet Quotes

☝️ Rather it was the memory, not long ago, of Sportcoat shagging fly balls with him at the baseball field on warm spring afternoons; it was Sportcoat who taught him how to pivot and zing a throw to home plate from 350 feet out [...] Sportcoat made him a star in baseball. He was the envy of the white boys on the John Jay High School baseball team, who marveled at the college scouts who risked life and limb to venture to the funky, dirty Cause Houses baseball field to watch him pitch. But that was another time, when he was a boy and his grandpa was living. He was a man now, nineteen, a man who needed money. And Sportcoat was a pain in the ass.

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Deems Clemens

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 28-29

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the scene where Sportcoat approaches Deems. As Sportcoat approaches—just minutes before shooting Deems—Deems thinks back to the time he and Sportcoat used to spend together when Deems was still playing baseball. Deems grew up without a father to take care of him. Sportcoat stepped in to act as a father figure, and they played baseball together—the quintessential, stereotypical father-son activity in America.

Additionally, baseball seemed to give Deems all the same perks of drug dealing. However, Deems quits baseball because he needs money immediately. In the harsh environment of the Cause, cash is what's most important, and Deems hopes to make a lot of it so that he can one day improve his living conditions.

At only 19 years old, Deems already thinks of himself as a “man.” However, to Sportcoat, he is still just a lost youth who needs to rejoin the proper path. For Sportcoat, to achieve success in baseball is to achieve the American Dream. Sportcoat wants this for Deems, but because Deems is



caught up in the drug business, he cannot see that. For him, Sportcoat is nothing now but “a pain in the ass.”

## Chapter 4: Running Off Quotes

☝☝ “I don’t swallow any more spirits than anybody else in these projects.”

“Now who’s lying? I ain’t the one they calling Deacon King Kong.”

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Hot Sausage (speaker), Hettie

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 45

### Explanation and Analysis



This quote comes from a conversation between Sportcoat and Hot Sausage in which Hot Sausage tries to convince Sportcoat that he (Sportcoat) shot Deems. Sportcoat refuses to believe that he could do such a thing, but then Hot Sausage reminds him of his constant drinking. This is the first moment where the title, “Deacon King Kong,” is used. Hot Sausage’s remark alludes to the cruel (but not altogether inaccurate) nickname that Sportcoat’s community gave him, which juxtaposes Sportcoat’s respected position in the church with his alcoholism (King Kong is the name of a type of moonshine).


Although Sportcoat’s claim that everyone drinks in the projects is largely true, it is clear that Sportcoat’s alcoholism is extreme, even in such an environment. Most days, he goes to bed drunk and starts drinking again as soon as he wakes up. Though Sportcoat has always had a drinking problem, it seems to have become even worse since Hettie’s death. As such, this passage, with its allusion to Sportcoat’s substance abuse issues, helps build the case that Sportcoat uses alcohol to cope with pain and hardship.

## Chapter 5: The Governor Quotes

☝☝ *Greed*, he thought wryly as he dug into the earth. That’s the disease. *I got it myself.*

**Related Characters:** Tommy Elefante (speaker), Deems Clemens, Joe Peck, Mrs. Elefante

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 49

### Explanation and Analysis

As Tommy Elefante works in his mother’s garden, he thinks about how upset he is about his city growing selfishness—and how that selfishness is rubbing off on himself, too. Indeed, greed is a central issue in the novel. In some cases, the greed that characters exhibit is understandable. For instance, Deems is on his own, without anyone to care for him. It makes sense that he would turn to selling drugs to get by, even if it is a greedy thing to do. Meanwhile, there are also characters like Joe Peck—whom Elefante despises—who will do anything to continue gaining wealth, even when they are already plenty wealthy. The novel has sympathy for someone like Deems and carves out redemption arcs for such characters. Meanwhile, it treats someone like Peck as irredeemable.

Although Elefante worries about his greed, his actions throughout the novel are largely selfless. Even while thinking about his greediness, Elefante is taking time out of his day to help his mother with her garden. There is an earthiness and goodness to Elefante that is completely lacking from someone like Peck.

## Chapter 6: Bunch Quotes

☝☝ “Church is a good thing. A great thing, really. Building up our community. Thank God.” He lowered his head to Earl’s ear. “We ain’t tearing down our community, brother. We’re building it up. Look at all the businesses I got. The jobs we’re providing. The help we give people. Is the white man opening car washes? Is he running car-rental places? Restaurants? Is he giving us jobs?” He pointed to the window, the filthy street, the abandoned cars, the dead brownstones. “What’s the white man doing for us out here, Earl? Where’s he at?”

**Related Characters:** Bunch Moon (speaker), Earl

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 69

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a conversation between Bunch Moon and Earl. Here, Bunch explains to Earl why both the church and drugs are necessary for the Causeway community to flourish. Importantly, Bunch means what he says here. It’s not clear how he came to this conclusion, but



it appears that Bunch genuinely believes that drugs are making the Cause a better place. Of course, he is not completely unaware of the negative consequences of heroin, but he does think that the good outweighs the bad.

Additionally, Bunch expresses a large amount of racial animosity toward white people in this passage. Bunch sees white people as the enemy; he believes they do everything they can to keep black people down. Because of this, Bunch feels that his actions are justified. If white society bars him from finding legitimate work as a car washer or at a restaurant, then he is fine with turning to selling drugs.

## Chapter 7: The March of the Ants Quotes

☞ “Everything,” he muttered aloud, “is falling apart.”

**Related Characters:** Deems Clemens (speaker), Bunch Moon, Lightbulb

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 79

### Explanation and Analysis



These are the first words that Deems mutters as he regains consciousness after being shot. Although he doesn't realize it when he says them, Lightbulb is nearby and possibly hears him. Deems gets embarrassed when he realizes Lightbulb might have heard him, because he always does his best to come off as a strong leader who never shows weakness. This quote two things into perspective. First, there is genuine instability in Deems's portion of the drug trade. Deems feels his power slipping, and he knows it's only a matter of time before he loses it entirely. Second, the instability that Deems is experiencing is a feature—rather than a flaw—of his profession. Drug dealing is a dangerous business with high levels of volatility; it is too complex and unpredictable for any one person to be able to control, even someone who is highly capable like Deems.

If Lightbulb does hear what Deems says in this moment, it would explain why he rats him out to Bunch later in the novel. After all, in the world of the drug dealing, one person's weakness is another person's opportunity. It is a world that runs on exploitation, and it's possible that Lightbulb sees Deems's vulnerability in this moment and uses it to his advantage.

## Chapter 9: Dirt Quotes

☞ Sister Gee snorted. “Things got unstable 'round here four years ago when that new drug come in. This new stuff—I don't know what they call it—you smoke it, you put it in your veins with needles . . . however you do it, once you do it a few times you is stuck with it. Never seen nothing like it around here before, and I seen a lot. This projects was safe till this new drug come in. Now the old folks is getting clubbed coming home from work every night, getting robbed outta their little payday money so these junkies can buy more of Deems's poison. He ought to be ashamed of hisself. His grandfather would kill him if he was living.”

**Related Characters:** Sister Gee (speaker), Deems Clemens, Potts Mullen, Bunch Moon

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis



Here, Sister Gee explains to Potts everything that heroin has done to her community. Although people who are active in the drug trade like Bunch Moon convince themselves that heroin is ultimately good for the community, here, Sister Gee dispels that illusion. Not only is heroin bad for the people who are addicted to it, it is also damaging to the community as a whole, as they are now subjected to the violence and other crimes that accompany the drug trade.


What Sister Gee describes in this passage, although it is a fictional account, is based on real history. In the 1960s, heroin became a popular drug in major city across the United States. Often, the mob—or people with mob connections—sold it in disenfranchised communities to make money and keep those communities powerless. Although Deems thinks he's doing something good for himself—which isn't even true—the damage he's causing his community is irreparable. He eventually comes to realize the error of his ways at the end of the novel.

## Chapter 10: Soup Quotes

☝ Like most of Sportcoat’s team, Soup disappeared from adult radar at the Cause when he entered the labyrinth of his teenage years. One minute he was striking out to the guffaws of the opposing team, the Watch Houses, the next minute word got out that Soup was in jail—adult jail—at seventeen. What put him there, no one seemed to know. It didn’t matter. Everybody went to jail in the Cause eventually. You could be the tiniest ant able to slip into a crack in the sidewalk, or a rocket ship that flew fast enough to break the speed of sound, it didn’t matter. When society dropped its hammer on your head, well, there it is. Soup got seven years. It didn’t matter what it was for.

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Soup Lopez

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 124

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is from Soup Lopez’s coming home party (he’s just been released from prison) and sheds light on his backstory. What is notable about Soup’s story is that it is so similar to the stories of so many young men who grew up in the Cause. No one even remembers what Soup did, suggesting that his crime was likely a minor infringement. Nevertheless, he ended up in prison, along with the majority of young men in the Cause.

Because incarceration rates are so high for young Black men in Brooklyn, it is no wonder that Sportcoat pushes baseball so hard. Although baseball is by no means a viable career path for most people, it at least keeps young men off the streets, where they are likely to get into legal trouble. After all, if, like Soup, a young man goes to jail at 18, it becomes even more difficult to establish his place in the world. This constant incarceration creates a vicious cycle, which makes it difficult for the Causeway residents to make progress.



## Chapter 12: Mojo Quotes

☝ “The church got plenty money.”

“You mean the box in the church?”

“No, honey. It’s in God’s hands. In the palm of His hand, actually.”

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Hettie (speaker), Tommy Elefante

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 160

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from one of Sportcoat and Hettie’s many conversations about the missing Church fund, which the congregation typically uses to buy Christmas presents for the children of the Cause. Sportcoat desperately wants to find the fund so that he will be back in the community’s good graces. Although he doesn’t realize it here, Hettie is actually giving him the answer he desires. She is telling him the location of the Venus of Willendorf, a valuable artifact that Elefante spends the majority of the novel looking for. The Venus is worth millions of dollars, meaning that it is worth significantly more than the missing church fund.

At the end of the novel, Sportcoat and Elefante figure out that the Venus has been hidden in the walls of the Five Ends Church. Specifically, it is behind a brick that it is part of a mural featuring Jesus; the Venus is tucked away behind the section of the mural that makes up Jesus’s hand. However, beyond the phrase’s literal meaning, Hettie’s message is also about faith. She asks Sportcoat to put himself in the hands of God; he needs to trust that God will show him the proper path. Ultimately, Sportcoat listens to Hettie, and, as a result, he manages to find the Venus and improve his community.

## Chapter 13: The Country Girl Quotes

☝ He scanned the East River, checking the line of barges moving along. Some of them he knew. A few were run by honest captains who refused hot items. They wouldn’t move a stolen tire if you paid them a thousand bucks. Others were captained by blithering idiots who would kick their scruples out the window for the price of a cup of coffee. The first type were honest to a fault. They just couldn’t help it. The second type were born crooks.

Which one am I? he wondered.

**Related Characters:** Tommy Elefante (speaker), The Governor, Joe Peck

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 179-180

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears as Elefante is making his way home after a meeting with the Governor. Because Elefante has lived a life of crime, he regularly questions his own sense of

morality. On the one hand, he doesn't consider himself a "blithering idiot" without any scruples. On the other hand, he is not completely honest either, as he was born into a life of crime (he inherited his smuggling business from his father).

Answering the question "Which one am I?" is a central concern for Elefante's character. He knows he's done immoral things in his life, but he strives to be better. He thinks that if he continues down his current path, that he will only become more and more irredeemable as the violence in the city grows worse. Although the novel doesn't entirely clear Elefante of all wrongdoing, it does suggest that he is fundamentally good person precisely because he takes the time to consider the ethical consequences of his actions. This is in stark contrast to someone like Joe Peck, who only acts in his own self-interest.

## Chapter 14: Rat Quotes

☝☝ "Soon as they started whipping on him, Deems ran off the roof. He run off soon as they started cutting Bumps up. The minute them Jamaicans left Bumps laying in the alley, Deems came out the back door of Building Nine and ran over to Bumps holding a steaming pot of rice and beans. He must've had it cooking in his house. He said, 'Here's your rice and beans, Bumps.' He poured that whole pot on him.

**Related Characters:** Lightbulb (speaker), Deems Clemens, Bunch Moon, Bumps

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 198

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from a story Lightbulb tells Bunch Moon about Deems. Apparently, Deems got his current spot at the flagpole after mutilating Bumps. This was revenge because Bumps brutally beat Deems in prison for not sharing his rice and beans. As this passage shows, Deems not only never forgets what Bumps did to him, but he also specifically tailors his revenge to match his mistreatment.

This is an important moment in the story because it is the one scene in the novel where Deems is a direct perpetrator of violence. Previously, Deems comes off as a more likeable character. Although he is a drug dealer, he is still little more than kid, and it's possible to waved off some of his questionable actions as immaturity. However, here, the reader gets direct access to the cruelty Deems is willing to

inflict on other human beings. It makes his character morally complicated and forces the reader to consider whether Deems is worthy of redemption.

## Chapter 15: You Have No Idea What's Coming Quotes

☝☝ "That Christmas Club money is all we can control. We can't stop these drug dealers from selling poison in front of our houses. Or make the city stop sending our kids to lousy schools. We can't stop folks from blaming us for everything gone wrong in New York, or stop the army from calling our sons to Vietnam after them Vietcong done cut the white soldiers' toenails too short to walk. But the little nickels and dimes we saved up so we can give our kids ten minutes of love at Christmastime, that's ours to control."

**Related Characters:** Sister Gee (speaker), Potts Mullen

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 217

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from one Sister Gee and Potts's many conversations. Potts doesn't understand Sportcoat's obsession with the Christmas fund, so Sister Gee attempts to explain it to him. Essentially, Sister Gee's point is that there is so much that Black people cannot control, especially compared to white people. As such, it is important that they do keep control of the little things, especially something like the Christmas fund, which gives joy to children and makes them hopeful for a better tomorrow.



All the problems Sister Gee mentions are very real issues during the period in which the novel is set. Of course, there is nothing Sister Gee can do to stop drugs pouring into her community; they are illegal, and yet they find their way in anyway. Nor can she put an end to draft for Vietnam. In short, the Christmas Club money—though it may seem inconsequential to an outsiders like Potts—is so important to the Causeway residents because it offers a sliver of control to a community that faces so many hardships they cannot control. In addition, the fund is especially important because of what it represents in the face of broader social and political unrest.

## Chapter 16: May God Hold You... Quotes

☞☞ Elefante shrugged, pocketed his money, and leaned against the wall of his house. “I used to see her come and go from church,” he said. “She’d say good morning. People don’t do that no more.”

“No they don’t.”

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Tommy Elefante (speaker), Hettie, Joe Peck

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 230

### Explanation and Analysis


This quote comes from a conversation between Elefante and Sportcoat. It is the first time the two of them speak to each other since Hettie’s death. Here, the “she” Elefante references is Hettie. This passage is indicative of what binds Elefante and Sportcoat together. Although they come from significantly different backgrounds, both share a sense of decorum that they feel the younger generation lacks. Throughout the novel, Elefante is disgusted by Peck, who has no tact or sense of decency. Similarly, although Sportcoat likes Deems, he gets angry when Deems doesn’t treat him with respect. Both Elefante and Sportcoat hope for a future where such common decency can once again exist. However, it seems to them that things are only getting worse. Communities like the one that exists in the Cause are being torn apart by the drug trade, causing basic decency and politeness to go out the window.

## Chapter 17: Harold Quotes

☞☞ “Seen ‘em all,” Sportcoat said proudly. “Even barnstormed a little myself, but I had to make money. That ain’t gonna be Deems’s problem. He’ll make plenty money in the bigs. He got the fire and the talent. You can’t take the love of ball out of a ballplayer, Sausage. Can’t be done. There’s a baseball player in that boy.”

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat (speaker), Deems Clemens, Hot Sausage

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 237

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a conversation between Hot Sausage and Sportcoat. Sportcoat wants Hot Sausage to arrange him a meeting with Deems so that Sportcoat can make matters right with him. Additionally, Sportcoat wants to continue his crusade to get Deems to return to baseball. Here, it is apparent that Sportcoat believes in Deems’s ability to make it to the major leagues. After all, he doesn’t treat his other former players like he treats Deems. Sportcoat believes that Deems can actually make it out of the Cause and become a major sports star. For Sportcoat, becoming a major league baseball player is the equivalent of achieving the American Dream. Not only will Deems lift himself up if he manages to achieve this goal, but he’ll help the entire Cause community as well. Sportcoat understands that Deems has the ability to be become a hero of the community rather than a pariah, and he does everything he can to unlock the young man’s potential.

☞☞ The waiting didn’t bother Deems, but the uncertainty of strategy did. Everything to him was about strategy. That’s how he’d survived. He heard that other big-time dealers called him a boy genius. He liked that. It pleased him that his crew, his rivals, and even at times Mr. Bunch marveled at how someone so young managed to figure things out on his own and keep ahead of older men, some of whom were vicious and clawing to get his business.

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**Related Characters:** Deems Clemens, Bunch Moon, Haroldeen/Phyllis

**Page Number:** 243

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the moment where Deems is sitting on the dock with Phyllis. Before the two of them talk, Deems thinks about his current place in the drug trade. He is proud of himself for making it big at such a young age. Evidently, his ego has gone to his head, and he truly does think of himself as “a boy genius.” While Deems’s reputation is not entirely undeserved, he is not quite as clever as he thinks. At the very moment he is thinking about how clever he is, Phyllis is sitting next to him on the dock and thinking about how she is going to kill him. Deems is completely oblivious to Phyllis’s true intentions. Because she is a woman, he’s completely let his guard down. Nonetheless, Deems is undoubtedly a talented dealer.

However, the lesson that Deems has yet to learn (although he will learn it soon), is that even the most talented dealers do not last too long, as there will always be someone younger, cleverer, or more vicious to replace them; in short, the drug trade is a vicious cycle that only ends with violence.

☛☛ Deems loved baseball. He'd pitched all the way through high school and could have gone further had not his cousin Rooster lured him into the fast money of the heroin game. He still kept track of the game, the teams, the squads, the statistics, the hitters, the Miracle Mets, who, miraculously, might be in the World Series that year, and most of all, the strategy.

10000

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Deems Clemens, Haroldeen/Phyllis

**Page Number:** 243

### Explanation and Analysis

As Deems sits on the dock with Phyllis, he reflects back on his career in baseball. Deems's thoughts confirm Sportcoat's claim that Deems still has a love for baseball inside him. Despite Deems's heavy involvement in the drug trade, he still makes sure to keep up with the game. Also note: Deems uses language that implicitly likens to dealing drugs; that is, he says he likes baseball because of "the strategy." This is notable because it suggests that both baseball and drug dealing are realistic options for Deems's skillset—yet he's chosen to go with drug dealing. This quote also suggests that, on some level, Deems knows drug dealing is a trap, as evidenced by his thought that selling heroin is a "fast money" game that he was "lured" into.

## Chapter 18: Investigation Quotes

☛☛ Sister Gee looked at the people staring at her: Dominic, Bum-Bum, Miss Izi, Joaquin, Nanette, and the rest, at least fifteen people in all. She'd known most of them her whole life. They stared at her with that look, that projects look: the sadness, the suspicion, the weariness, the knowledge that comes from living a special misery in a world of misery. Four of their numbers were down—gone, changed forever, dead or not, it didn't matter. And there would be more. The drugs, big drugs, heroin, were here. Nothing could stop it. They knew that now. Someone else had already taken over Deems's bench at the flagpole. Nothing here would change. Life in the Cause would lurch forward as it always did.

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Deems Clemens, Hot Sausage, Sister Gee, Sister T.J. Billings

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 266



### Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Sister Gee reflects on the recent shooting at the docks. She suspects that Hot Sausage is likely dead (he isn't) and doesn't yet know the full status of Deems and Sportcoat. This is the second shooting in the Cause in only a few weeks, and Sister Gee is in a pessimistic mood. Understandably, she thinks that the violence will only continue to get worse as the heroin trade continues to grow in scale. As she looks around at the other members of the Cause community, she realizes that they feel the same way as her—but that there is nothing any of them can do about it. Sister Gee has seen a lot and knows that the escalating drug trade can only lead to worse lives for those who live in the Cause. Although faces change, the fundamental operations of the drug trade will stay the same and none of them are good for the residents of the Cause. The idea that life in the Cause "lurches" forward is a powerful image that is evocative of something that continues to live and move, even though it is barely alive.

## Chapter 20: Plant Man Quotes

☛☛ "The man who come here to New York wasn't the man I knowed in South Carolina. In all the years we been here, ain't been a plant in that house of ours. Not a green thing hung from the ceiling nor the wall, other than what I brung in from time to time."

**Related Characters:** Hettie (speaker), Sportcoat, Pudgy Fingers

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 285

### Explanation and Analysis



This quote comes from the final conversation between Hettie and Sportcoat as they reminisce about their past. Here, Hettie reveals that the Sportcoat that she and reader have come to know is not the same person as the man she knew in South Carolina. As a young man, Sportcoat constantly cared for plants, and Hettie loved this about him.

His love for plants symbolized his love for life and for Hettie. However, after moving to New York and succumbing to alcoholism, Sportcoat's love for plants, life, and Hettie all fell away. Although he, Hettie, and their son, Pudgy Fingers, lived together, Hettie and Sportcoat felt dead inside. This is the reason for Hettie's eventual suicide, and it is why Sportcoat can never come to terms with her death. In order to redeem himself in Hettie's mind, Sportcoat needs to give up drinking and return to the planting-loving man she once knew.

## Chapter 22: 281 Delphi Quotes

☹☹ They were horrible sons of bitches—men who set upon one another with welding torches, scorched each other with hot irons, and poured Clorox into one another's eyes for the sake of dope; men who made their girlfriends do horrible things, servicing four or five or eight men a night, who made their women do push-ups over piles of dogshit for a hit of heroin until, exhausted, the girls dropped into the shit so the men could get a laugh. These were the men her mother allowed in her life.

**Related Characters:** Deems Clemens, Hot Sausage, Haroldeen/Phyllis

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 309

### Explanation and Analysis

Haroldeen remembers the horrific environment she grew up in due to her mother's addiction. These thoughts surface as Haroldeen sits in Bunch's apartment and waits to be paid for shooting Deems, Deems's man, and Hot Sausage. In part, this passage explains how Haroldeen became a vicious assassin at such a young age. Although this novel is ultimately optimistic, it does not skirt over some of the more sordid details of the heroin trade. Here, Haroldeen sheds light on the brutality of some of the men in the industry, revealing horrific details of their depraved and barbaric behavior. Although Deems isn't as depraved as the men Haroldeen describes, the novel implies that he'll end up like them if he doesn't fundamentally change the trajectory of his life.

This passage also explains why Haroldeen has no problem shooting Deems or allowing others to kill Bunch. She sees them as the same type of monsters who abused her and her mother when she was a child. Although some characters in this novel get happy endings, Haroldeen is not one of them., suggesting that some pasts are too traumatic to recover

from.

## Chapter 23: Last Octobers Quotes

☹☹ And from there, so close, he saw in the old man's face what he had felt down in the darkness of the harbor when the old man had yanked him to safety: the strength, the love, the resilience, the peace, the patience, and this time, something new, something he'd never seen in all the years he'd known old Sportcoat, the happy-go-lucky drunk of the Cause Houses: absolute, indestructible rage.

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Deems Clemens

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 322

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from when Sportcoat visits Deems in the hospital after the young drug dealer is shot for a second time. At the start of their visit, Sportcoat is in a good mood because he is happy to see that Deems is doing well. However, after Deems continually disrespects him, Sportcoat grows incredibly angry. This moment closely parallels the first interaction between Deems and Sportcoat in the novel, which ended with Sportcoat shooting Deems in the ear. As Deems notes here, Sportcoat is known for his patience; others often disrespect him, yet he thinks nothing of it. However, now, perhaps because he is sober, Sportcoat decides that he is not going to take it anymore. He feels he deserves to be treated like a human being, especially because he's had as much of a hand as anyone in raising Deems. In this moment, Sportcoat snaps, unloading years of suppressed rage on Deems, who is not prepared for it.

## Chapter 25: Do Quotes

☹☹ Until then he'd always believed a partner brought worry, fear, and weakness to a man, especially one in his business. But Melissa brought courage and humility and humor to places he'd never known existed. He'd never partnered with a woman before, if you didn't include his mother, but Melissa's quiet sincerity was a weapon of a new kind. It drew people in, disarmed them. It made them friends—and that was a weapon too.

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Tommy Elefante, Melissa



**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 342-343

### Explanation and Analysis

As Elefante and Melissa drive to meet Sportcoat, Elefante reflects on his life. For much of his life, Elefante felt lonely because he didn't have a wife. However, he is now coming to realize that he didn't even know the real benefits of having a wife. When Elefante first meets Melissa, she charms him, but he finds it unlikely that she is capable of running a business (like a man would be). However, now that he knows her, he realizes that she is not only capable, but also a worthy "partner." This is high praise coming from a man who is revered and feared all over the Cause. Here, Elefante realizes that Melissa is not only good company, but she also makes him a better person by allowing her strengths to make up for his weaknesses. His new relationship with Melissa gives Elefante—previously a pessimist—hope for the future and makes him feel as though he's on a path to redemption.

☝ “I think I can handle that, Mr. Sportcoat.”

“Come again? Mister?”

“Mr. Sportcoat.”

Sportcoat pawed at his forehead with a wrinkled hand. There was a clarity to the world now that felt new, not uncomfortable, but at times the newness of it felt odd, like the feeling of breaking in a new suit of clothing. The constant headaches and nausea that had been his companions after leaving the swigfest for decades had lifted. He felt like a radio tuning in to a new channel, one that was beginning to fuzz into range, slowly coming in clear, proper, the way his Hettie had always wanted him to be. The new feeling humbled him. It made him feel religious, it made him feel closer to God, and to man, God's honored child. “I ain't never been called Mr. Sportcoat by nobody.”

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Tommy Elefante (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 352

### Explanation and Analysis



This quote comes after Elefante and Sportcoat finally find the Venus of Willendorf statue. Because he is so grateful for Sportcoat's help, Elefante tells him that he'll give a lot of money to the church to replace the missing Christmas fund

and much more. In doing so, he calls the old deacon, “Mr. Sportcoat.” Being addressed this way moves Sportcoat like nothing else in the novel. This moment is significant for two reasons. First, this is a moment where Sportcoat gets to experience the benefits of sobriety. Although Elefante's comment is not directly related to Sportcoat's sobriety, Sportcoat could have only got to this moment by quitting drinking. Additionally, this is one of the rare moments in the novel where two people are able to transcend their differences—whether those differences be class, race, occupation, or anything else—and have a moment of shared humanity. This is more than just a touching moment for Sportcoat; it renews his sense of spirituality and makes him feel worthwhile in the eyes of his fellow human.

## Chapter 26: Beautiful Quotes

☝ As the ferry pulled away from the dock and arced into New York Harbor, heading due southwest, it offered her a clear view of the redbrick Cause housing projects on one side, and the Statue of Liberty and Staten Island on the other. One side represented the certainty of the past. The other side the uncertainty of the future. She felt suddenly nervous. All she had was an address. And a letter. And a promise.

**Related Characters:** Sister Gee, Potts Mullen

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 367



### Explanation and Analysis


This passage comes from when Sister Gee takes the Staten Island Ferry to go and visit Potts. Potts is now divorced, and the two of them are hoping to start a romance together. Here, the description Sister Gee provides of her journey is evocative of one of the primary concerns of the novel: how, in a world full of horrible violence, racial prejudice, and political turmoil, two people of different backgrounds can come together and understand one another. The novel doesn't provide a firm answer to this concern. Even though Sister Gee is hopeful about her future with Potts, she seems to recognize that there are still reasons to be “nervous.” The novel offers no confirmation that Sister Gee and Potts's relationship will work out, nor does it suggest that there will be an end to the violence and political turmoil that Sister Gee and her neighbors in the Cause face on a daily basis. However, as this passage illustrates, the novel suggests that none of these issues have a chance of getting better unless someone puts in the effort to make them better.

●● Then he patted me on the back and said, "Look after them moonflowers behind the church for my Hettie." Then he walked into the water. Walked right into the harbor holding that bottle of King Kong. I said, "Wait a minute, Sport, that water's cold." But he went on ahead.

First it come up to his hips, then to his waist, then to the top of his arms, then to his neck. When it got to his neck he turned around to me and said, "Sausage, the water is so warm! It's beautiful."

**Related Characters:** Sportcoat, Hot Sausage (speaker), Hettie, Sister Gee

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 370

**Explanation and Analysis**

These are the final lines in the novel, as well as Sportcoat's last words. In a conversation with Sister Gee, Hot Sausage describes watching Sportcoat walk into the water, just as he always dreamed of doing with Hettie, holding a bottle of King Kong. Although the scene itself is somewhat ambiguous, Hot Sausage tells Sister Gee that this is the last time that he saw Sportcoat, implying that Sportcoat killed himself by drowning in the water, just like Hettie. Interestingly, Sportcoat's death is not a sad scene, but one of liberation of happiness. Sportcoat is proud of himself for living the last years of his life as a sober man, even though he wants to drink so badly. Rather than sully himself by downing King Kong, Sportcoat purifies himself in the water, which he describes as "warm" and "beautiful," even though Hot Sausage says it is cold. This passage also reaffirms Sportcoat's undying love for Hettie; he planted her favorite flowers (moonflowers) behind the church for her, and even in his final moments, Sportcoat is thinking of Hettie.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

## CHAPTER 1: JESUS'S CHEESE

In September of 1969, an old deacon nicknamed Sportcoat shoots 19-year-old Deems Clemens, an infamously “ruthless” drug dealer, in the Causeway Housing Projects of Brooklyn. Sportcoat is an unlikely killer—he’s thin, sickly, and a longtime drinker; people thought he was a peaceful man.

After the shooting, residents of the projects gather outside to exchange theories about why Sportcoat shot Deems. Sister T. J. Billings, whom people call “Bum-Bum,” insists that Sportcoat “is under an evil spell.” Sportcoat’s best friend, a Cause Houses janitor named Hot Sausage, suggests that Sportcoat shot Deems to settle a disagreement between the Cause Houses **baseball** team and their rival, the Watch Houses. Still, nobody really knows why Sportcoat did it—not even Sportcoat himself.

The night before the shooting, Sportcoat dreamed about his late wife, Hettie. Sportcoat loves to tell the story of Hettie’s disappearance, which happened during a snowstorm in 1967. As Sportcoat remembers it, after waking up in the middle of the night to a light floating around the room, Hettie goes out into the snowstorm. Hettie tells Sportcoat that the light belongs to God and that she has to leave to get some **moonflowers** from the harbor. Sportcoat lets his wife leave and doesn’t question her.

The next morning, Sportcoat looks for Hettie. He follows her footprints to the water, but they end there. Then, Sportcoat looks up and sees a raven circling overhead; he watches the bird until it vanishes, and then he returns home. Later that day, when Hettie doesn’t show up for church at Five Ends Baptist Church, people grow concerned.

Two days later, Tommy Elefante’s crew finds Hettie’s body floating in the harbor. Elefante, or “The Elephant,” is a smuggler and a tough customer whom most people try to avoid, even drug dealers like Deems. However, Elefante promises Sportcoat that he and his men had nothing to do with Hettie’s death.

Deacon King Kong *opens in medias res* (in the middle of the action) and then takes the reader back in time to explain what led up to Deems’s shooting. The novel is set in the late 1960s; with the assassinations of both Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X only a few years earlier, the end of the decade was a somber time for Black people in the United States. To make matters worse, the late 1960s saw the rise of heroin in impoverished urban areas such as Brooklyn.



Throughout the novel, the residents of the Cause Houses act similarly to a chorus in Greek tragedy; that is, they provide commentary on major events, often while providing conflicting information. Many residents of the Cause have nicknames, usually based on some aspect of their personality or appearance. For instance, Sportcoat’s nickname comes from his attire.



Hettie’s disappearance is odd and mysterious; clearly, there are important details missing in Sportcoat’s story. As the story progresses, some of these details will be gradually filled in. Additionally, this passage mentions flowers, which function as a symbol of the persistence of love in times of great hardship.



The fact that Hettie’s footprints end at the water suggest that she went into the water but didn’t come back out. However, why this would be is still unclear. Additionally, the raven Sportcoat sees signals something ominous happened.



Elefante will eventually become a major player in the novel, though he is only mentioned here as an aside. Assuming Elefante can be taken at his word—and it seems that Sportcoat thinks he can be—Hettie’s death remains a mystery.



Hettie's funeral is a chaotic affair. No one knows where to put the **flowers**—this was Hettie's job. Then Pastor Gee makes a joke at Hettie's expense and arguments break out among two of the singers in the choir. Nonetheless, Sportcoat is relatively cheerful and enjoys the ceremony. He is in a good mood, having spent the previous night drinking with his second-best friend, Rufus Harley, who makes a strong blend of moonshine known as "King Kong." Also in attendance is Sportcoat's son, Pudgy Fingers, who is "twenty-six, blind, and said to be half a loaf short in the mind."

That night, Sportcoat dreams of Hettie and tells her about how great her funeral service was. However, he also has questions for Hettie. In particular, he wants to know where she stashed the Christmas Club money for the church. Hettie acted as the treasurer for the church and the Christmas Club money is the fund the church uses to buy Christmas presents for the children. Now that Hettie is gone, everyone wants to know what's happened to their money—but Sportcoat doesn't have any answers. Sportcoat spends the entire next day arguing with Hettie out loud, but he doesn't find out what's happened to the Christmas funds.

During their argument, Hettie insults Sportcoat by calling him "the cheese thief." She is referencing a shipment of cheese that mysteriously arrives in the Cause on the first Saturday of every month. No one knows where the cheese comes from, but it is one of the few boons of living in the Cause. Not only is the cheese free, but it is also of high quality, and the residents of the Cause line up every Saturday to get their hands on some. Hot Sausage is in charge of handing it out and he always makes sure to set some aside for Sportcoat, so he doesn't have to wait in line. Sportcoat is offended by the notion that this makes him a thief, as Hettie suggests, especially since she benefitted from it as well.

From this day on, Sportcoat regularly talks and argues with Hettie as though she is there with him. Meanwhile, the other members of the projects simply ignore him. They think he is a little crazy, but no more so than anyone else. However, when Sportcoat shoots Deems, their perception changes. They realize Sportcoat may be crazier than they thought, as his actions defy all reason. Additionally, they know that Sportcoat ostensibly signed his own death warrant by killing Deems who is a feared figure in the community.

*This passage gives a sense of Sportcoat's values. Despite the chaos of Hettie's funeral—or perhaps because of it—Sportcoat find it to be a satisfactory affair. Later he will brag about it as a great success. This scene also establishes community as an important theme in the novel.*



*Because Sportcoat cares about his community, and he knows how much the Christmas Club money means to them, he is desperate to get it back. He seems to care about it even more than he cares about the circumstances surrounding Hettie's death.*



*The sudden appearance of the cheese is another one of the mysteries that slowly unravels over the course of the novel. The fact that the residents of the Cause value the cheese so highly says a lot about the conditions they are living in. To them, the cheese is a delicacy. This is why Sportcoat is so insulted when Hettie calls him a thief. Stealing the cheese would be akin to stealing the Christmas fund—both actions would be a slap in the face to the Cause community.*



*This chapter has a circular structure. It starts with Deems's shooting, goes back in the past, and then circles back around to its opening paragraph. For most of the novel, Sportcoat's soundness of mind will remain up for debate, and the question of why he shot Deems will continue to be an important one.*



## CHAPTER 2: A DEAD MAN

Even before he shot Deems, it was surprising to the Causeway community that Sportcoat was still alive. The residents of the Cause often spotted him stumbling drunk through the streets at night and spending time in seedy areas. Additionally, throughout his life, Sportcoat's been prone to taking ill and hurting himself. Even the members of the Five Ends Baptist Church, where Sportcoat is a deacon, are surprised he is still alive.

Among other health issues, Sportcoat's had three stokes, he's contracted gout and rheumatoid arthritis, and he's developed a number of cysts and hernias. Additionally, as a child, he grew way too many teeth and had to have them extracted. He also accidentally cut off a finger, a toe, and sliced his aorta. As a young man, Sportcoat injured himself so much that he became a familiar face to the medical students at his local university in South Carolina. Despite his medical history, Sportcoat is still alive and drinks constantly.

As a young boy, Sportcoat lost his mother. His father raised him, and his stepmother treated him poorly. As a young man, he decides to follow Hettie, his high school sweetheart, to New York; the two of them eventually get married. Hettie moved to New York from South Carolina several years before Sportcoat did to work as a maid for a white family. After joining Hettie in New York, Sportcoat becomes the local handyman and gardener. Sportcoat is excellent at both of his jobs—there is no appliance he cannot fix and no plant he cannot grow.

Unlike Sportcoat and Hettie, Deems grew up in New York City. This upbringing made Deems tough, and although he has little formal education, he's managed to make connections all over the city in the drug trade. At a young age, Deems managed to make himself relatively wealthy and feared all over the Cause. The residents of the Cause know that those who cross Deems often end up injured or dead. This is why they fear for Sportcoat's safety. Although Sportcoat's previously been able to live through anything, his luck may have finally run out after shooting Deems.

*Drugs and alcohol play an important part in the novel, as this early description of Sportcoat's addiction illustrates. In addition, despite his addiction, Sportcoat is still welcome—and even allowed to be a deacon—at the Five Ends Church. The church is a beacon of light for the Five Ends community—it offers safety, camaraderie, and opportunities for redemption.*



*Sportcoat is a medical miracle to the point of absurdity. He's come down with every illness and hurt himself in every possible way, and yet he's still managed to live to old age and perform manual labor. However, the residents of the Cause know about his background and are still worried about Deems. This speaks to the level of fear Deems manages to inspire within the community.*



*Sportcoat's upbringing is only lightly detailed here—more details will emerge toward the end of the novel. Needless to say, Sportcoat's early life was difficult, so much so that he left his loved ones behind to follow Hettie. This is one explanation for his alcoholism. An important quality of Sportcoat's character is that he is a hard worker who is extremely competent, especially with plants.*



*The novel never discusses Deems's upbringing in the Cause in depth, but it's clear that he doesn't have a parent to look out for him. In part, Deems is a product of the city he grew up in. As a young Black man, he didn't see opportunities to escape his dire circumstances, so he turned to the one occupation that was sure to make money: dealing drugs. Notably, drug dealers are not an uncommon sight in the Cause. Additionally, the fact that everyone fears Deems suggests that he can be especially clever and violent.*



## CHAPTER 3: JET

Sixteen people watched Sportcoat shoot Deems, but no one would say anything to the police. However, they didn't have to because the police had an undercover detective on the scene. The detective's name is Jet Hardman, and he is disguised as a janitor. Jet's job is to spy on Deems, whom he's watched for seven months. The police know that Deems works for a man named Joe Peck, a major figure in the Italian mob and their true target.

Jet's superior is Kevin "Potts" Mullen, an aging Irish sergeant. Potts is fond of Jet and tells him not to go into undercover work because it is difficult and dangerous. However, Jet couldn't pass up the opportunity to be the first ever Black undercover cop in the Cause. All his life, he's strived to be the first Black man to accomplish certain tasks, and he doesn't plan to stop now.

Despite his confidence in himself, Jet is still nervous because Deem Clemens is his first undercover assignment. Jet spends his time near a flagpole in the main plaza of the Causes, the same spot where Deems and his fellow dealers do the majority of their selling. While watching Deems, Jet notices Sportcoat approaching him and senses trouble. Sportcoat looks drunk, and Jet sees that he has a gun. Jet is concerned and unsure of what to do. He wants to prevent violence from occurring, but he also doesn't want to blow his cover. As Sportcoat gets closer to Deems, Jet almost pulls out the gun he has strapped to his ankle but decides against it because such a move would immediately give him away. Instead, he decides to continue to monitor the situation to see what will happen next.

When Sportcoat reaches Deems, who is standing around with members of his crew, he asks Deems about **baseball**. Previously, Deems was the best baseball player the Cause had ever seen, and Sportcoat was his coach. Sportcoat taught Deems everything he knows about baseball and turned him into the best player in the Cause. As such, Deems likes Sportcoat, but Sportcoat makes him uncomfortable, partially because he's drunk all of the time.

*Everyone on the scene when Sportcoat shot Deems was presumably Black or at least not white. In the late 1960s, (and to this day) distrust toward the police among African American communities was common. Black people rarely felt that the police had their best interests at heart. Talking to the police usually meant more trouble rather than less, so keeping one's mouth shut was often the best option. Additionally, this passage introduces the hierarchy of the drug trade. As feared as Deems is, he is a relatively low-level criminal compared to someone like Joe Peck.*



*Jet strives to break down the rigid barriers that existed in the 1960s for someone with his skin color. Unlike many characters in the Cause, he is a force of optimism when it comes to social progress in regard to race.*



*Here, Jet faces a difficult situation. It is unclear whether he knows about Sportcoat and his relationship with Deems. Furthermore, even if he did, it's unlikely that he would be able to predict what happens next. Additionally, the fact that Deems deals drugs near the flagpole is notable for two reasons. First, it highlights how prominent drugs are in the Cause—the flagpole is located in a popular area, which everyone walks by daily. Second, it associates dealing drugs with American iconography, as it is presumably the American flag that sits on top of the flagpole. The purpose of this association is ambiguous, but it certainly illustrates the prominence of drugs in American society.*



*Sportcoat is the closest thing Deems has to a father figure in the novel. After all, stereotypically, playing baseball is a classic American pastime between fathers and sons. Baseball is important to Sportcoat, not only because he enjoys it, but because he sees it as a noble alternative to dealing drugs. By this time, Black players regularly played for major league teams because it had been around two decades since Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier.*



When Sportcoat asks Deems why he stopped playing **baseball**, Deems tells Sportcoat that he's found a better way to make money instead. In response, Sportcoat tells Deems that there is a better way to make money than playing baseball. Deems condescendingly agrees with him in attempt to steer Sportcoat away from the subject. However, Sportcoat won't drop it and continues to press Deems on why he isn't still playing baseball. This angers Deems, and he tells Sportcoat to leave.

Meanwhile, Jet is circling the scene and trying to get a view of what's going on. In a last-ditch effort, he drops down to the ground to pretend to tie his shoe and watches as Sportcoat pulls out the gun. At the last minute, he yells to warn Deems. Still, Sportcoat is able to get a shot off, which hits Deems in the ear. Nonetheless, Jet's warning is ultimately successful because Sportcoat was originally aiming for Deems's forehead.

As everyone flees the scene, Sportcoat moves to shoot Deems again. However, after seeing Deems on his hands and knees, Sportcoat has a sudden change of heart. Instead, he begins performing the Heimlich maneuver on Deems, who is choking on a sandwich he was eating before Sportcoat shot him. Although Sportcoat's Heimlich maneuver is ultimately effective, from far away it looks like Deems is "on all fours being humped like a dog from the back by an old man." Soon after, the police show up and arrest Deems and Jet, although Sportcoat manages to flee the scene by escaping to a nearby building. Jet's partner, Potts, arrests him in an attempt to maintain Jet's undercover status.

## CHAPTER 4: RUNNING OFF

After leaving the scene of the shooting, Sportcoat ends up in the basement furnace room of Building 9 where Hot Sausage works. Rather than think about what just happened, Sportcoat continues his ongoing argument with an imaginary Hettie about the missing church fund. He tries to impress on Hettie how important the missing funds are, but she largely just ignores him. After finishing his argument with Hettie, Sportcoat takes a few swigs of King Kong and then heads off to the liquor store where he is expected to help unload some crates.

On his way to the liquor store, Sportcoat sees multiple police cars and an ambulance race past him. When he enters the liquor store, his boss, a Jewish man named Mr. Itkin, asks him what's going on outside. Sportcoat gives him an unserious answer and seems genuinely not to know what all the fuss is about.

*Achieving success in baseball is Sportcoat's idea of achieving the American Dream. He believes that Deems has real talent and is upset that he's squandering it. Meanwhile, Deems treats the old deacon poorly, showing little respect for the man who is the closest thing he has to a father.*



*Sportcoat's actions are abrupt and shocking. Although Deems treats him poorly, Sportcoat's response—if it can be read as a direct response—is, of course, way over the top. There are a few possibilities for why Sportcoat acts the way he does. First, he could just be going insane. Second, there is more that is motivating him than what is seen here. Or, third, it could be some combination of both.*



*As the scene progresses, it is clear that Sportcoat is not in his right mind. At the very least, he is conflicted in how he feels about Deems. Stylistically, one feature of the novel is that it quickly alternates between serious violence and farcical comedy, which can be seen here as Sportcoat helps Deems.*



*When Sportcoat reaches Building 9, he acts as though he doesn't even remember what just occurred. His memory is certainly not helped by the swigs of King Kong that he takes before heading to work.*



*Again, Sportcoat doesn't seem to know what he's just done. Perhaps the act was of little consequence to him, or maybe he genuinely doesn't remember. Both options point to a man who is not mentally well.*



After his brief interaction with Mr. Itkin, Sportcoat makes his way to the back of the store to start unloading crates. As he works, Sportcoat regularly sips from the store's wares whenever Mr. Itkin is not looking. Shortly after Sportcoat starts unloading the crates, he takes off his jacket and tosses it to the side. When he does so, he hears a loud "clank." He then looks in the pocket of his jacket to find a gun, which he doesn't remember putting there.

Just after Sportcoat finds his gun, he hears Hot Sausage come in the store. Hot Sausage tells Mr. Itkin that Sportcoat left something at home and so he is bringing it to him. This allows Hot Sausage to get in the back of the store—typically he is not allowed in the back because Mr. Itkin doesn't like him. Once he's alone with Sportcoat, Hot Sausage immediately begins to question him about the shooting. However, Sportcoat acts as though he has no idea what Hot Sausage is talking about.

Hot Sausage warns Sportcoat that he is in great danger. Deems has deep connections in the drug business, and they won't hesitate to kill Sportcoat to seek revenge. Hot Sausage tells Sportcoat he must leave town if he doesn't want to be killed. However, Sportcoat refuses to believe that he shot Deems and thinks Hot Sausage is just playing a trick on him. Nonetheless, Sportcoat finds it curious that his old gun is in his pocket, and he admits to Hot Sausage that he forgets a lot of what he does, likely because of how much alcohol he consumes. Still, when Hot Sausage presses him on his alcohol consumption and calls him "Deacon King Kong," Sportcoat says that he doesn't drink more than anyone else in the projects. In a last-ditch effort to help Sportcoat, Hot Sausage tries to give Sportcoat money to leave town, but Sportcoat turns it down.

## CHAPTER 5: THE GOVERNOR

Not long after Sportcoat shoots Deems, a police officer arrives at Thomas Elefante's house to tell him about the shooting in the Cause. The house belongs to Elefante's mother, although Elefante lives there with her. Elefante is a large and handsome 40-year-old man with a troubled past. Elefante's father was in jail for most of his life, during which time his mother ran the family business—a smuggling operation at the nearby docks. Although he is single, Elefante hopes that one day soon he will meet a woman who will be his wife. Despite his line of work, he still hopes that he can eventually be a family man.

*Although Sportcoat is a good worker, perhaps the liquor store is not the best place for him. It only enables his alcoholism.*



*Clearly, word of Sportcoat shooting Deems has spread quickly around the community. After all, Hot Sausage already knows, and he did not witness the shooting.*



*Deems continues to be hyped up as a violent criminal who will kill Sportcoat for what he's done, though it is not yet clear whether that image is justified. Meanwhile, Sportcoat seems genuine in his assertion that he doesn't think he shot Deems. Additionally, this passage contains the first mention of the book's title. Evidently, despite what he says, Sportcoat does drink more than other people in the projects, as he is the only one with a nickname that reflects the amount of alcohol he consumes.*



*Police corruption was especially common in the decades when New York was run by mobs. It is presumably one of the reasons why Black people did not trust the police. Elefante is an interesting mobster; although he is a criminal, one of the first things the reader learns about him is that his true desire is to be a family man. Like many characters in the novel, Elefante was born into a life that directly shaped who he became; his father was a criminal, and Elefante took over the family business.*





However, in the moment, all Elefante feels is annoyance. He does not like the young officer's lack of tact and doesn't find the information useful. The shooting doesn't matter to Elefante because it had nothing to do with him—he considers it Joe Peck's problem. Nonetheless, he pays the police officer and sends him on his way. Despite his tough image, Elefante thinks of himself as a nice person, and he prides himself on his restraint. Although he traffics various items throughout the Cause, he's never been in the drug business and does not plan to be; he finds it revolting.

After the police officer leaves, Elefante begins working in his mother's garden, an activity that he enjoys. The garden is full of **flowers** and plants that Mrs. Elefante picked from lots all over the Cause District. As Elefante works, he thinks about the "disease" that is traveling around Brooklyn. The disease, he thinks, is "greed"—something that he's contracted himself.

As Elefante works, he thinks back to a strange encounter he had two weeks ago. Elefante and his men were unloading cigarettes when a man named Driscoll Sturgess, who calls himself the Governor, arrives and asks for a word with Elefante. The Governor is an old man who is approximately 70 years old. His face is covered in wrinkles, and one of his eyes is permanently swollen shut.

Elefante invites the Governor to sit down, and the older man obliges. The Governor then states his business: he wants Elefante's help. At first, Elefante is cautious. He tells the Governor that he may be able to help him—depending on what the Governor needs. Then, Elefante offers the Governor a cigarette. The Governor rejects it because he is a singer and doesn't want to ruin his throat. This amuses Elefante, and he asks the old man to sing him a song. In response, the Governor sings a song about something called "The Venus of Willendorf." The song means nothing to Elefante, but he the power and beauty of the Governor's voice impresses him.

After the song, the Governor and Elefante return to the matter at hand. In order to gain Elefante's trust, the Governor tells Elefante his real name. He also tells Elefante that nowadays, he runs a bagel shop in the Bronx. This surprises Elefante—to him, an Irishman owning a bagel shop is an oddity. Although the man amuses Elefante, he doesn't trust him and tries to send him away. However, the Governor is persistent and assures Elefante that he was friends with Elefante's father. Elefante searches his memory and eventually realizes remembers his father telling him about the Governor and something to do with money. As such, he decides to hear the man out.

*Elefante is annoyed that the young officer has pulled right up to his house rather than communicating with him in a more private manner. Unlike some of the other mobsters in the novel, Elefante has a code of ethics that he is careful to follow. Although he is willing to break the law, he does not do so in ways that harm his community.*



*Again, flowers are a symbol of love—in this case, they symbolize Elefante's love for his mother. Additionally, although Elefante claims to have contracted greed (as one would contract an illness), his actions throughout the rest of the novel say otherwise. However, perhaps the issue is on his mind because of the flashback that is about to occur.*



*Once again, the novel mixes up the chronological order of its events. The Governor's name suggests that he is—or at least was—an important person. Also, his physical appearance suggests that he's lived a full life, as well as a difficult one.*



*Elefante is always careful; in his line of business, he never knows who could come to him asking for help. The Governor could be a criminal, an undercover cop, or anything in between. Indeed, looks can be deceiving, as the old man belts out a song, almost out of nowhere. Although the song seems random and inconsequential, it is actually pertinent to the favor the Governor is looking for.*



*Elefante's amusement at the Governor's current occupation would not be uncommon in the 1960s. Many types of businesses broke down along racial and ethnic lines, and it would indeed be rare to find an Irish person running a bagel shop (bagels are of Jewish origins). The Governor intrigues Elefante. Elefante has a lot of respect for his father, so if the man was truly his acquaintance, then he is worth listening to, especially if there is money involved.*



The Governor tells Elefante that he is an old friend of Elefante's father. The two of them met in prison and became lifelong pals. However, Elefante's father is now dead, and the Governor wants Elefante's help. Apparently, Elefante's father was in possession of a valuable artifact known as "the Venus of Willendorf" before he died. The Governor thinks the artifact is now locked up in one of Elefante's storage containers, which his father once owned.

*Now Elefante knows the significance of the old man's song, which also mentioned "the Venus of Willendorf." This is a money-making opportunity that might be worthwhile for Elefante; after all, there is nothing here that seems to violate his code of ethics.*



Despite his initial skepticism of the Governor, Elefante now recalls that his father once told him about such a man who would come seeking a valuable artifact. Elefante's father told him this story just before he died and failed to tell his son the nature or the location of the artifact. And Elefante's interest piques after the Governor tells him it is worth millions of dollars. The Governor implores Elefante to try to seek out the object, and he instructs Elefante to call him when he finds it.

*The location of the Venus is another one of the novel's central mysteries, and it is the nexus that Elefante's narrative thread circles around. Unbeknownst to Elefante, it also relates to the other key mysteries of the novel. In the beginning of this chapter, he believes that Deems and Sportcoat are not his problem; however, he will eventually discover that they are relevant to his search for the Venus.*



## CHAPTER 6: BUNCH

Bunch, a member of Joe Peck's (and therefore Deems's) criminal enterprise, is sitting in his apartment and reading the newspaper. His subordinate Earl sits nearby and works on a crossword puzzle. Bunch puts down his newspaper and tells Earl that Queens is being destroyed: "The Jews are burning it up." Earl quickly agrees with him, although it doesn't appear that he is actually listening. Feeling empowered, Bunch continues to rant about the position of Jewish people in the city. Every time he says something, Earl responds by saying, "Dig thaaat." However, he doesn't register anything that Bunch is saying.

*Prejudices of all kinds are on display throughout Deacon King Kong, often because characters feel disempowered by their place in society. This is certainly true of Bunch's anti-Semitism. While Bunch rants, Earl sits and does his crossword puzzle, suggesting that he is the more intelligent of the two.*



Eventually, Bunch realizes that Earl isn't listening to him and decides to change the subject. He begins asking Earl about Deems, who is still recovering from the bullet he took to the ear. Earl tells Bunch that Deems is quickly recovering and will be back out on the streets and selling drugs within a week or two. Bunch wants Deems and his men back to selling even sooner, but Earl warns him that the police are still swarming the area because of the shooting.

*Here, Bunch shows his impatience, as Earl is clearly the more cautious of the two. Like Deems, Bunch sees drug dealing as a fast route to the top of the economic ladder. However, also like Deems, his greed often gets the best of him, causing him to make rash decisions.*



Next, the topic of conversation turns to Sportcoat's fate. On the one hand, Bunch insists that there is a need for retaliation, but, on the other, he doesn't want to kill the old man. He knows that Sportcoat's death would cause problems with the people of the Five Ends Church. Additionally, although Bunch is a criminal, he is still a product of a religious upbringing, and he cares about his community. He insists that the best way to improve the Cause is to sell drugs in order to make it less impoverished. As Bunch's right-hand man, it is Earl's job to go after Sportcoat. He does not want to hurt Sportcoat, but he promises to do what Bunch says.

Next, Bunch and Earl switch their conversation to focus on expanding their business. Earl warns Bunch about trying to expand his drug empire too rapidly. Bunch wants to start using the docks, which are Elefante's territory, to smuggle drugs. However, Bunch is ultimately in charge, and he implies that he will do as he pleases.

## CHAPTER 7: THE MARCH OF THE ANTS

Every year in the Cause, just before Fall arrives, "the March of the Ants" occurs in Building 17. The ants come for "Jesus's cheese," which is delivered monthly to the boiler room of the building. The residents call the cheese "Jesus's cheese" because no one knows for sure where it comes from. The ants crawl over piles of junk and under many doors to reach the cheese, which gives off a pungent odor. Once there, they eat their fill and carry off the rest for later. This annual event began in 1951 after a factory worker accidentally transported a large number of these large red ants from Colombia.

For most members of the Cause, the ants are no big deal. They are little bother compared to the variety of other animals that occupy the area. However, Deems always does his best to make sure the ants don't get into his building. While recovering from his shooting, Deems finds himself lying in bed and thinking of the ants. For the most part, his mind is foggy because he's on painkillers. This is a first for Deems, who is only 19-years-old. While on the drugs, he struggles to remember his childhood memories and the names of people he used to know. However, the fact that he can remember the ants makes him feel good. Although the ants have always annoyed him, he has fond memories of getting rid of them with his friends. While dealing with ants, Deems always acted as the group's leader.

*As it turns out, the drug dealers—or at least Bunch—are slightly less bloodthirsty than the other members of the Cause presume. Although Bunch does want to retaliate against Sportcoat, he doesn't plan to kill him. Of course, Sportcoat is still in real danger, but perhaps not as much as people like Hot Sausage think. Meanwhile, the church continues to prove its worth as a valuable social institution, as its very presence protects Sportcoat, at least to some degree.*



*Once again, Earl demonstrates himself to be thoughtful and intelligent, while Bunch comes off as aggressive and unthinking. Of course, Elefante despises drugs, so it is unlikely that he would allow Bunch to use the docks without a fight.*



*The Cause is full of odd traditions, and this is one of them. Like nearly everything and everyone else in the Cause, the ants are outsiders, and they do what they can to survive.*



*Deems's attitude of the ants is typical of who he is as a person. The ants are something that other residents of the Cause are willing to put up with, but not Deems. Deems believes that he deserves better, and he is willing to fight for it. Evidently, Deems was this way from a young age, as he always acted as the group's leader. At the moment, Deems is completely disoriented because of the drugs he is on, and this relatively trivial memory is comforting to him, perhaps because it gets at the core of his identity.*



While thinking about the ants, Deems mutters to himself, “Everything [...] is falling apart,” unaware that anyone is around him. However, he is shocked out of his daydream when his friend Lightbulb, who is standing by his bedside, asks him what he said. This shocks Deems awake, and his thoughts quickly turn to Sportcoat. Deems is understandably angry at Sportcoat and cannot fathom why the old man would shoot him. Deems always let Sportcoat get away with way more than anyone else in the Cause because Sportcoat was his **baseball** coach. Yet, Sportcoat shot him anyway.

Deems always liked Sportcoat because he wasn't like the other members of the Five Ends Church. Deems thinks that the other members of the church spent too much of their time “complaining about nothing” and waiting for God to solve their problems. But Sportcoat rarely complained and had something that the others did not: happiness. Happiness is incredibly rare in the Cause, and Sportcoat was the only figure in Deems's life that had it. Growing up, Deems's grandfather was miserable, and Deems's mother saved all of her love for Jesus and the Bible rather than Deems. Deems's mother didn't even come and visit him when he went to prison. Because of this, Sportcoat became the primary light in Deems's childhood. Deems has plenty of fond memories of playing **baseball** with Sportcoat and going on trips with him.

However, despite all of Deems's positive memories of Sportcoat, he is still furious with him. He begins talking out loud with Lightbulb about the status of their business and about Sportcoat. Although he doesn't want to see Sportcoat hurt or killed, Deems knows he cannot simply let the incident go. He agrees that they should send Earl after Sportcoat to teach Sportcoat a lesson. However, Deems makes it clear that he does not like Earl. He thinks Bunch and Earl cost him too much money for the services they provide. Deems believes it might be best to ask Joe Peck to find him better men. However, for now, Deems decides to wait and see how the situation with Sportcoat plays out.

*Although he acts strong, it is important to remember that Deems is only a teenager who is in way over his head. Deems is surprised and perhaps embarrassed by Lightbulb's presence because he catches Deems in a vulnerable moment. Additionally, Deems is upset because one of the few people who he had a positive relationship with is now his enemy. Sportcoat's decision to shoot Deems is evidently as much a mystery to Deems as it is to everyone else.*



*There is a fundamental optimism about Sportcoat that Deems enjoys, although it is fair to wonder if Sportcoat's positivity is at least, in part, the result of his alcoholism. Regardless, Sportcoat was always there for Deems in ways that his parents and grandparents were not. Additionally, Deems's mother's relationship with religion explains why Deems would turn away from the church. However, his turn away from baseball is more puzzling and can really only be explained by a desire for money and power.*



*Once again, it appears that the drug dealers are not quite as cruel as the residents of the Cause think. Deems also isn't letting Sportcoat off the hook completely, but he doesn't want to see the old deacon dead either. Also, this scene sets up a stark contrast between Deems and Bunch. While Bunch is impatient and bullheaded, Deems is willing to wait for the right opportunity to strike.*



## CHAPTER 8: THE DIG

Sportcoat makes his way over to the Watch Houses where Rufus lives. Although the rest of the community is worried that Sportcoat's life is in danger, Sportcoat is still focused on finding the long-lost Christmas fund. Sportcoat tells Rufus about his plight, and Rufus suggests that he pay a visit to Sister Paul, who was previously responsible for the Christmas fund and might know where it is now. Rufus knows Sister Paul because he was one of the original members of the church. Rufus also tells Sportcoat that it was Sister Paul who initially founded the church. After the church's construction, an Italian man who was fond of Sister Paul painted a portrait of Jesus with the phrase, "May God Hold You in the Palm of His Hand" above Jesus's head.

After his conversation with Rufus, Sportcoat departs from Rufus' place. On his way out, Earl, who is hiding around the corner, attempts to hit Sportcoat with a pipe. However, before Earl can do so, a **baseball** that two neighborhood kids attempted to throw at Sportcoat hits him in the head. The blow knocks Earl down, and his hand lands in a rat trap. Earl curses Sportcoat, who is completely oblivious to Earl's presence in the first place. Sportcoat continues to go on with his day, still unaware that he is in danger.

*Sportcoat continues to live in his own world. He's determined to find the Christmas fund, perhaps because doing so will allow him to finally find peace after Hettie's death. Additionally, the mention of an Italian man brings to mind both Elefante and Joe Peck, as they are the only Italian people mentioned in the novel so far.*



*This passage is another example of the farcical comedy the novel employs. Even though Sportcoat is an old man who is completely unaware of what is going on, Earl's attempt to injure him fails miserably. In fact, not only does Earl fail, but he ends up getting hurt himself. Although Sportcoat comes out of the situation safe, he still doesn't recognize that he is in danger. This continues Sportcoat's streak of being somehow incredibly lucky and misfortunate at the same time.*



## CHAPTER 9: DIRT

Because Jet has likely blown his cover, his higher-ups transfer him to Queens. Meanwhile, they put Potts in charge of the case surrounding Deems's shooting. Potts, along with a younger member of the force, shows up at the local church and asks about Sportcoat. As the police officers enter the church, the younger man takes the lead and asks who is in charge. Sister Gee responds, suggesting she is in charge, but rather than answer the young officer's question, she chastises him for his rude entrance. The young officer ignores her and continues on with his questioning. However, because of his rude behavior, Sister Gee closes down and does not give helpful answers to any of his questions.

*The residents of the Cause are already not amenable to the police, and the young officer only makes matters worse. Even at the best of times, it is unlikely that Sister Gee would provide information, and now it seems almost impossible. Sister Gee probably sees the officer's behavior as not only a slight to herself, but also to God—they are in a church, after all.*



Because the young detective is rude and arrogant, Potts sends him outside and decides to perform the questioning on his own. He apologizes to Sister Gee for the young man's behavior, and she seems to accept his apology. The two restart the conversation by properly introducing themselves. Both playfully joke about the strangeness of the other's name. Then, rather than immediately questioning her about Sportcoat, Potts asks Sister Gee personal questions about herself and what she does for a living. Sister Gee happily answers his questions—she enjoys talking to Potts and appreciates his good manners. Potts learns that Sister Gee is a housekeeper. He comments that both of them make a living cleaning up dirt.

As Sister Gee and Potts converse, Potts realizes that he is attracted to Sister Gee, and she seems to like him in return. However, Potts is married to another woman, and so he does not act on his feelings. Nonetheless, his and Sister Gee's conversation is largely friendly, and often veers away from what Potts originally came to talk about. Potts tells Sister Gee that he plans to retire soon and looks forward to going fishing.

Eventually, Potts does focus in on police business. He asks Sister Gee questions about a man named Thelonius Ellis, a name she claims not to recognize. Clearly, Potts is searching for information about the shooting and really wants to know about Sportcoat, but Thelonius Ellis is not Sportcoat's real name. As such, Sister Gee is not lying when she tells Potts that she doesn't know who he is talking about.

Still, Sister Gee does provide Potts with some new information. She tells him that Deems survived the shooting because Jet, whom everyone in the Cause knows is an undercover policeman, yelled out a warning. As such, she recommends Potts speak to Jet if he wants more information about the shooting. Although Sister Gee doesn't give Potts the information he is looking for, they depart on good terms, and Sister Gee tells him to come see her again.

*Unlike the young detective, Potts knows how to get on Sister Gee's good side. This is not a matter of manipulation; Potts is genuinely annoyed by the younger officer's impropriety and wants to make it up to Sister Gee. Rather than immediately resume questioning, Potts lets the conversation sway elsewhere; he takes an interest in Sister Gee as a person rather than merely as an object that is impeding his investigation.*



*Many of the characters in the novel are past middle age and are looking forward to retirement; they see that the world is only growing more complicated and violent and do not want any part of it. This is certainly true of both Potts and Elefante.*



*Neither Sister Gee nor the reader have heard of a Thelonius Ellis up to this point. Of course, Sister Gee knows that it is Sportcoat that Potts is really looking for, but she doesn't tell him that. She feels that she is doing her duty to both Sportcoat and Potts by not telling the full truth.*



*Perhaps because she likes Potts, Sister Gee does want to provide him with some information, even though it is unlikely to aid him in his investigation. Also, the fact that Jet was so conspicuous in the Cause demonstrates how little the police force understands the people they are meant to be policing.*



## CHAPTER 10: SOUP

The day after visiting Rufus, Sportcoat lays in bed and talks to Hettie, who is helping him decide what shirt to wear. Sportcoat is happy that the two of them are getting along for once. Just then, loud noises coming from outside Sportcoat's window interrupts their conversation. Sportcoat looks out his window and finds that a huge crowd has gathered in the central plaza of the Cause. Though Sportcoat doesn't know it yet, the various residents of the Cause have come together to celebrate Soup Lopez's release from prison. No one remembers why Soup went to prison, but they are glad he is back. A band known as Los Soñadores plays Latin music as everyone dances and congratulations Soup on returning home.

Wanting to see what all of the fuss is about, Sportcoat goes outside and shows his face in public for the first time since shooting Deems. Before long, Sportcoat finds Hot Sausage and asks him what the celebration is all about. Rather the answer Sportcoat's question, Hot Sausage immediately tells Sportcoat that he needs to leave before Deems (or one of his men) comes and kill him. At this point, Deems is now out of the hospital and is likely to show up at the ongoing party. However, Hot Sausage's warning barely registers with Sportcoat.

Instead, Sportcoat continues to ask questions about the purpose of the party. Eventually, Hot Sausage decides to tell Sportcoat about Soup's release, hoping that an answer will allow them to return to the more pressing matter at hand. However, Hot Sausage's strategy fails, as Sportcoat continues to ignore his warnings about Deems and instead continues to ask questions about Soup. Sportcoat likes Soup because he used to be a member of his **baseball** team. Unfortunately, like many members of Sportcoat's baseball team, Soup ended up getting in trouble with the law at a young age.

As Sportcoat and Hot Sausage navigate their way through the crowd, they come across Sister Gee, who tells Sportcoat that the police are looking for him. She also says that they mentioned the name "Thelonius Ellis." This gets a rise out of Hot Sausage, whose real name turns out to be Thelonius Ellis. Hot Sausage explains to Sister Gee that the police are likely confused because he and Sportcoat have an ID that they sometimes use, which contains Hot Sausage's name and Sportcoat's picture. This mix-up angers Sister Gee, who now thinks that Potts will assume she lied to him.

*Although the Cause's population is predominantly African American, there are a fair share of Latino people who live there as well. Unlike many racial and ethnic groups in the novel, the African American and Latino residents of the Cause get along with one another and celebrate one another's successes. Unfortunately, spending time in prison is a far from uncommon experience for members of both groups, even if the crimes that land them there are relatively inconsequential. Whatever Soup did to land himself in jail, it presumably wasn't too bad, otherwise someone would probably remember it.*



*Because Soup's party is a community event, it's all but certain that Deems or one of his men will spot Sportcoat there. However, Sportcoat evidently does not believe Hot Sausage, or he does not care, because he chooses to stay.*



*Both members of Sportcoat's baseball team the novel has mentioned thus far have turned to a life of crime. It is no wonder that Sportcoat continues to push baseball so hard; it seems to be one of the few healthy alternatives to the path that Deems is now pursuing. Meanwhile, Hot Sausage continues to prove himself a committed and loyal friend, albeit an ineffective one.*



*The mix-up with Sportcoat's identity is important and something to keep in mind as the plot unfolds. Sister Gee is upset not because she thinks she is likely to get in trouble with the law, but because she likes Potts and doesn't want him to think poorly of her.*



Not long after Sportcoat and Hot Sausage's conversation with Sister Gee, a fight breaks out among some of the Cause residents. Meanwhile, Earl, who is nearby, begins making his way to Sportcoat with the intention of hurting him. However, before he can do so, Soup takes a bottle of alcohol out of Sportcoat's hand and chucks it outside the range of the crowd, inadvertently striking Earl on the head and knocking him out. Before long, the fighting attracts the attention of the police and the Cause residents scatter as they hear their sirens in the distance. Sister Gee asks Soup to help her carry away Earl so that the police won't find him there. Together they take Earl to the train station, wake him up, and warn him not to come back.

*Once again, the novel turns to farcical comedy as Sportcoat obliviously manages to avoid Earl for a second time. Hot Sausage's prediction comes true—someone was trying to hurt Sportcoat—but Sportcoat seems to be protected by good luck. Additionally, Sister Gee and Soup prove themselves to be invaluable allies for Sportcoat; they take Earl away and threaten him, although their threats fall on deaf ears.*



## CHAPTER 11: POKEWEED

Not far from the train station where Sister Gee and Soup are talking to Earl, sits Elefante's house. Elefante and his mother are there discussing pokeweed, a plant that grows around the harbor. Elefante thinks the plant might be poisonous, but his mother assures him that it is not—rather, it is “good for the blood.” At the moment, Mrs. Elefante is slicing up some pokeweed, which she apparently plans to eat. Elefante tells his mother to go to a doctor and get some blood thinners instead, but she dismisses this idea as a waste of money.

*Mrs. Elefante's suggestion that pokeweed can help her heart is reminiscent of the role that flowers play in the novel; that is, the heart is the organ most associated with love, and flowers act as a symbol of love throughout the text. Elefante's conversations with his mother are mundane, and it is no wonder that he wants to build a life of his own. He loves his mother, but he wants a wife.*



Elefante tells his mother that he won't be able to help her with her plants today. Mrs. Elefante tells her son that she does not need his help anyway because a deacon from the Five Ends Church (Sportcoat) is coming soon to take care of her garden. Elefante vaguely knows who she is talking about. He tells her to keep the man out of the house, explaining that he drinks too much. This annoys Mrs. Elefante, who tells her son that the deacon knows more about plants than anyone else in the entire Cause.

*Here, the link between Sportcoat and the Elefantes is revealed, although its significance is still a mystery. Though he barely knows him, even Elefante knows that Sportcoat drinks too much. While this is true, Mrs. Elefante, like the members of the Five Ends Church, is willing to look past this flaw to embrace Sportcoat's good qualities.*



Ultimately, Elefante drops the subject and instead thinks to himself about race relations in his neighborhood. Overall, he likes having African American neighbors. They don't disrupt his business, and they are kind. He doesn't understand the hate that many of the other racial groups in the city throw their way. He thinks that more people should set aside their prejudices and learn to get along with one another.

*Elefante is relatively tolerant of other races compared to other characters in the book. This mindset dictates how he runs his business and contributes to why he does not get involved in the drug trade.*



After the conversation with his mother, Elefante leaves for a meeting with the Governor to learn more about the mysterious artifact that his father supposedly possessed before his death. Elefante thinks that it is unlikely that the artifact still exists, but he still decides to pay the old man the courtesy of another meeting. Plus, after talking to his mother and placing some calls with his father's former contacts, he knows that the Governor's story is at least partially true.

*Even though Elefante thinks it is unlikely that the artifact exists, he is obviously interested in it. After all, he seems to have spent a considerable amount of time trying to locate it.*





And yet, previously, when Elefante searched all of his storage units, he found nothing. Elefante is angry with himself for not remembering more about what his father said regarding the Governor. Elefante's father was a quiet man and when he spoke, it was only to say something important. As such, Elefante feels as though he should know more about the Governor and his situation, but he doesn't.

On his way to his car, Elefante thinks about retirement. He longs to be away from his smuggling business and would much rather relax in paradise. However, he recognizes this desire as a pipe dream. Although retirement is a possibility, if he left New York City, there would be no one around to take care of his mother. As such, Elefante must remain in his current position—a lonely middle-aged man in charge of a local smuggling ring.

Before Elefante can get in his car, Joe Peck pulls up to Elefante's house in an expensive car and asks him for a favor. He wants Elefante to help him with a one-time deal to smuggle some heroin into the Cause via the docks. Immediately, Elefante rejects the offer. In response, Peck grows angry with Elefante, and his temples bulge. Elefante immediately picks up on Peck's anger. Peck has always had a temper—it's one of the many reasons that Elefante does not like or respect him.

Peck begins talking about the recent events in the Cause. He is mad about Deems's shooting because it's creating problems for his business. Deems is one of his best men, and Peck is angry at the "old man" who shot him. Peck is convinced that the old man is hiding from him and his men. He also tells Elefante that he's sent a man after the shooter to get revenge. None of this information is important to Elefante, who tells Peck to get on with his point. Peck tries to convince Elefante that smuggling the heroin is in his best interest. Furthermore, Peck promises Elefante a lot of money. The money is enticing to Elefante, and, for a moment, he considers Peck's offer.

Ultimately, Elefante turns Peck down. Elefante has never trafficked drugs before, in keeping with the moral standards of his father. The most harmful substance Elefante is willing to smuggle is cigarettes, and he doesn't plan to change that, even for someone like Peck who can get him a lot of money. Elefante sees what heroin is doing to his community and those that surround him and wants no part of it. Additionally, he does not like or respect Joe Peck enough to carry out such a job for him. Peck is angry when Elefante turns down the job and leaves upset. As Elefante gets in his car, he thinks about how he wants out of his life of crime. He wonders whether it is possible for him to retire and live out the rest of his days with a woman who loves him.

*Elefante finds himself wishing that he paid more attention to his father; had he done so, he would be a wealthy man right now. Elefante is now beginning to realize just how little he knew about his father and the people he worked with.*



*Although Elefante lives a life of crime, it is not something he enjoys. As he continues to age, he longs for a more traditional life, far away from the city where he was raised. However, he knows he has other responsibilities, especially in regard to his mother, that make his desires impossible. This is presumably depressing to him.*



*Elefante dislike Peck because Peck lacks the tact and ethical standard that Elefante holds himself to. Peck acts like an entitled child who gets upset as soon as he doesn't get what he wants. Unlike Elefante, Peck has no problem with shipping in the drugs that are ravaging the Cause community. Peck is one of the few characters for which the novel has no sympathy.*



*Notably, Peck doesn't care about Deems; he cares only about his business. He also has no idea what is actually going on in the Cause. Peck thinks that Sportcoat is hiding from him, which couldn't be further from the truth. Meanwhile, the money Peck offers Elefante is enticing to him because of his wish to retire and escape New York City.*



*Again, Elefante proves himself to be an admirable criminal; he does not put his own wants and desires over those of the Cause community. Meanwhile, Peck continues to act like a petulant child who is upset that Elefante is not doing what he asks. Peck does not understand Elefante. He does not see the residents of the Cause as people; they are only things from which he can extract money.*



## CHAPTER 12: MOJO

Back in the Cause, Sportcoat sits alone in Sausage's boiler room and drinks "King Kong." He knows he is a couple hours late to help an old Italian lady garden (Mrs. Elefante, whose name he cannot remember), but he doesn't think she'll mind. Instead, Sportcoat drinks and once again begins talking to an imaginary Hettie.

When Hettie first appears, Sportcoat worries that she plans to lecture him about what happened at Soup's party, and he tells her not to bother. Hettie tells him that she doesn't care what happened at Soup's party—Sportcoat walks around getting "spit on" all of the time anyway. This makes Sportcoat angry. He asks Hettie who she thinks is spitting on him, and she responds, "You spit on yourself." Sportcoat denies this accusation and tries to prove that he is an honest man and a hard worker whose community respects him. He tells Hettie that he plans on returning to **baseball** soon. However, Hettie dismisses the importance of baseball for the community. Sportcoat assures her that the sport is important, but Hettie responds that she wouldn't know, because Sportcoat never invited her to a game.

Hettie then tells Sportcoat that she was lonely in their marriage. Sportcoat tells Hettie to stop complaining and then steers their conversation back toward a more typical topic: the missing Christmas fund. This time, Hettie tells him, "It's in God's hands. In the palm of His hand actually." But this means nothing to Sportcoat; he continues to ask other questions about the money, but they get him nowhere. Quickly, he gets frustrated with Hettie, who assures him that she is giving him the answer he is looking for, even though he doesn't know it.

As this conversation is going on, Hot Sausage arrives to find Sportcoat talking to himself. Hot Sausage immediately recognizes that Sportcoat dipped into his supply of King Kong, and he decides to drink some himself. As Hot Sausage and Sportcoat take turns drinking the King Kong, Hot Sausage works on one of the building's generators, which keeps failing. In doing so, he causes the power to go out in the room and then recruits a drunken Sportcoat to help him. He asks Sportcoat to hit a nearby switch to restore the power, but Sportcoat refuses, insisting that he will be electrocuted. Sportcoat promises him that he is not around any live wires and won't get hurt.

*Although he is a talented gardener, here, Sportcoat chooses drinking over gardening. Hettie will later chastise Sportcoat for drinking rather than spending time cultivating his skills with plants.*



*Notably, almost every time Hettie appears, she and Sportcoat always fight. Sportcoat's imagined version of Hettie is angry at Sportcoat and it sounds as though she was unhappy with their marriage. However, whether this version of Hettie is like the real Hettie is unclear at this point in the novel. Notably, Sportcoat kept Hettie away from one of the most important aspects of his life: baseball. This means she never got to see Sportcoat at his best. The novel never provides a clear reason for why Sportcoat didn't invite her to his games, and it seems odd and out of place for Sportcoat given that baseball is such a central part of his life and the community.*



*Although Sportcoat doesn't realize it yet, Hettie is giving him a clue to the location of an item that will solve the problem of the missing Christmas fund. Earlier in the novel, the Governor tells Elefante that Elefante's father sent him a letter saying that the Venus is sitting in the palm of God's hands. Of course, Sportcoat doesn't know this because he wasn't present for the meetings between Elefante and the Governor.*



*Part of the reason that it is so difficult for Sportcoat to quit using alcohol is that alcohol is around him at nearly all times. All his friends also drink to excess, and even if they don't have as much of a problem as Sportcoat, they still certainly use alcohol as a coping mechanism.*



As Sportcoat and Hot Sausage argue back and forth, Earl sneaks into the room, once again planning to hurt Sportcoat. Just as Sausage tries to warn Sportcoat of Earl's presence, Sportcoat finally flips the switch to restore the power. Almost simultaneously, Earl steps on a nearby live wire; he electrocutes himself and loses consciousness. Surprised, Sportcoat and Hot Sausage carry Earl out of the building and into a nearby alley. Eventually, Earl comes to and decides to complete a different job for Bunch before returning to him in the hopes of offsetting his thrice-failed hit on Sportcoat.

*Once again, the novel quickly shifts its tone from serious to farcical. At this point, Earl doesn't know what to make of his attempts to harm Sportcoat. It seems as though some kind of unseen force protects Sportcoat and thwarts Earl.*



## CHAPTER 13: THE COUNTRY GIRL

Elefante heads to the Bronx, where he meets the Governor. To Elefante's surprise, the Governor owns a bagel shop, which his daughter Melissa runs. Elefante is struck by Melissa's beauty and wonders if something could happen between the two of them. He thinks Melissa looks like a country girl and imagines a future together where they are running a country store. The Governor notices Elefante's interest in Melissa and appears to be pleased.

*The Governor seems to hold the answers to all of Elefante's problems. Not only does he tip Elefante off to the Venus's existence, but he also has a daughter whom Elefante is romantically interested in. With some luck, Elefante could get the wife and retirement he always dreamed of.*



Elefante and the Governor head to the Governor's apartment to discuss their business in private. Once there, the Governor tells Elefante that no one knows about the artifact except the two of them. Even Melissa doesn't know, and, for now, the Governor means to keep it that way. Elefante asks the Governor about how he came to own a bagel shop. The Governor tells him that his wife, who has since died, bought the store while he was in prison. Through hard work, his wife turned the shop into a successful business so that the family could survive while the Governor was incarcerated. Although her plan works, she dies only a few years after the Governor is released from prison.

*Unlike many characters in the novel, the Governor's wife built her business from the ground up, fair and square. Seeing his wife's resolve seems to have convinced the Governor to turn away from a life of crime.*



The Governor tells Elefante the story of the Venus of Willendorf. Apparently, the Governor's brother, Macy, served in Vienna during the World War II. While there, he found a variety of rare items hidden away from the Nazis. Macy gathered these items up and shipped them back to America, where he could collect them after the war. For the most part, Macy held on to these items for the majority of his life, though he did sell a few here and there. It was only toward the end of his life that he showed the Governor his collection. The Governor urged him to do the right thing and return to the objects to Vienna and Macy complied. This was easy for Macy to do—he worked at the post office and knew how to make sure the packages wouldn't be traced back to him.

*In World War II, the Nazis often either destroyed valuable artifacts or took them for themselves. As such, treasure troves like the one Macy finds were not uncommon. That said, like several other characters in the novel, Macy is unbelievably lucky. Additionally, like Elefante, Macy and the Governor have a strong moral sense. Rather than keep all of the items for themselves to get rich, they return almost all of them to where they belong.*



Although Macy returned most of the artifacts to Vienna, there was one he could not let go of: the Venus of Willendorf. This artifact is a small statue of a voluptuous woman that is only the size of a bar of soap. Nonetheless, it is the most valuable item of everything Macy owned. Macy gave the Governor the statue, which the Governor in turn gave to Elefante's father for safekeeping. The Governor planned to sell the Venus and split the profits with Elefante's father, but Elefante's father died before he could do so. However, recently, the Governor found a new buyer for the Venus who promises to pay him three million dollars to purchase it. The Governor went back and forth with the potential buyer for some time and knows that he is a serious person who will pay when the time is right.

However, because the Governor promised this mysterious person the Venus, he worries about what will happen if he cannot produce it. He fears for his own life as well as Melissa's and urges Elefante to think hard about where the Venus could possibly be. Elefante tells the Governor that he's searched all of his storage units, but to no avail. The Governor gives Elefante a postcard that Elefante's father previously sent him with a traditional Irish blessing on the back. The Governor is convinced that the blessing is a code that will lead them to the Venus. Elefante thinks he's probably right but does not know what the code means. Nonetheless, he is sure the statue is hiding right under their noses because his father rarely went any further than a few blocks from his home.

*The novel almost seems to draw a parallel between the Venus and Melissa, describing both as voluptuous and incredibly valuable to the Governor and Elefante.*



*Here, the Venus becomes not only an object of desire, but one of necessity as well—for both the Governor and Elefante. Both of them love Melissa, and not finding the Venus could mean putting her life in danger.*



## CHAPTER 14: RAT

Lightbulb, one of Deems's henchmen, goes to a meeting with Bunch. He tells Bunch that Deems is not as effective at his job as he should be. He claims that because Deems grew up in the church, he does not sell to as many people as he should, and he makes sure to keep up his choir boy image around the church community.

*Indeed, Deems's religious upbringing does affect how he does business. Although Deems clearly doesn't abide by the teachings of the church, he still respects it as a valuable social institution. It instilled community values in him from a young age, and although he is hardly a model citizen, he still cares for the residents of the Cause.*



Deems's primary selling location is near a flagpole, a central location in the Causeway Projects, which he claimed by severely injuring another drug dealer who had previously wronged him. Lightbulb tells this story to Bunch. After Deems's grandfather died, Deems stopped playing **baseball** and turned to drug dealing instead. Deems's cousin Rooster recruited him, and Deems joined a crew that consisted of himself, Rooster, Lightbulb, Bumps, Beanie, and Sugar. Rooster was the leader of the crew. After selling drugs for a while, the boys were caught and sent to juvy. While serving time, Rooster was killed. This was difficult on Deems, and it also meant that the group needed a new leader. Also, at one point, Bumps brutally beat up Deems and took some of his money to get back at Deems for not sharing his rice and beans with him.

The first to get out of juvy was Bumps. As such, he made himself the new leader of the group. When the rest of the members of the crew got out of jail, Bumps gave them jobs but made it clear that they worked for him. Deems agreed to work for Bumps and pretends to forgive and forget the incident in juvy. However, instead he secretly plots revenge.

One day, while Bumps was selling drugs by the flagpole, a woman approached him and offered sexual favors for drugs. Bumps agreed to the deal, and the woman leads him into an alleyway where some Jamaican men to whom Bumps had sold dangerous fake cocaine jump him. The Jamaican men cut Bumps up bad, leaving him disabled. Deems watched the entire incident, which he orchestrated, from afar. Then, as soon as the Jamaican men left, he went inside, grabbed a boiling pot of rice and beans, ran over to Bumps, and dumped it on him. After his revenge was complete, Deems took charge of the flagpole.

Lightbulb gives all of this information to Bunch in the hopes that Bunch will let him take over Deems's flagpole. Bunch tells Lightbulb that he will consider it. However, when Lightbulb pushes him for an answer, Bunch tells him that he's not going to give the flagpole to someone who just stabbed his friend in the back.

Lightbulb leaves and Bunch considers the best way to get rid of Deems. He agrees with Lightbulb's assessment and wants Deems gone because he has a large quantity of heroin coming in from Joe Peck. Additionally, Bunch tells Earl, whose been sitting in the corner and listening in on the conversation with Lightbulb, that he's called in someone else to deal with Sportcoat because Earl cannot seem to handle him. Unknown to Bunch, Earl recently decided to become a police informant to avoid jail time. He worries about what will happen if Bunch finds out.

*Lightbulb's story explains how Deems turned from a friendly neighborhood boy into a vicious drug dealer. Evidently, after the death of Deems's grandfather, Deems needed money and did not know where else to turn. Baseball was not going to make him money any time soon; after all, he was still a minor. Because Deems does not have a family to look out for him—except for Rooster, who is already a drug dealer—his drug dealing associates become his family.*



*Here, tension continues to build between Bumps and Deems. Bumps seems to think he's asserted his dominance over Deems and that Deems will simply fall in line. However, that is far from the truth.*



*Although Bumps is hardly a likeable character, his beating is sudden and shocking. Most of the violence in the novel is only referenced in retrospect, but here there is a graphic description of what can happen when taking part in this lifestyle. Clearly, Deems never forgot what Bumps did to him in prison, considering he made rice and beans part of his revenge.*



*Lightbulb, ironically, is not very bright. Essentially, he gives Bunch a ton of free information and gets nothing in return. Meanwhile, Bunch continues to prove himself to be a capable player in the drug trade.*



*Ironically, after Bunch just chastised Lightbulb for turning on his friend, it turns out that Earl has flipped allegiances as well. For the next few chapters, tension builds over the new identity of the new hitman that is coming into town.*



## CHAPTER 15: YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT'S COMING

Potts returns to the Five Ends Church for another conversation with Sister Gee. He informs her that one of his men saw her and Soup carrying Earl to the train station. He warns her that she could be in trouble with the law if she continues to do things like this. He also tells her that she needs to trust the police to handle such situations, a claim that Sister Gee regards skeptically. In addition, Potts tells her that he's arrested Earl, so she doesn't need to worry about him coming after Sportcoat anymore.

Potts insists that Sister Gee hand Sportcoat over to the police so they can protect him instead. Otherwise, he says, matters will only get worse—both for Sportcoat and for the community as a whole. In response, Sister Gee asks Potts why he doesn't just arrest Deems if the police are so powerful. Potts tells her that Deems has wealthy connections that will keep him out of jail no matter what the police do.

Still, Sister Gee does not help Potts find Sportcoat. This saddens Potts, who cares for Sister Gee and does not want to see the community suffer. He warns her that a new hitman is coming after Sportcoat, a fact he learned from Earl. As such, he recommends that the members of Cause stay away from the central plaza, where violence is likely to occur. Again, Sister Gee refuses to heed Potts's advice and Potts turns to leave, dejected. As he leaves, Sister Gee tells him to keep coming around to keep her updated, which makes him feel a little better.

## CHAPTER 16: MAY GOD HOLD YOU...

At this point, it's been roughly two weeks since Sportcoat shot Deems. It is a Wednesday, and Sportcoat is spending his time with Mrs. Elefante, helping her with her garden and gathering herbs. Together, they go to an empty lot in search of pokeweed that Mrs. Elefante insists will help her heart. Eventually, they accomplish their goal and Sportcoat takes Mrs. Elefante home.

When they return, Mrs. Elefante is weary and needs to lie down, so she leaves Sportcoat with instructions for the rest of what she needs done. Sportcoat finishes up his work. As he's getting ready to leave, he spots Elefante, whom he doesn't know. Sportcoat explains his presence to Elefante, and then Elefante introduces himself to Sportcoat. At first, Sportcoat is taken aback. Although he didn't recognize Elefante, his reputation precedes him, and Sportcoat is amazed, albeit nervous, to be in the presence of a genuine mobster. He looks forward to sharing the story when he returns home.

*Here, the conversation between Potts and Sister Gee continues along the same lines as before. As a Black woman, Sister Gee does not trust the police to help her community. Instead, she expects that matters will only get worse with them involved. Also, their conversation fills in the background of how Earl presumably became a police informant: Potts arrested and recruited him.*



*Although the police are powerful, they have their limitations. Some of those limitations come from the level of corruption that exists in the police force. After all, if Elefante has police on his payroll, then Joe Peck certainly does as well.*



*The relationship between Sister Gee and Potts is an interesting one because both characters feels wholeheartedly that they are doing the right thing. However, their different backgrounds and experiences keep them from seeing eye to eye. Nonetheless, the two of them respect one another and it seems that their romantic interest in each other is only continuing to grow.*



*Although a lot happens in the novel, it all takes place over the course of a few weeks. Here, Sportcoat is doing what he does best—helping out a member of his community with her plants. It is in these moments that Sportcoat is at his most endearing—and shows the most potential for redemption.*



*This is the first meeting between the novel's two main characters, which occurs in a flashback. Elefante and Sportcoat come from two different worlds; Sportcoat is the neighborhood alcoholic, while Elefante is a major player in the city's criminal underworld. Nevertheless, the two of them have one important thing in common, even though they haven't figured out what it is yet.*



To thank Sportcoat for helping his mother, Elefante attempts to give Sportcoat money for his work. However, Sportcoat rejects it. He tells Elefante that his mother already paid him enough and that he already feels thankful that Elefante returned Hettie's body to him. Elefante gives up his attempt to pay Sportcoat and the old deacon turns to leave. As a way of saying goodbye, Sportcoat says, "I hope God holds you in the palm of His hand," which catches Elefante's attention. He asks Sportcoat for the origin of the saying and questions him about his role as a deacon at Five Ends Church.

Sportcoat tells him that the saying is painted across the top of the mural at the church, and it is something that the members of the congregation often say. At first, Sportcoat is excited to tell Elefante about the church because he thinks he is interested in it for spiritual reasons. However, he becomes more skeptical as their conversation drags on. Nonetheless, the two men depart on good terms. Sportcoat feels he has a story to tell, and Elefante thinks he might be one step closer to solving the mystery of the missing Venus.

*This passage presents both Sportcoat and Elefante at their best. Both men do their best to express gratitude for each other. Ultimately, though, it is Sportcoat that does Elefante the bigger favor by mentioning the motto of the Five Ends Church. The motto is the same phrase that Elefante's father used in a letter to the Governor regarding the Venus.*



*This is a semi-comical passage that finds Sportcoat completely oblivious to what Elefante is actually after. Although Elefante has yet to discover what the connection is, he now knows that the Five Ends Church has something to do with the location of the missing Venus.*



## CHAPTER 17: HAROLD

Sportcoat and Hot Sausage talk about the best way to solve Sportcoat's predicament with Deems. Sportcoat thinks that the best way to solve matters is to speak with Deems in private. He doesn't think Deems will actually hurt him because he's built up too much goodwill over the years as Deems's **baseball** coach. Additionally, he thinks he can get Deems to give up drug dealing and to start playing baseball again instead. He wants Hot Sausage to help him arrange a private meeting, though Hot Sausage wants nothing to do with his plan. However, after discussing matters a bit more and downing a healthy amount of King Kong, Hot Sausage eventually decides to help Sportcoat.

In the meantime, Deems has other matters on his mind. He is less focused on Sportcoat and more focused on how to get rid of Bunch. He thinks that Bunch and his men are useless and wants to operate his branch of the drug trade without them. He considers the best way to present his argument to Joe Peck. Additionally, Deems thinks it likely that Lightbulb ratted on him. He is also worried about the new hitman that Bunch recruited, who might his gun on Deems after he is finished with Sportcoat.

*Despite what everyone else tells him, Sportcoat still has faith in his relationship with Deems. However, it remains unclear whether that faith is justified. Meanwhile, Hot Sausage proves himself to be a loyal friend. He knows that helping Sportcoat is dangerous, but he decides to do it anyway.*



*In the wake of his shooting, Deems is worried that his early success in the drug trade is beginning to go away. As such, he wants to make changes, starting with Bunch. Although Bunch is capable, Deems is correct to point out that Bunch never does anything that is helpful to him. Also, Deems once again proves his intelligence by correctly identifying Lightbulb as the rat.*



In an attempt to get away from his hectic life, Deems goes on a date with a girl named Phyllis. She is new to the area and has recently begun buying drugs from Deems. She promises Deems that she is just a casual user and is not hooked, unlike many of his normal customers. Deems believes her and is especially interested in her because she, like Deems, was brought up in the church. Because of her upbringing, Deems suspects that she will be more fun and “wild.”

Deems and Phyllis have a conversation on a pier that begins to turn sexual. Nearby, Deems has one of his men standing guard in case someone tries to sneak up on him. Before Deems and Phyllis can get anywhere, Hot Sausage appears, clearly inebriated, and dressed in an umpire uniform. Deems tells Hot Sausage to go away, but Hot Sausage insists on talking to him in private. Deems refuses, but Hot Sausage relates his message anyway. He tells Deems that Sportcoat wants to meet with him to get rid of any bad blood that may exist because of the shooting.

Before their conversation can go any further, Phyllis takes a gun from her jacket and shoots Deems’s bodyguard. She then turns the gun to Deems and Hot Sausage and shoots both of them as well. Hot Sausage gets hit in the chest, and Deems takes a bullet to the arm. In desperation, Deems hurls himself into the water to try to escape. Unfortunately, Deems cannot swim, and his broken arm makes matters even worse. However, just as he thinks he will drown, Sportcoat, who has been hiding under the pier, appears and pulls Deems’s head above the water. Sportcoat tells Deems to be quiet until Phyllis vacates the scene. After Phyllis is gone, Sportcoat takes Deems to shore and goes to attend to Hot Sausage.

## CHAPTER 18: INVESTIGATION

Shortly after the shootings at the pier, the Cause residents find themselves waiting in line for their monthly cheese ration. Usually, Hot Sausage hands out the cheese, but because he is nowhere to be found, Sister Gee takes over the operation. All of the residents know about the shooting, but no one seems to know the details. Similar to the first time Deems got shot, many rumors circulate, though no one knows what to think of the incident.

*Here, we see Deems finally engaging in behavior that is typical of a teenager, although the nature Deems and Phyllis’s relationship is troubling. Also, this passage demonstrates that Deems is acutely aware of the negative impact of the product he sells. After all, he would not even go on a date with someone who regularly uses it.*



*Apparently, Hot Sausage has put on the umpire uniform in an attempt to appeal to Deems’s nostalgia for his baseball days. Ultimately, though, he just looks ridiculous, and his drunkenness doesn’t help matters.*



*Evidently, Phyllis is not who she pretends to be. Rather than a heroin addict, Phyllis is the new assassin in town who’s been hired to take out Deems and Sportcoat. It is very likely that she would have been successful Sportcoat hadn’t been hiding under the dock. This is the second time that Deems is shot in only a matter of weeks. This time, instead of doing the shooting, Sportcoat emerges as the hero.*



*Despite the violence that surrounds them, the Cause residents still continue to participate in their regular traditions. Once again, all anyone can do is speculate, because the only people present for this shooting are injured, in hiding, or on the run.*





While working, Sister Gee spots Potts, who shows up with a number of other officers who have come to gather information about the shooting. Potts tells Sister Gee he warned her that something like this might happen. He also informs her of what he knows so far. Right now, it looks as though Deems's bodyguard was killed, but Deems and Sportcoat are still alive and in the hospital. However, Hot Sausage is nowhere to be found and is presumed to be dead.

Sister Gee listens to the story but feels that something is amiss. She recalls the mix-up regarding the ID that Hot Sausage told her about previously and wonders if the police have once again confused Hot Sausage for Sportcoat. However, she doesn't say anything about this to Potts. Additionally, Potts asks Sister Gee if he can speak to Hot Sausage's girlfriend because he keeps talking about her in his sleep and implying that she who shot him. Sister Gee promises Potts that that is not the case, but he insists on speaking to her anyway. Sister Gee tells him where the woman lives, which is on the other side of the cause, even though she knows the woman was just inside getting her cheese ration.

## CHAPTER 19: DOUBLE-CROSSED

The following night, at 2:00 AM, Elefante and his men are unloading a shipment of TVs at his dock when Joe Peck shows up to talk to Elefante. Peck's car frightens Elefante's men, who immediately hide, thinking Peck might be the police. Even the boat captain flees the scene, despite the fact that there are still more TVs to unload. This angers Elefante. Joe Peck gets out of his car and makes his way toward Elefante, clearly angry himself. Immediately, Elefante chastises Joe for interrupting him while his men were in the middle of unloading a shipment. Joe dismisses Elefante's concerns and tells him that he'll pay for whatever Elefante didn't get to unload.

Elefante doesn't know what Peck is so upset about and cannot imagine why he came to see him, since he already told him he wouldn't help him with his drug shipment. When Elefante asks Peck what he wants, Peck thinks that Elefante is messing with him. He tells Elefante that the police are all over him now because of what Elefante did. In response, Elefante swears that he has no clue what Peck is talking about.

*Whether Potts could have prevented the shootings is up for debate. On the one hand, the situation in the Cause seems worse than ever. On the other, there is nothing to say that police interference couldn't have made matters even worse.*



*Again, the police make a fundamental mistake—one that Sister Gee is sure to keep to herself. If it is true that the police think Hot Sausage is Sportcoat, then it is possible that Sportcoat is dead. However, the reader knows that Sportcoat was alive and well at the end of the last chapter, meaning that there is likely something else going on that neither the police nor Sister Gee has figured out.*



*Elefante always works in the middle of the night to ensure that the police don't interrupt his business. However, Peck's presence interrupts him and messes up his shipment. Normally this would cost Elefante money, but Peck promises to pay him back. This suggests the Peck has arrived on serious and urgent business. Additionally, it indicates that money is not an issue for Peck; shelling out the money for multiple TVs on a whim is no big deal to him.*



*Although Elefante is usually up to date on what goes on in the Cause, he clearly has yet to hear about the shooting at the docks. However, his connection to Sportcoat makes him seem suspicious to Peck, who is convinced that Elefante is trying to mess up his business.*



Peck tells Elefante about the shooting at the pier and assumes that Elefante had something to do with it. Surprisingly, this is the first that Elefante has heard of the matter, and he insists that he had nothing to do with it. At first, Peck doesn't believe Elefante. Peck is under the impression that the shooter was Sportcoat (Peck knows that Sportcoat works for Mrs. Elefante). Elefante once again insists that he is not involved and finds Peck's telling of the story unlikely. He thinks Sportcoat is too old and too much of a drunk to be able to effectively dispatch multiple young men with a gun.

Still, Peck remains suspicious. The pier where Sportcoat supposedly shot Deems and his bodyguard was the same place where Peck planned to receive his large heroin shipment. Now, the police are swarming the area, and Peck thinks it will be difficult for him to get his hands on the shipment. Eventually, Elefante convinces Peck that he had nothing to do with the shooting. Because Peck believes him, he also lets Elefante know that Potts is the one investigating the case.

## CHAPTER 20: PLANT MAN

After the events at the pier, Sportcoat hides in Rufus's basement and spends his days eating, sleeping, and drinking King Kong. Every day, Rufus returns to him with news about Hot Sausage and Deems. At the moment, both Hot Sausage and Deems are alive, well, and in the hospital. However, the police are still looking for Sportcoat, as are Sportcoat's various employers. Additionally, "some unusual-looking white men" are after Sportcoat as well.

However, Sportcoat doesn't care about all of the people looking for him. Instead, he spends all of his time thinking about the night of the shooting and pulling Deems out of the water. He and Hettie had always wanted to jump into the New York water together at night, but they never did. Like many of the resolutions he and Hettie made with each other, he never followed through. Although Hettie did end up in the water one night, she did so on her own.

During Sportcoat's third day of hiding at Rufus's place, he falls asleep and dreams about Hettie. The version of Hettie he dreams of is young and beautiful woman with neat hair and a brown dress that she made herself. This is the first time since her death that Hettie has appeared to Sportcoat as a young woman. He compliments her dress and tells her that he remembers it. In response, Hettie looks at him sadly and asks him what is wrong. He tells her that nothing is wrong anymore except that he still hasn't found the Christmas Club money.

*Although Elefante does not know Sportcoat well, Peck knows him even less. Peck seems to assume that the old deacon is a capable killer, which is completely false. Sportcoat couldn't even kill Deems at point-blank range. Like Sister Gee, Elefante knows that there is something about the story that is not quite right.*



*This is the real reason that Peck is angry. He does not care that his men were killed or injured. He only cares that the incident is preventing more heroin from flowing into the Cause. Although Peck is a hothead, he is not a stupid man. He eventually realizes that the facts don't add up and that Elefante must not have ordered the shooting.*



*Because Sportcoat doesn't know what else to do with himself, he resorts to his vice: drinking. At this point, he finally seems to realize that his life is in danger because he's actually laying low. Evidently, Rufus has done a good job of keeping Sportcoat's location a secret; no one else knows he is there.*



*Sportcoat genuinely cares about Deems and is happy he is alright. He also feels that he's redeemed himself for shooting Deems earlier in the novel. The water by the docks reminds him of Hettie because it is the same place where she committed suicide. The idea of Hettie and Sportcoat spending a night together in the New York water is a romantic notion, but it now carries a sinister weight because of the nature of Hettie's death.*



*Despite everything else that has happened, it is the Christmas fund that is still on Sportcoat's mind. The fact that he still cares so much about the fund demonstrates how important it is to him. Additionally, it is a reason for him to be able to continue to talk to Hettie and keep her close to him.*



Hettie ignores Sportcoat's comment about the money and instead tells stories about their childhood. She recalls a time where she came across Sportcoat and his father cutting down a tree with a crosscut saw. Sportcoat was only a young boy and eventually got tired of working. When he stopped, his father screamed at him. Hettie finds this moment sad—she cannot imagine a parent treating their child so cruelly.

Hettie then turns the conversation to a different topic: Sportcoat's abilities with plants. Hettie loves the smell of plants, and she always loved how good Sportcoat was with them when they lived in South Carolina. However, when she moved to New York, she didn't get to be around **flowers** anymore. And then, when Sportcoat moved to New York, he turned into too much of a drunk and never kept flowers around the house. She tells Sportcoat that when he moved to New York, he became an entirely different person from the man she once knew.

Sportcoat tells Hettie that he changed so much after arriving in New York because of all of his medical issues. He also says he was broken down because of how his stepmother treated him. Hettie tells him that she understands. She also says that Sportcoat's background is what makes him like Deems so much; they came from similar broken upbringings.

Sportcoat reaches for a drink but cannot find one. Suddenly, Hettie gets angry and aggressive with Sportcoat. Sportcoat tells her that she is not his wife—his wife didn't speak to him in such a way. The two of them begin arguing aggressively, and Hettie insults Sportcoat repeatedly. She tells him that he always blames other people for his problems. In response, Sportcoat tells her to go away. Suddenly, Hettie grows soft again and tells him, "I can't [...] I'd like to. That's the thing. You got to let me." Sportcoat asks her how he can do so, but Hettie says she doesn't know how.

After his conversation with Hettie, Sportcoat decides to be sober. When Rufus returns and begins drinking, Sportcoat refuses to join him. Together, the two men talk about the origin of the Five Ends Church. During their conversation, Rufus mentions that Hettie helped out with the church's construction, leading Sportcoat to believe that the missing Christmas money may be hidden in the church. Newly motivated, Sportcoat decides to finally pay Sister Paul a visit.

*Here, Hettie sheds light on Sportcoat's childhood, which doesn't sound like it was a happy one. Sportcoat's mother died when he was a young boy, and his father appears to be hard and uncaring man. Such circumstances likely contributed to Sportcoat's struggles with alcoholism.*



*Perhaps because of his troubled background, Sportcoat wasted much of his life—including his marriage to Hettie—drinking. He stopped cultivating his talents and instead found solace in alcohol. This led to a lonely life, and though Sportcoat was happy, he was never whole unless he was drinking. Sportcoat's drinking likely contributed to Hettie's unhappiness and, ultimately, to her suicide.*



*Indeed, in many respects, Sportcoat and Deems are similar people. This explains why Sportcoat feels such an attachment to the young man, despite everything they've been through and all the ways that Deems has gone down a destructive path.*



*Hettie's angry is directly related to Sportcoat's desire for a drink. She hates who he is when he's drinking. Or rather—since this version of Hettie is merely a figment of Sportcoat's imagination—Sportcoat himself hates who he is when he's drinking. This illusory Hettie is the part of himself that longs to be free of alcohol and the sorrows of his past.*



*Perhaps because he drinks so much, Sportcoat never got around to visiting Sister Paul as Rufus suggested much earlier in the novel. Sister Paul is one of the founding members of the Five Ends Church and may have some insight into what happened to the Christmas fund. Additionally, Sportcoat finally decides to change his ways. It is a major shift for the character, though one presumes that transitioning away from a lifetime of alcoholism will not be easy for an old man like Sportcoat.*



## CHAPTER 21: NEW DIRT

Potts decides to pay Elefante a visit to try and gather more information about the shooting. Like Joe Peck, Potts suspects that Elefante may have had something to do with the shooting. First, he asks Elefante about Sportcoat. Elefante tells him that he casually knows Sportcoat, but that is all. Potts believes Elefante and quickly realizes that it is unlikely Elefante had anything to do with the shooting. Instead, their conversation turns to the rising drug use and violence within the neighborhood. Potts predicts that things will only get worse as drugs become more prominent and gang wars begin to break out.

Potts also tells the story of how he first met Elefante's father, whom he has great respect for. As a young man, Potts was staked out close to the dock where the Elefantes receive their shipments. While there, he spotted a man running suspiciously and chased after him. Potts eventually caught the man, who pulled a gun on him. Elefante's father, who witnessed the event, drove over the man with his truck and killed him. Elefante's father insisted that he did not see the man, but, regardless, he managed to save Potts's life.

The conversation between Potts and Elefante turns to their respective retirements. Potts discusses his desire to retire and go fishing. Meanwhile, Elefante talks about how he wants to retire and work in a bagel shop. At first, Potts doesn't believe that Elefante actually means to retire, but eventually Elefante convinces him that it is the truth. As their conversation ends, Potts looks across the water where he spots the Five Ends Church, and he thinks about Sister Gee.

## CHAPTER 22: 281 DELPHI

Bunch Moon sits and looks out the window of his apartment. He likes this window because he is able to see several blocks in each direction. Therefore, it is a good defensive position—he'll always know if someone is coming for him. After spending several minutes making sure no one is coming for him, Bunch turns around to talk to Phyllis.

Phyllis, whose real name is Haroldeen, has come to collect her payment for killing Deems and his bodyguard. However, because Deems is still alive and the job is not yet finished, she only expects to receive half. Bunch immediately asks Haroldeen many questions about the failed hit. He tells her that he doesn't plan to pay her for doing such a poor job. If anything, he thinks, she's only made more trouble for him.

*Evidently, Potts has also connected Elefante to Sportcoat through Elefante's mother. However, Potts is much sharper than Peck, and he almost immediately realizes that Elefante had nothing to do with the shooting. Although they exist on different sides of the law, Elefante and Potts appear to respect each other somewhat. They also are alike in that they both dislike direction the city is going and hope to retire soon.*



*Potts's story about Elefante's father links two principal characters to each other. It also reinforces the novel's central theme of community; though Elefante's father and Potts were on different sides of the law, Elefante extended a hand to save Potts's life.*



*Potts and Elefante have lived difficult lives, and in their old age, they both want to escape the hard streets that they've been a part of for so long. Both men are also in desperate need of a woman to love. Elefante has never found love, and it seems that Potts's marriage is falling apart (a theory that Potts's heightened, possibly romantic interest in Sister Gee supports).*



*Here, Bunch is not paranoid; rather, he is looking out for very real threats that are a part of his everyday existence.*



*Haroldeen's request is more or less reasonable; she's completed part of the job, so she expects part of her payment. However, it's a little odd that she would feel entitled to receive payment for a job she didn't complete, which may suggest that she has ulterior motives for visiting Bunch. Meanwhile, Bunch is angry because he's gone rogue in ordering Deems's murder, and he knows there will be consequences.*



Haroldeen doesn't take kindly to Bunch's attitude and insists on getting half of the money. She does not like people in the drug trade; as a child, people involved in the drug trade sexually exploited Haroldeen and Haroldeen's mother, who had a drug habit. Nonetheless, Haroldeen tries to deal with Bunch civilly. She tells him that she promises she will complete the job because she needs the money to go to college.

Finally, Bunch gives into Haroldeen's demands and tells her where she can collect the money. He also tells her to leave out the basement door so that no one will know they met. Haroldeen does as she is told. She goes down to the basement, collects her money, and then departs. However, on her way out, she purposefully leaves the basement door open for Joe Peck's men. As she walks away from Bunch's house, Haroldeen hears Peck's men shooting Bunch.

*Haroldeen knows firsthand what the drug trade can do to vulnerable people. She has no sympathy for Bunch and doesn't feel at all bad for trying to get the maximum amount of money out of him.*



*Here, the reader discovers Haroldeen's ulterior motive for visiting Bunch: she has allied herself with Peck and allows his men to kill Bunch. Peck likely kills Bunch because he ordered a hit on Deems without Peck's permission. Bunch's swift death is the logical conclusion to his overly aggressive approach to the drug trade.*



## CHAPTER 23: LAST OCTOBERS

After three days in the hospital, Deems wakes up with a painful buzzing noise in his ear. He is still in immense pain and cannot put any weight on his left shoulder. While in the hospital, Deems doesn't get many visitors. Only the police, Sister Gee, and a few other sisters from the Five Ends come to see him. However, Deems doesn't say anything to any of his visitors. Instead, he continues to think about what happened to him. He knows now for sure that he was betrayed, probably by Lightbulb.

However, today Deems wakes up to a new face: Sportcoat. To Deem's surprise, Sportcoat isn't wearing his usual coat, which gave him his moniker. Instead, he's wearing the outfit of a Housing Authority worker and clutching a "hideous" homemade doll that's roughly the size of a pillow. Startled, Deems asks Sportcoat about the doll. Sportcoat tells Deems that the doll is for him; he got it from a Dominican man who lives in his building. It is said to bring good luck and the Dominican man made it specifically for Deems.

Sportcoat pulls out another gift for Deems: a small exercise ball that Sportcoat says will improve the strength of Deems's pitching hand. Sportcoat's gifts make Deems angry, and he vulgarly asks why Sportcoat is here. Sportcoat is put off by Deems's language, and he tells Deems that he's come a long way to see him. Annoyed, Deems tells him to leave and Sportcoat refuses. He promises not to ask Deems about any of his business. Instead, Sportcoat says, he's come to handle some business of his own.

*After being shot twice in only a matter of weeks, Deems has a lot of reflecting to do. Notably, the people who visit him in the hospital are not his fellow drug dealers. Instead, they are members of the church—people who actually care about his wellbeing. With no one else around him, Deems must reevaluate his life on his own.*



*After everything, Sportcoat still hasn't given up on Deems. Like the other members of the church, he wants what is best for the young man, and so he provides him with support the only way he knows how. Superstition is common in the Cause, and the doll pillow is an example of this.*



*Still, Sportcoat wants Deems to play baseball; he sees it as a viable alternative to Deems's current path. However, baseball only frustrates Deems; Deems seeks immediate remedies to his problems, and that is not what baseball can provide. Because of his frustration, he unfairly lashes out at Sportcoat.*



Annoyed, Deems starts to mock Sportcoat and calls him “Deacon King Kong.” Sportcoat tells Deems that he cannot hurt him by calling him names. He’s much more concerned about his two friends who are currently in the hospital. In fact, he just got back from talking to Hot Sausage. Together, the two of them talked about Deems’s future in **baseball**. When Sportcoat relates this conversation to Deems, it only makes Deems angrier. He begins cursing at Sportcoat again.

Still, Sportcoat doesn’t understand where Deems’s hostility is coming from. He asks Deems why he is so angry, and Deems reminds him that before Haroldeen shot him, Sportcoat shot him as well. Sportcoat responds by saying that he doesn’t even remember the incident. This only makes Deems angrier, and he tells the old deacon that he should have killed him. This makes Sportcoat upset. He still doesn’t understand why Deems hates him so deeply.

Annoyed with Sportcoat, Deems continues to curse his name. Sportcoat tells Deems he’ll leave in a minute—he just has one more thing he wants to do first. Sportcoat moves to the door and shuts it. Then, he moves toward Deems as though he is about to whisper something to him. Deems tells him to get away, and then Sportcoat grabs the doll pillow and begins to smother Deems with it. Deems struggles for breath, but his air supply is completely cut off, making it impossible for him to fight Sportcoat.

As Sportcoat smothers Deems, he tells him that his father used to do something similar to him as a child, supposedly because it would make him strong. In reality, Sportcoat thinks his father held the pillow over his head because he wanted to wield his power over his child. It reminds Sportcoat of how white men act, although he thinks that black men might act the same way if they held similar positions in society. As Sportcoat says all this to Deems, Deems stops fighting—he’s almost lost consciousness entirely. Noticing this, Sportcoat takes the pillow off Deems’s head and allows him to breath.

The last thing Sportcoat tells Deems is that he might as well die as a young and healthy man rather than as an old man who’s ruined his life. Sportcoat sees a lot of himself in Deems and realizes that the reason he shot him in the first place is because the boy reminded him of a young version of himself. Ultimately, Sportcoat lets Deems live, but he threatens to kill him if he ever sees him again.

*Given Deems’s role in enabling addiction in the Cause community, his mocking of Sportcoat seems especially cruel. The old deacon just wants what is best for Deems, even if he doesn’t always know the best way to express it.*



*Here, Deems’s anger appears more reasonable. Whether he remembers it or not, Sportcoat did shoot Deems over seemingly nothing. To Deems, this is a major betrayal, as Sportcoat is one of the few people Deems has always liked and trusted to have his best interest at heart.*



*Here, Sportcoat moves to finish the job he started at the beginning of the novel. Because Deems won’t listen to reason or treat Sportcoat with respect, Sportcoat decides to smother him. Ironically, he uses the pillow that was meant to bring Deems good luck.*



*Here, Sportcoat reveals another sordid detail of his traumatic past. Evidently, his father frequently tortured him. Here, Sportcoat does the same thing to Deems, from a similar position of power. It is the only option he feels he has left.*



*Here, Sportcoat finally takes responsibility for his actions, explaining that alcoholism and a long, hard life in the Cause have worn him down. And Deems and his fellow drug dealers (and the drug users they enable) are making life in the Cause even worse. As such, Sportcoat thinks it might be better just to kill Deems now and get things over with. Because Sportcoat acts so radically, he actually does cause Deems to change his mind about the current trajectory of his life, though it remains unclear whether Deems will act on his changed perspective.*



## CHAPTER 24: SISTER PAUL

Finally, Sportcoat makes his way to the nursing home to visit Sister Paul. When he arrives at the nursing home, he is in rough shape. Because he hasn't had a drink in over 24 hours, he is sweating profusely and is clearly agitated. When the receptionist spots him, she assumes he is crazy and tries to turn him away. However, a nearby security guard, who is also newly sober, takes pity on Sportcoat and shows him where to find Sister Paul.

Sportcoat goes to Sister Paul's room, and she tells him about the relationship between the Elefantes and the Five Ends Church. When Sister Paul was a young woman, she happened to witness the incident where Elefante's father saved Potts's life. According to Sister Paul, Potts ran off after the man was flattened by the truck to go get help. However, Elefante's father had other plans in mind. He asked Sister Paul to help him take the truck to his home. He'd been transporting illegal goods when he ran over the gunman, he told Sister Paul, and he didn't want to get caught by the police. He explained to the Sister that he couldn't drive the truck the rest of the way by himself because he broke his foot by slamming on the breaks so hard.

At first, Sister Paul was reluctant to help a man who was clearly a criminal. However, she eventually decided that God would want her to help him, and so she did. When Sister Paul later arrived at Elefante's father's house, he offered to pay her, but she didn't take his money. Later, Elefante's father repaid her by loaning her money to build the Five Ends Church. In addition, Elefante's father promised to pay for the church altogether if she would let him hide a small object in one of its walls. Sister Paul agreed, and Elefante's father hid the object, as promised. In addition, Elefante's father began sending cheese to the church every week.

## CHAPTER 25: DO

Elefante and Melissa, who are now dating, pick up Sportcoat who they think can lead them to the Venus. Elefante is happier than he's ever been with Melissa by his side, and he's more motivated than ever to find the Venus. At first, he found Melissa to be shy, but as he got to know her, he recognized that her reticent manner is one that belies confidence and trust. While courting Melissa, Elefante takes notice of how respectfully Melissa treats her employees at the bagel factory. Because she treats them with kindness, respect, and understanding, they treat her the same way.

*So far, Sportcoat has remained sober, although doing so is obviously difficult for him. Nonetheless, he feels the need to tie up all of his loose ends. This includes finding the missing Christmas fund. Sportcoat believes that if he can maintain his sobriety and return the fund, he will have redeemed himself in the eyes of Hettie and the broader Cause community.*



*Here, Sister Paul reveals the second half of the story that Potts told Elefante earlier in the novel. In Potts's story, Elefante's father looks like the hero. However, in Sister Paul's story, Elefante's father is in need of a savior himself. Elefante's father knows that if the police find the illegal goods he is transporting, he will go to jail and his family will be left with nothing.*



*Sister Paul does not act in accordance with the law; instead, she does what she believes is right. Such actions are characteristic of those who are part of the Five Ends Church. So that her motivations are unquestionable, Sister Paul doesn't even accept payment for her good deed. Additionally, this passage reveals the origin story of Jesus's cheese: it actually comes from the Elefantes.*



*More than at any other point in the novel so far, Elefante is happy—partially because he thinks he might be able to get his hands on the Venus, but primarily because he has Melissa by his side. Unlike many of the people with whom Elefante associates, Melissa is kind, hardworking, and deserving of immense respect. Furthermore, she operates a legal business, a rarity in Elefante's world.*



This respectful attitude also carries over to how Melissa treats old people, including Sportcoat. Elefante notices that Melissa calls the old deacon “Mister Sportcoat” and never refers to him as “colored” or “Negro” the way many other white people, including Elefante himself, often do. At first, Elefante worries that such behavior is “dangerous, odd, and foreign,” but he quickly warms up to it.

Thinking about “dangerous, odd, and foreign” matters shifts Elefante’s focus to Bunch Moon. Although there’s been no official confirmation, Elefante heard that Joe Peck had Bunch killed. This is yet another brutal act of violence in what Elefante sees as an endless drug war, which will only continue to take lives. However, despite the danger that surrounds him, Elefante is happy to have found love. Love makes everything else tolerable to him; it helps him block out the outside noise and focus on the one person whom he cares for unequivocally. For the first time in his life, Elefante no longer feels lonely.

Elefante and Melissa’s courtship was initially strange because it was a first for both of them. However, the two quickly got on, and their dinner plans quickly turned into extended dates featuring lengthy conversations and joy. Elefante immediately felt that the two of them were in love. However, now, while driving to Sportcoat in the middle of the night, he knows it for sure. Before, Elefante thought that he should never have a business partner because they would weigh him down. Now, however, with Melissa by his side, he feels stronger and more capable than ever before.

While on their way to Sportcoat, Elefante thinks about a recent visit he paid to Sister Paul after Sportcoat insisted that they meet. At first, Sister Paul did not like Elefante—she thought he didn’t live up to his father’s name. However, after Melissa assured Sister Paul that Elefante is a good man who is worthy of his father’s name, Sister Paul opened up to him.

Sister Paul told Melissa and Elefante about her life and the events surrounding the construction of the Five Ends Church, which finally allowed Elefante to discover the location of the Venus. Before Elefante left Sister Paul, he promised to send her some of the cheese that usually goes to the Cause. She also asked him to buy Mars bars for the security guard who watches over her and performs errands for her free of charge. Elefante agreed to do this as well.

*Although Elefante is one of the more progressive characters in the novel, he is not without his prejudices. However, here, Melissa opens his mind to a new, more respectful way of thinking about his Black neighbors.*



*Elefante knows that the drug trade is an endless cycle of violence. It is one of many reasons why he never takes part in it, even though it could make him rich. Unlike Peck, Elefante has a sense of what actually matters in life: love. This is part of the novel’s simple but effective message, as well its fundamental optimism.*



*Elefante and Melissa have both apparently lived strange lives. Elefante is nearing retirement age and is only now going on his first date. Although Melissa is a bit younger, the same holds true for her. However, ultimately, it doesn’t matter—the two of them immediately connect with each other, mutually benefiting from each other’s company. This is a major development for both characters.*



*Sister Paul thinks highly of Elefante’s father and wants to make sure his son lives up to his image. Sister Paul remembers Elefante’s father as a family man with a good heart, and she confirms with Melissa that the same is true of Elefante.*



*Finally, Elefante understands the significance of the Five Ends Church motto as it relates to the Venus. Assuming Elefante can get his hands on the object, it will change his life forever. Finally, he will be able to get away from his life of crime and start anew.*





Back in the present, Elefante and Melissa pick up Sportcoat and head to the Five Ends Church. Together, they chisel lightly into the Jesus mural in search of the Venus. Eventually, they manage find the statue hidden in a small metal box. Elefante is elated and promises to give Sportcoat enough money to replace the missing Christmas funds. He also promises to build a new church if that's what the members of the Cause would like. As they talk, Elefante treats Sportcoat with great respect and even calls him "Mister Sportcoat." At first, Sportcoat is taken aback by the title, and he asks Elefante to repeat himself. When Elefante obliges, hearing Elefante call him Mister Sportcoat fills the old deacon with warmth and a sense of shared humanity.

*Now that he knows he will be a rich man, Elefante is generous to Sportcoat. He wants to continue in the footsteps of his father by continuing to support the Five Ends Church in any way he can. After hearing from Sister Paul, Elefante realizes the way that his life is inextricably linked to the residents of the Cause. Partially because of this newfound respect—and because of Melissa's influence—he calls the old deacon "Mister Sportcoat." In so doing, Elefante gives Sportcoat the respect that he has long been denied. Elefante's action also represents a gesture of respect between characters of different races, a rarity in the world of the novel.*



## CHAPTER 26: BEAUTIFUL

Two years later, the members of the Cause gather at the Five Ends Church to attend Sportcoat's funeral. After helping Elefante secure the Venus, nobody in the Cause (except for Hot Sausage) ever saw Sportcoat again. Sportcoat's funeral, like all funerals in the Cause, is a rambunctious and exciting affair that Sportcoat would have marveled at. There is a huge amount of cheese everywhere, and all of his friends and family are present.

*Here, the novel takes a huge leap forward to the days following Sportcoat's death. This leap in time allows the novel to reveal the positive outcome of Sportcoat and Elefante's actions. It is also a way for the novel to come full circle; it begins with Hettie's funeral, and it ends with Sportcoat's.*



The church is now in a better state because of the money Elefante put into it (although it is still being renovated during the funeral), and Elefante himself shows up for Sportcoat's funeral, as do Potts and even Sister Paul. Included in Elefante's renovations is a marvelous painting of a Black Jesus, which adorns the church's back wall. Although the members of the church are thrilled with the improvements, they do not know where the money is coming from to pay for them.

*Sportcoat's funeral is an even grander affair than Hettie's. This suggests that Sportcoat had a huge impact on the community; they all want to show up to celebrate his life. Additionally, this passage discusses the improvements that have been made to the Five Ends Church. Throughout the novel, the church has served as a beacon of light and hope for the community. As such, when the church gets a boost, so do the residents of the Cause.*



Elefante and Melissa are now married, and Potts is retired from the service. Meanwhile, Deems, as a result of his conversation with Sportcoat, is no longer selling drugs. Instead, he's managed to join a minor league **baseball** team (the Iowa Cubs) and is well on his way to playing professionally. Additionally, two members of the Five Ends choir, Nanette and Sweet Corn, have made themselves Pudgy Fingers's guardian in Sportcoat's absence.

*Deems, in becoming a sports star, undergoes the most extreme transformation of any character in the novel. Not only is Deems able to escape his criminal past, but he also manages to excel in one of America's most popular sports, symbolizing his attainment of the mythic American Dream. His success would surely make Sportcoat proud.*



After the funeral, Sister Gee talks to Hot Sausage to learn about what happened to Sportcoat. Hot Sausage tells Sister Gee that Sportcoat managed to maintain his sobriety throughout the end of his life. However, Sportcoat felt certain that he would eventually drink again. The last time Hot Sausage saw Sportcoat, the old deacon was walking into the water near the docks where he shot Deems. There, Sportcoat held a bottle of King Kong, which he no longer drank. Hot Sausage warned Sportcoat not to go into the water, insisting that it was too cold. However, after walking in up to his neck, Sportcoat turned to Hot Sausage and said, "Sausage, the water is so warm! It's beautiful."

Hot Sausage also tells Sister Gee that he learned that Pudgy Fingers isn't Sportcoat and Hettie's biological son. When Hettie first moved to New York, and before Sportcoat followed her, she got a knock on her door. Outside was a woman with a small child around 5 to 6 years old. The woman asked Hettie if she could briefly look after the boy. Hettie agrees to do so, but the woman never came back. Nonetheless, Hettie and Sportcoat decided to raise the child as their own.

Additionally, Hot Sausage tells Sister Gee the story of the **moonflowers**, which were mysteriously planted behind the Five Ends Church. He informs her that it was Sportcoat who planted and maintained the flowers. Hettie always wished Sportcoat would do more gardening, and she loved moonflowers, so Sportcoat plants them in her honor. Before walking into the water, Sportcoat asked Hot Sausage to make sure that someone looks after the flowers in his stead.

About one week after Sportcoat's funeral, Sister Gee takes the Staten Island Ferry—something she's never done before—to see Potts. While riding the ferry, Sister Gee tries to keep a low profile, as though someone might recognize her. However, she quickly realizes that doing so is silly; no one she knows rides the Staten Island Ferry.

As Sister Gee looks out across the water, she sees the Cause Houses on one side of her and the Statue of Liberty and Staten Island on the other. She feels as though one side represents "the certainty of the past," while the other represents "the uncertainty of the future." This makes her nervous, but she reassures herself by thinking about Potts. Potts is newly divorced from his wife and has a lot in common with Sister Gee. Like Sister Gee, he's lived an unselfish life, always cleaning up others' messes. Sister Gee thinks that together, the two of them could make a nice couple and finally live the lives they want to.

*Sportcoat's death is largely shrouded in mystery, much like Hettie's. Also, like Hettie's death, the reader only ever gets a secondhand account of what happened. Although the passage is somewhat ambiguous, it seems as though Sportcoat walked into the water and drowned himself so he would not relapse. He wanted to die a sober man rather than one consumed by addiction. In the end, Sportcoat dies the same way as Hettie. However, Sportcoat's death enables his redemption.*



*Good parents who are also present in their children's lives are a rarity in this novel. Although Hettie and Sportcoat are far from perfect parents, they take in Pudgy Fingers and do what they can for him. They know that if they don't, no one else will.*



*It is notable that moonflowers replace moonshine in Sportcoat's life. The flowers signal Sportcoat's renewed dedication to Hettie, as well as his new lease on life. Here, the flowers symbolize both love and redemption. Sportcoat wants to show Hettie that he can be a good man and maintain his sobriety.*



*Sister Gee's ferry trip to see Potts is a sign of hope and progress. The ferry bridges the gap between two worlds, one belonging to a white, former police officer, and the other belonging to a poor, Black house cleaner.*



*The final pages of the novel are optimistic and hopeful about the future. Here, in its final moments, the novel emphasizes that although nobody can change the past, the future can be a better and brighter place—one that sees more equality and tolerance, and less violence.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

### MLA

Sawyer, Ian. "Deacon King Kong." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Jan 2023. Web. 23 Jan 2023.

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Sawyer, Ian. "Deacon King Kong." LitCharts LLC, January 23, 2023. Retrieved January 23, 2023. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/deacon-king-kong>.

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McBride, James. *Deacon King Kong*. Riverhead Books. 2021.

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