

Room



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EMMA DONOGHUE

Born in 1969 in Ireland to esteemed literary critic Denis Donoghue and his wife Frances, Emma Donoghue grew up in Dublin and earned degrees in English literature from University College Dublin and the University of Cambridge. In 1998, Donoghue and her partner Christine Roulson relocated to Roulson's home country of Canada, where they have lived ever since. Donoghue's novels, including *Stir Fry*, *Hood*, *Slammerkin*, and 2010's worldwide smash *Room*, are largely about the lives and concerns of women throughout history and often focus on lesbian themes. *Room*, her most successful work to date, was shortlisted for the 2010 Man Booker Prize and the Orange Prize for Fiction, and was later adapted into a 2015 film starring Brie Larson. The film version of *Room* garnered commercial and critical attention for Larson, and she won an Academy Award for the role. Donoghue wrote the screenplay, adapting it from her own novel, and was nominated for her work at the Academy Awards, the Golden Globes, and the BAFTAs. Donoghue is also the author of numerous short stories, plays, and critical essays, and she holds dual Irish and Canadian citizenship.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events of *Room* draw inspiration from several real-life kidnappings (and the media attention that followed them), including the 1991 abduction of Jaycee Dugard, the 2002 kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart, and, most notably, the Fritzl case in Austria. In 2008, a woman named Elisabeth Fritzl escaped her father Josef's basement after 24 years of captivity. Fritzl had borne her father seven children over the years—one died in infancy, while three were raised by Fritzl's parents as "foundlings," and three remained hidden with Fritzl herself. According to Fritzl's testimony, her father visited the 400-square-foot basement several times a week to bring down food and other supplies and to rape Elisabeth, similar to how Old Nick brings supplies to Ma and Jack before raping Ma. Elisabeth was rescued after one of her children, Kerstin, was brought to the hospital for urgent medical attention. Josef later allowed Elisabeth to visit the hospital, and there, police—already suspicious of Josef—took him and Elisabeth into custody, where she was able to tell her story and secure freedom. There are many parallels between the Fritzl case and Jack and Ma's story—for example, Josef would cut power to the basement as punishment for "bad behavior," just as Old Nick does to Ma and Jack. Ma even comes up with a plan to fake Jack's illness and get Old Nick to take him to the hospital for

care, mirroring the way that a need for medical care led to Elisabeth's escape.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Books about abduction, abuse, and escape have long fascinated readers. From fictional stories such as Aaron Paul Lazar's *Devil's Lake*—the story of a young girl's escape from her kidnapper and her struggle to reintegrate into the world—to autobiographical tales such as Dave Pelzer's [A Child Called It](#) and Elizabeth Smart's *My Story*, these miraculous tales of captivity and escape are often attention-grabbing and widely discussed. *Room* trades in the tropes of this niche genre while also subverting it—Donoghue presents lurid details of Ma and Jack's life inside of Room, but also casts a light on contemporary culture's voyeuristic obsession with stories of trauma and abuse. Once Ma and Jack escape, they're forced to contend with (and even cater to) a veritable media circus—and the effects of playing into the hands of the press have devastating consequences for both Ma and Jack.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Room*
- **When Written:** Late 2000s
- **Where Written:** London, Ontario
- **When Published:** 2010
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction
- **Setting:** An unknown American state
- **Climax:** Jack plays dead and surrenders himself to Old Nick, in order to bravely execute the escape plan Ma has devised in hopes of getting them both out of Room.
- **Antagonist:** Old Nick
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Child's Play. Donoghue has said in interviews that she based Jack's highly distinctive way of speaking and thinking off of her own son, who was five at the time she began writing *Room*. Donoghue says she followed her son around like an anthropologist, making notes on the odd and inaccurate grammatical patterns in his speech in order to nail down Jack's way of observing the world.

Hit-maker. Although *Room* was Donoghue's breakout hit, she was active as a writer for many years before it was published; *Room* is her seventh novel.



PLOT SUMMARY

On his fifth birthday, Jack wakes up next to Ma inside Room—the 11-by-11 shed that Jack has called home all his life. As Jack and Ma celebrate his birthday by reminiscing about the day of his birth, baking a cake, playing games, and watching TV, it becomes clear that Jack and Ma are captives of a man they know only as Old Nick. Jack is Old Nick's biological son, and Ma, who has been locked up in Room for seven years since she was abducted at 19, is just barely keeping herself and Jack alive—and sane. Ma is just 26, but already suffers from a bad wrist as well as rotting teeth and a barely-controlled addiction to “killers,” which results in her having “Gone” days where she is unable to get out of bed. Many of the things Jack and Ma do together are things that Jack perceives as games—but actually, activities like “Orchestra” (banging on objects and walls), “Scream” (screaming as loud as they can at the skylight), and flicking the lamp on and off again are designed to draw attention to the isolated hovel Ma and Jack are forbidden from ever leaving. It also becomes evident that Jack believes no world exists outside of Room—Ma has told him that beyond Room, there is only Outer Space, and that the things they see on TV are fake things happening on “other planets.” Though Jack has a limited understanding of reality, he has a tremendous vocabulary, a clear moral center, and is beginning to want more out of life (such as toys and animal friends). Old Nick comes to Room several nights a week to bring by food and to rape Ma—every time he enters, by way of a heavy door sealed by an electronic keypad, Ma hides Jack away in Wardrobe so that Old Nick can't see him, and so that he can't see Old Nick.

Shortly after Jack's birthday, a series of things happens that shift Jack's understanding of Room—and the world beyond it. First, Jack witnesses Old Nick choking Ma one night. Next, Jack sees an advertisement for Ma's “killers” on TV, and begins demanding to know if some things on TV are real. Third, Jack finds a mouse alive in Room, and starts to understand that there are other creatures just out of reach. Ma begins trying to tell Jack more about the world—and the circumstances of her abduction—by telling him fantasy stories, but the sensitive Jack is disturbed by Ma's tales and confused when she tries to compare herself to *Alice in Wonderland*. One night, Jack overhears Old Nick tell Ma that he has been out of work for six months and is struggling to pay the bills. The conversation intrigues Jack, who climbs out of Wardrobe in the middle of the night to look at Old Nick. When Old Nick wakes up and tries to talk to Jack, Ma flies into a rage and begins screaming. As a punishment for Ma's infraction, Old Nick cuts the power for several days. Ma and Jack grow colder and colder and nearly run out of food, leading Ma to realize that she must do something to change their circumstances before Old Nick does something even worse. Ma begins telling Jack about her

abduction and the world outside Room in more concrete terms, and though Jack grows more and more confused about what's real and what's not real, he slowly begins to grasp their situation. Ma begins preparing Jack to attempt an escape—an idea that exhausts and confounds Jack.

Once the power comes back, Ma enlists Jack's help in crafting an escape plan. Jack suggests Ma use the very trick Old Nick used to lure her into his clutches so many years ago. Old Nick captured Ma by approaching her on her college campus and pretending he needed help with his sick dog—now, Ma realizes that if she pretends Jack is terribly ill, Old Nick will have no choice but to bring Jack to a hospital, where he'll be able to ask for help. Jack insists he isn't ready, but when Ma begs him to help her, he reluctantly agrees. Ma begins putting her plan in motion by telling Old Nick that Jack is starting to come down with something. The next day, she refuses to let Jack shower or flush the toilet and breaks his feces up with a spoon so that it looks like diarrhea. She presses a bag of hot water on Jack's face as Old Nick's arrival approaches, and even forces herself to vomit on Jack's shirt to make him smell sick. When Old Nick arrives, Ma begs him to see how ill Jack is and to take him to a hospital. Old Nick, suspicious and apathetic, refuses to bring Jack to the ER, but tells Ma he'll bring some medicine tomorrow night.

Jack tells Ma he's sorry that the plan didn't work. Ma, though, insists excitedly that they can now enact Plan B—pretending that Jack has died, and sneaking him out rolled up safely inside a rug. Jack is even more averse to this plan than he was to the first, but Ma convinces Jack that this is their last chance. Ma talks Jack through the new plan: he will be rolled up inside Rug and must remain very stiff as Old Nick carries Jack to his flatbed truck. Ma prepares Jack to jump out of the truck at the first stop sign. The next night, when Old Nick arrives, Jack listens as Ma tells Old Nick Jack has died and demands Old Nick take him far away to be buried. Old Nick agrees, and soon Jack feels himself lifted up into the air. Things go exactly as Ma said they would, but Jack has trouble unrolling Rug and misses the first two stop signs. At the third one, he jumps out—but Old Nick sees him and chases him. Jack runs headlong into a man walking his dog, and the dog bites Jack's finger. As Old Nick catches up with Jack and carries him back to the car, Jack begins screaming—and the man with the dog calls the police. Old Nick drops Jack and drives away. The man, whose name is Ajeet, stays with Jack until the police arrive. A kindly cop named Officer Oh begins questioning Jack about what has happened to him, and though Jack struggles intensely both to understand her questions and to respond to them, Officer Oh remains determined to get to the bottom of Jack's story. When Jack tells Officer Oh that he comes from a small room with a skylight that is, according to Ma, “not on any map,” Officer Oh and her partner do a satellite search for freestanding structures with skylights in the area and successfully triangulate the location of

Room. The officers quickly drive there, free Ma, and reunite her with Jack. As Ma and Jack embrace, Jack says he wants to go back to Room and go to bed. Ma tells Jack that they are never going back to Room, and Jack begins sobbing.

After a visit to the police precinct to give a statement to the police captain, Ma and Jack are driven to a nearby psychiatric clinic for evaluation, care, and rest. They are swarmed by paparazzi at both the precinct and the clinic—the media has already gotten ahold of their story. A kind doctor named Dr. Kendrick collects a rape kit from Ma and cleans Jack’s scrapes and dog bite, and a psychiatrist, Dr. Clay, introduces himself as Ma and Jack’s primary physician. The exhausted Ma and Jack fall asleep as soon as they’re taken to their room, and in the morning, Jack awakes to an entirely new world. As he looks out the window at the city below, he can hardly believe the sight of so many people and buildings. Jack is confused when Ma throws their old clothes in a trash bin and takes a shower rather than a bath—before breakfast, which usually comes first. Ma tries to explain that they’re no longer bound by the rules of Room, but Jack misses the comfort of his old life. As Ma and Jack meet the hospital staff, attend therapy sessions, and receive medical care, Jack struggles with the new pace of his life. Ma and Jack learn that Old Nick has been sent to jail, and entertain visits from Ma’s mother, whom Jack calls Grandma, and Grandma’s new husband, Leo. Ma is happy to be reunited with her mother but sad that her parents are divorced and her father has moved to Australia.

As the days go by, Jack and Ma explore the clinic, but limit their outside time due to the paparazzi—and Jack’s emotional sensitivity to being outside. A lawyer advises Ma to consider either filing lawsuits against the media for using her image without her consent or submit to a major interview—she needs to secure a financial future for herself and Jack. Ma reunites with her brother, Paul, and she and Jack meet his wife Deana. Ma struggles to balance these happy reunions with her family with the challenge of keeping Jack away from media about their case and helping him process his intense anxiety about being “Outside.” Ma has some much-needed dental work done, renewing her confidence and restoring her sense of self, and she and Jack begin a nightly routine of counting all the friends they’ve made in the world so far. Things are derailed once again, however, when Ma’s father—Grandpa—arrives and can barely stand to be in the same room as Jack, whom he sees as an aberration. Ma consents to a major TV interview, but as the journalist asks her increasingly invasive and damning questions which frame her as selfish for keeping Jack in Room rather than asking Old Nick to take him to a hospital or shelter, Ma begins to break down. The day after the interview, Ma is “Gone,” and Jack is surprised that she still has Gone days outside of Room. Jack goes on an outing to the mall with Paul, Deana, and their three-year-old daughter Bronwyn. The trip is overwhelming and confusing, and when Jack returns to the hospital he finds

that Ma is unresponsive. As nurses and doctors attempt to revive Ma, Jack notices that her bottle of killers is empty. Jack tells the unconscious Ma she’s had a “bad idea.”

While Ma recovers from her suicide attempt, Jack goes to stay with Grandma and Leo, whom he calls Steppa. Grandma and Steppa struggle to understand Jack’s peculiar way of talking, thinking, and seeing the world, and have trouble managing the intense separation anxiety he feels being away from Ma. Slowly but surely, Grandma and Steppa begin to get closer to Jack. Jack talks on the phone with Ma every couple of days, and though she assures him she’s getting better, they can’t see each other yet. Grandma and Steppa introduce Jack to playgrounds, LEGOs, potato chips, and even take him to the ocean for the first time, and Jack enjoys spending time with them more and more. After several weeks, Ma surprises Jack at the house one day—he is overjoyed to see her, and Ma is excited to tell Jack that they’ve secured their own apartment in an independent living facility with good security and round-the-clock counselors on staff. After they move, a shipment of things from Room arrives, and Ma and Jack get into a terrible fight about whether or not they should keep them. It’s clear that Jack still misses Room, which Ma resents. As the weeks go by, Ma and Jack spend time with family, try all sorts of new foods and activities, and make lists of the things they want to accomplish in the future. But Jack keeps bringing up Room and expressing a desire to go back. Eventually, Ma reluctantly calls Officer Oh to ask if she’ll escort them on a visit to Room one last time. The next day, Officer Oh brings Ma and Jack over to Old Nick’s and leads them to the backyard, where they face down Room. Jack marvels at how small Room is and asks if it has “got shrunk,” but Ma insists it’s the same size as always. Ma helps Jack bid goodbye to all the objects inside Room, and then, together, they leave it behind once and for all.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jack – Jack is the singular and idiosyncratic protagonist and narrator of *Room*. A five-year-old boy who has lived his entire life inside an 11-by-11 garden shed known as Room, Jack’s unique way of thinking about his limited world shapes the entire universe of *Room*. Jack’s preoccupation with stories and **TV**, his uncannily mature but unorthodox use of language, and his devoted but complicated love for his mother, whom he calls Ma, make Jack a deeply complex and intriguing character. At the start of the novel, Jack believes that there is no world outside of Room—he thinks that he, Ma, and Old Nick are the only three people on earth. Though he knows that Ma doesn’t like Old Nick, and though he’s forced to hide inside Wardrobe during Old Nick’s visits, Jack doesn’t understand exactly who Old Nick is—and definitely doesn’t realize that this man, Ma’s captor, is his biological father. Jack’s naïve and hazy view of the

world begins to shift shortly after his fifth birthday. When Old Nick reveals to Ma that he's been let go from his job, Ma begins to fear that Old Nick will soon lose his house—and will do something terrible to herself and Jack rather than let them be discovered. Ma begins the process of “unlying” to Jack about the world in order to prepare him for making a “Great Escape,” but Jack is angry, fearful, and determined to stay within the confines of Room. Nevertheless, Ma convinces Jack that he must go through with the escape plan, which requires him to play dead so that Old Nick will put Jack in the back of his truck and drive him away from Room. Jack ultimately saves both himself and Ma—but the escape turns out to be the easy part, and as Jack's adjustment to the world begins, he finds himself struggling to understand and participate in human society. Jack thinks, feels, and loves deeply, and as he and Ma work together to survive in a sometimes-hostile, voyeuristic new world, he learns lessons about fame, growth, family, and the ways in which all humans must leave behind the familiar in order to discover the extraordinary.

Ma – Ma is the secondary protagonist of *Room*, and Jack's mother. Abducted at age 19 by Old Nick, Ma has spent the last seven years of her life in Room. Though she is tough and resilient, Ma suffers terrible pain due to her rotting **teeth** and often has “Gone” days—days where she is awake but nearly catatonic and cannot be roused for anything. Ma does her best to keep Jack healthy and to teach him about right and wrong—but because of their confinement to Room, Ma has had to make some difficult choices about what to tell Jack about the world. Ma has let Jack operate under the assumption that Room is the entire world—everything outside of it, she's led him to believe, is Outer Space. When Jack turns five, however, and things with Old Nick take a turn for the worse, Ma realizes that she can't be complacent anymore—and neither can Jack. Ma begins “unlying” to Jack and teaching him that there is indeed a world outside of Room, and that she used to live in it. The burden Ma faces as she prepares Jack to sneak out of Room and help secure both their rescues is enormous, and she often grows frustrated, disheartened, and apathetic. When Jack pulls off their “Great Escape” plan, however, Ma turns into a completely new person. Thrilled to be back in the world, ravenous for simple things like meals, showers, and material possessions, and staunchly unwilling to doubt the difficult decisions she's made as a parent, Ma seems more than ready to face down “Outside” and to teach Jack to do the same. As media attention and the judgement of the public, however, begin to creep into Ma and Jack's life, Ma begins to crumble—and this time, Jack cannot be the one to save her. Nonetheless, Ma succeeds in regaining her autonomy with the help of her family and her medical team, and at the end of the novel, she and Jack move out on their own and say goodbye to Room forever.

Old Nick – “Old Nick” is, in popular culture and common usage, a nickname for both Santa Claus and Satan—and in *Room*, Old

Nick earns this strange sobriquet. Ma's captor and rapist (and Jack's biological father), Old Nick makes visits to Room many nights each week to bring “presents” of food and supplies—and to repeatedly rape Ma while Jack, unaware of what's really going on, listens from inside Wardrobe. Not much is known about Old Nick other than he is a white man in his forties or fifties, and that he abducted Ma off her college campus when she was 19 by luring her towards his truck with a fake story about having a sick dog. Most of what is communicated about Old Nick is through Ma—because Jack sees so little of Old Nick (and doesn't really understand who the man is anyway), Ma's descriptions of Old Nick's indifference in the face of her years-long suffering and his constant attempts to rub her face in his power over her and Jack show what kind of man he is. Old Nick is cruel, temperamental, and unfeeling—and yet in spite of his absolute power over Ma and Jack, Ma senses a part of him that seems to be growing increasingly fearful and uncertain. Eventually, Old Nick admits to Ma that he has been unemployed for six months, and this admission is what sparks Ma's intense desire to escape Room before the increasingly unstable Old Nick does something terrible to her and Jack. After Ma and Jack's “Great Escape,” Old Nick is apprehended and placed in jail to await trial. Ma relishes her captor's encounter with justice.

Grandma – Grandma is Ma's mother. A deeply emotional woman whose daughter's disappearance has shaped her life. Grandma is overjoyed to have Ma back in her life, and though she's a little uncertain of how to navigate a relationship with the timid, eccentric Jack, she loves him very much. Grandma is imperfect—and sometimes a little dismissive of Jack's peculiar needs—but at the end of the day she is a committed caregiver. A pragmatist in spite of her often outsized emotions, Grandma doesn't believe in coddling or catering to Jack, and while it takes him a while to adjust to this treatment after he goes to live with her and Steppa, it soon becomes clear that Grandma has intuited all along Jack's need for space to make mistakes, learn, and grow.

Steppa/Leo – Grandma's second husband, Leo, is a kind and gentle man who adopts the nickname “Steppa”—short for step-grandpa. Leo has a great sense of humor in spite of his slightly introverted personality. He slowly bonds with Jack because of his ability to just let Jack feel his feelings and express himself, without either coddling him or pushing him too far.

Dr. Clay – Dr. Clay is a psychiatrist at the Cumberland Clinic. He is Ma and Jack's primary doctor there, and he is in charge of their medical and mental health alike. Extremely sensitive and empathetic, Dr. Clay is worried that Ma and Jack need a very slow adjustment to the world—a perspective which Ma pushes back against time and time again. Dr. Clay is well-read, thoughtful, and interested in helping Ma and Jack make sense of the separate but linked ordeals they've been through. He is protective of Ma and Jack as they navigate the media circus

surrounding their case, and encourages them to take their feelings and boundaries seriously. Occasionally, Dr. Clay verges on being too protective, such as when he tries to discuss an “acceptable standard of care” with Grandma after Jack gets his first sunburn. In general, Dr. Clay underestimates what Ma and Jack can handle and is repeatedly surprised by their resilience and bravery. In spite of his occasional oversensitivity, which sometimes reads as a lack of confidence in Ma and Jack’s strength, Dr. Clay cares deeply about Ma and Jack and is invested seriously in their rehabilitation.

Officer Oh – Officer Oh is the first officer to respond to Ajeet’s 911 call about Jack. Though Jack has difficulty responding to Officer Oh’s questions due to a combination of shock, fear, and uncertain social skills, Officer Oh senses that Jack’s situation is very serious and refuses to give up on him. As she asks him an intense but attentive series of questions about where he comes from and what his life is like, Officer Oh begins unraveling the mystery of Room—and is able to direct her fellow officers to conduct a satellite search of local properties that have freestanding sheds with skylights. Due to Officer Oh’s care and attention, officials are able to find Room—and Ma. Officer Oh is also the one to accompany Ma and Jack back to Room at the very end of the novel, as they return to the site of their captivity to process their freedom and say goodbye.

Ajeet – Ajeet is the first person Jack sees when he enters the “real” world. Ajeet is walking his dog Raja when he notices Jack jump from Old Nick’s truck. When Old Nick attempts to pick the screaming Jack up and take him back to the truck, Ajeet begins calling the police and shouting that he has Old Nick’s plates—as a result, Old Nick drops Jack, gets into his car, and speeds away. Ajeet is kind and responsible, and a huge part of the reason Ma and Jack are able to pull off their escape plan.

Dr. Kendrick – Dr. Kendrick is the general medical resident on duty at the Cumberland Clinic, a psychiatric facility where Ma and Jack stay after their escape from Room. Even though Dr. Kendrick has the difficult task of examining Ma and Jack in their fragile state, she is a kind and gentle doctor who respects Ma and Jack’s boundaries.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Grandpa – Grandpa is Ma’s father, who separated from Grandma and moved to Australia in the wake of Ma’s disappearance. He has trouble accepting Jack, and though he comes home to see Ma after she and Jack escape from Room, he doesn’t stay very long.

Paul – Paul is Ma’s brother. Paul is genial and sensitive, and he seems to really want to establish a relationship with both Ma and Jack. It’s clear that Paul missed Ma very much while she was in Room, and is overjoyed to have her back in his life.

Deana – Deana is Paul’s wife. She is a kind, well-meaning woman who is nonetheless overwhelmed by Jack’s naivete and

confusion about the world around him.

Bronwyn – Bronwyn is Paul and Deana’s three-year-old daughter.

Noreen – Noreen is a kind, accommodating nurse at the Cumberland Clinic.

Pilar – The admissions coordinator at Cumberland Clinic.

Morris – Ma and Jack’s lawyer. A practical, savvy man who encourages Ma to take advantage of the media attention swirling around her in order to secure a more comfortable financial future for herself and Jack.



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.



ISOLATION

In her novel *Room*, Emma Donoghue focuses on a mother and son living in an extreme set of circumstances. Prisoners of a mysterious kidnapper whom they refer to only as Old Nick, Ma and Jack—her five-year-old son, and a product of Old Nick’s multiple rapes—are confined to a one-room shed and cut off from the rest of the world. In the space they call Room, Ma and Jack watch **television**, read, have “Phys Ed” classes, and create a kind of language of their own in order to accommodate Jack’s limited understanding of the world. When they finally make their escape, Jack finds himself missing the solace of Room, and Ma struggles to protect her son and herself from the cruelty of the wide world. Through *Room*’s distinct sections—the half of the novel set inside of Room and the half set beyond it—Donoghue examines the effects of prolonged and profound separation from the world, ultimately suggesting that an end to physical seclusion does not always mean an end to emotional isolation.

At the beginning of the novel, Ma and Jack are confined to Room. Donoghue explores the effects of their isolation from the world, charting how their seclusion is shaping both of their lives. Ma and Jack live a simple, regimented life inside Room. Every object is important and, in Jack’s view, sentient. Ma and Jack’s daily rituals—mealtimes, Phys Ed, attempting to guess the code that will open the door to Room, measuring objects with a homemade ruler, and the planning of their weekly “Sundaytreat” requests for Old Nick—are peculiar and precise. Ma and Jack’s world has a logic of its own, and so does their language. Ma explains that the single Plant inside Room doesn’t have flowers anymore because “she got tired.” Ice cream, which Jack has never had, is “TV”—their word for things that are fake

or nonexistent. Jack understands complicated words, like “poignant,” but has no idea what simple things such as hammocks are. The rules of life inside Room are strange and singular, and Donoghue quickly establishes the ways in which Ma has tried to teach Jack about what it is to be alive in the world—even if he believes the world is no bigger than Room. Propelled by a desire to escape Room before the increasingly unstable Old Nick does anything to harm her or Jack, Ma begins to educate Jack about the fact that there is a world beyond Room. With this new knowledge, Jack experiences isolation for the first time. In Room, with Ma, he never felt lonely or missed the world simply because he didn’t know there was a world to miss. Now, at the prospect of leaving Room and entering a world whose rules he does not understand, Jack experiences disorientation and trepidation—and his emotions foreshadow the uneasy transition he and Ma will have as they depart from the confines of Room.

Midway through the novel, Jack and Ma put an escape plan into motion—and in spite of a couple hiccups, they pull it off and are rescued. As they transition into the world beyond Room—Jack for the first time ever, and Ma for the first time in seven years—they find that though their physical isolation has come to an end, there is a long road ahead for both of them in terms of mitigating the emotional and social isolation that has become their norm. Ma and Jack’s intense, symbiotic emotional bond, their peculiar way of speaking to one another and explaining things, as well as Jack’s insistence on **breastfeeding** (and Ma’s encouragement of him to do so) all represent the ways in which the two of them have, within the constraints of Room, created a world of their own. When they move into the “real” world, Ma is overjoyed to be free and tries to teach Jack about new things like showers and pancakes—but Jack is upset over the fact that he and Ma now “have to be in the world.” Jack and Ma have been rescued from their secluded prison—but the problem is that Jack never saw Room as a prison at all, while Ma developed a series of physical, emotional, and intellectual survival mechanisms to make Room seem bearable or even normal. When a doctor suggests that Ma and Jack may be experiencing a kind of “separation anxiety,” Ma retorts that she and Jack are not separated from one another, and never will be—but the doctor points out that “it’s not just the two of [them] anymore.” As the doctor points out, the simple fact of Ma and Jack’s departure from Room is, in and of itself, a kind of separation anxiety. They have been separated from the world they jointly created—and, ironically, though their physical isolation has come to an end, their sense of emotional or psychological isolation is just beginning.

Though Ma and Jack do, by the end of the novel, become participants in the world around them by moving into an independent living community and engaging in more open relationships with Ma’s family, they remain deeply affected by all they’ve been through—and intimidated by the world around

them. “Now I’m in the world all the time [...] I’m always confused,” Jack says in the final pages of the book. Donoghue shows how the lingering effects of physical isolation contribute to ongoing emotional isolation—and how sometimes, the end of an intensely secluded lifestyle can be more isolating than solitude itself.



GROWING UP

When Jack turns five, everything in his life changes. Ma begins “unlying” to him, explaining that the way he has conceived of the world—as no bigger than the confines of Room and containing no humans but him, his mother, and occasionally Old Nick—is false. Jack’s coming-of-age tale is an unusual one: it involves an escape from captivity and an intense period of physical and psychological adjustment to the world. Jack misses Room at first, as it was the only home he ever knew, and he even longs to return there, much to Ma’s chagrin. As the novel progresses and Jack learns more about the world around him, however, Donoghue argues that what all children need most is both the physical and emotional space to grow—even when the vastness of the world seems frightening, overwhelming, or even repulsive.

Over the course of *Room*, Donoghue charts Jack’s transformation as he leaves the world of Room and enters the “real” world. The way Jack understands the world at the start of the novel is rooted in the false belief that outside of Room is outer space—everything Jack sees on **TV**, Ma tells him, is fake. She brings him up for the first five years of his life to believe that the world consists only of Room and the objects within it—and so Jack never sees Room as too small or not enough. In fact, the objects within Room take on a larger-than-life quality as Jack ascribes special names and qualities to his favorite objects. The wardrobe in Room is not just a wardrobe—it is **Wardrobe**, and by referring to it (along with **Toothbrush**, and **Blue Crayon**, and **Melted Spoon**, and all of the other objects within Room) as a proper noun, Jack imbues it with a sense of humanity. Jack finds infinite space in his tiny world, playing games and using his imagination to make Room seem bigger. Jack doesn’t realize how small his world is—but there is evidence of his desire to grow beyond it in spite of his ignorance of the outside world as he longs for more books, asks more questions about what he sees on TV, and seeks friendships with potentially dangerous creatures like mice.

Several factors drive Ma to begin her “unlying” and start telling Jack about the real world beyond the confines of Room. First of all, Jack is clearly growing up and becoming more curious—and secondly, Ma learns that Old Nick, their captor, has lost his job. Worried that Old Nick will kill her and Jack if his house goes into foreclosure and moving become necessary, Ma begins signaling for help each night by switching **Lamp** on and off over and over. She also starts preparing Jack to understand that there is, after all, a world beyond Room—a world they may have

to enter very soon. When Ma begins the process of “unlying,” she tells Jack that, now that he’s five, he’s old enough to know certain things. Jack repeatedly states that he wishes he could go back to being four—and, when Ma begins training Jack to execute an escape plan, begs her to wait until he turns six: when he’s six, he assures her, he’ll be ready. The more Jack learns about the real world, the more frightened he becomes of facing it. He wishes he could regress back into ignorance, but when he’s unable to, he tries to bargain for just staying put. Jack resists the demands of growing up, and Donoghue suggests that Jack’s feelings are representative of any child coming to terms with the necessities and responsibilities of growing older, even though Jack’s situation is unique.

Jack and Ma devise a plan to help Jack escape Room. As Jack plays dead, Ma rolls him up inside of Rug and convinces Old Nick that Jack has died of a fever and must be taken far away and buried. The plan is a success, and soon, Jack is free and Ma has been rescued by the police. As Jack begins the process of growing up in the real world, he finds it hard to adjust to life outside of Room—and repeatedly expresses the wish that he could return. Even Ma is forced to admit that life in the real world is “harder.” “When our world was eleven foot square,” she tells one reporter, “it was easier to control.” Jack and Ma’s story is unusual and exceptional—but it provides a profound allegory for the terror of leaving childhood behind and entering the real world. Jack and Ma both experience overwhelming fear out in the real world—Ma even attempts suicide when things become too much for her to bear—but slowly and surely, both she and Jack start to thrive. As Jack experiences “new things every single day,” he and Ma grow “braver” and even make a list of things they want to experience: on it, “Going to the North Pole” and “Going to the moon” sit alongside simple things like “Making new friends” and “Taking swimming lessons.” Jack and Ma—both afraid of the wide world at first, having shrunk themselves physically and emotionally to survive in Room—are expanding due to the space they now have, and their goals for their lives are expanding, too.

At the end of the novel, Ma and Jack visit Room one final time. Jack remarks upon how small it looks and wonders aloud whether it has “got shrunk” since they’ve left. This passage suggests that the amount of emotional growth Jack has been able to accomplish outside of Room has allowed him to recognize, on some level, what a constraining place it really was. As Jack bids goodbye to Room once and for all, he sees it as “a hole where something happened.” He has recognized that he—like all children, Donoghue suggests—must work to feel at home in the world as he grows bigger and older, and that hiding himself away is both fruitless and futile.

circumstances, but it is also an unforgiving look at the fear, uncertainty, and guilt that accompany parenthood. Though at the outset of the novel, Ma has spent her last seven years in captivity—and Jack has been imprisoned for the entirety of his life—they draw strength from one another, and Ma especially finds herself reaffirmed in the value of her own life as a result of her love for Jack. Ultimately, Donoghue shows how in spite of its challenges and even in the most painful of circumstances, the act of parenting gives meaning, purpose, and motivation to one’s life—and suggests that in many cases, parents need their children just as much as their children need them.

Through the character of Ma, Donoghue demonstrates just how complicated the nature of parenting is—and at the same time, shows that in spite of the difficulties parenting has brought to her life, Ma is just as sustained by Jack as he is by her. In the opening passages of the novel, as Jack awakens on his fifth birthday, he asks his Ma to tell him the story of how he came to be. Before Jack came, Ma explains, she slept for days, “cried till [she] didn’t have any tears left,” and “lay [around] counting the seconds.” Once Jack arrived, Ma’s story implies, she had responsibility—and love—in her life, and thus something to live for. Though Jack has never known life outside of Room, the 11-by-11 garden shed in which he and Ma are imprisoned, Ma lived 19 years in the real world before Old Nick abducted and imprisoned her. Her world, she tells Jack, was full of only suffering before he came into it—and because of her desire to keep him safe and healthy, she has experienced a renewed desire to do the same for herself. Ma’s **bad teeth** are a symbol of the years of self-neglect she inflicted upon herself during the early days of her captivity in Room. In the early pages of the novel, however, Ma insists on strict daily oral hygiene for both herself and Jack—a symbol of her desire not to languish in self-pity any longer, but rather to make things better for both of them. Jack’s arrival reinvigorates Ma’s sense of purpose and reanimates her desire to survive and indeed overcome her imprisonment—not just for Jack’s sake, but for her own. This idea is cemented later on in the novel, in Ma’s own words. “For me, see, Jack was everything,” Ma tells a reporter during a television interview shortly after she and Jack have escaped Room. “I was alive again,” she says; “I mattered.” In this quotation, Ma confirms that Jack’s arrival transformed her and actively sustained her through her years of captivity.

One of the novel’s central symbols is the act of **breastfeeding**. Though Jack is five years old, he still breastfeeds several times a day. For any nursing mother, breastfeeding is an act of communion and a method of bonding with their baby—but for Ma and Jack, the ritual is given heightened meaning and even sacredness. Though Ma’s milk is no longer Jack’s sole source of nutrition—he eats three meals a day, which Ma attempts to make sure contain some fresh fruits and vegetables—it is a source of comfort to him, and to Ma as well. When Ma and Jack



PARENTING

Emma Donoghue’s *Room* is an uplifting ode to the power of maternal love in the face of unimaginable

escape Room, Jack continues breastfeeding—but when Grandma realizes that Ma has not stopped breastfeeding, she is shocked and slightly disturbed. Ma explains curtly that “There was no reason to stop”—but what she doesn’t say is that there was every reason to continue feeding Jack from her own body. The act of breastfeeding is both practically and symbolically nurturing for Ma and Jack alike—it represents the strength and sustenance they draw from one another, and externalizes the intense, symbiotic relationship between the two of them. Jack would not have life if it weren’t for Ma—but in many ways, it’s possible that Ma would not be alive, either, if Jack had not come along.

“Is there a word for adults when they aren’t parents?” Jack asks his “Steppa” (or step-grandfather), Leo, during a moment alone. Steppa laughs at Jack’s question—but the quotation is actually revealing with regard to Donoghue’s deep investigation into the nature of parenthood. Donoghue uses the emotional and sensational story at the heart of *Room* to demonstrate how the act of parenting can bring intense fulfillment and purpose to one’s life. Children draw strength and confidence from their parents, and, from the lessons their parents teach them, they learn how to face the world. In *Room*, the opposite idea is also true: Ma is able to find purpose, resolve, and courage because of her child, and once they are out in the world, she learns as much from him as he learns from her.



VOYEURISM AND THE MEDIA

The events of *Room*, though fictional, draw inspiration from several real-life incidents: the 1991 abduction of Jaycee Dugard, the 2002 kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart, and, most notably, the 2008 case of Elisabeth Fritzl, an Austrian woman who was imprisoned in the basement of her parents’ apartment building and raped repeatedly by her father for years, ultimately bearing him seven children. All of these cases received widespread media attention—and in *Room*, Ma and Jack escape Room only to find a media wildfire awaiting them. Through the events of the novel, Donoghue criticizes the response of the media to the very real traumas of survivors of abduction, rape, and abuse. Ultimately, Donoghue argues that such intense media attention often re-traumatizes survivors—and is a machine that must be stopped.

Ma and Jack face one set of trials within the confines of Room, but when they make their escape, they must contend with a new set of difficulties. Adjusting to the world is hard enough for Ma and Jack, but as their story spreads like wildfire across the country, they must confront the media attention their case has garnered. From the moment Ma and Jack arrive at the precinct after being rescued from Room, there are already paparazzi waiting for them. The officers who saved Ma and Jack lament that the press keeps coming up with new ways to track police activity in hopes of sniffing out stories. Jack is confused by

Officer Oh’s categorization of the people with “machines flashing and black fat sticks” as “vultures.” He doesn’t understand why she tries to put a blanket over his head as she helps him and Ma inside, and pushes back against her. While Ma is questioned by police and examined by doctors, Jack, in a waiting room nearby, watches **TV**—and is shocked to see himself and Ma on the screen. He listens to the report as a journalist describes him and Ma as “victims” with an “eerie pallor.” Footage of Jack resisting Officer Oh’s attempt to shield him with a blanket rolls as a newscaster describes “The malnourished boy [...] lashing out convulsively against one of his rescuers.” This instance is Jack’s first introduction to the media. Though Jack can’t comprehend the intricacies of what’s happening to him, Donoghue makes it crystal clear that the media are sensationalizing Jack’s story, preying on two vulnerable people, and warping the events they capture on camera to fit a narrative they have constructed about Ma and Jack’s case. As Ma and Jack are transferred to a psychiatric clinic for evaluation, the paparazzi pursue them. While Ma is agitated by their presence, Jack is amused by the fact that he and Ma are “famous now, like rap stars.” Jack understands the concept of fame only abstractly from his years of TV-watching inside Room. He doesn’t understand the gradations of fame and celebrity in American society, and this conflation of the very different kinds of attention garnered by “rap stars” versus the victims of personal tragedies is part of Donoghue’s cynical commentary on the cannibalistic, voyeuristic media.

It’s not enough for Ma and Jack to put up with the “vultures” from the press—at a certain point, Ma realizes she needs to strategize not against the media but with them, in order to secure a living for herself and a future for Jack. Ma’s difficult moral bargain has resounding emotional effects for both her and Jack. When Ma agrees to do a major primetime interview, she feels anxiety and anger as the television interview approaches. Though Dr. Clay and others around her notice her agitated state, Ma chooses to press on and do the interview, stating that the profits from it will cover Jack’s college fund. Ma is leveraging the public’s intense interest in her and Jack’s story to their advantage—or at least trying to. Even though Ma has reservations about engaging with the press, she feels forced to do so, both because of her financial situation and because she knows that the press won’t back off until she gives them something. As the interview begins, the journalist conducting it asks leading questions that criticize Ma for keeping Jack with her in Room rather than asking Old Nick to bring him to a hospital or shelter. The journalist accuses Ma of being selfish for keeping Jack with her—and though Ma tries to steer the conversation towards larger issues such as the corrupt prison system and systemic abuse in orphanages and foster care, the interviewer only cares about drawing out lurid details of Ma and Jack’s story. Ma has offered herself up to the press in hopes of beating them at their own game, but Donoghue shows just how unfeeling and sensationalist the press really is—and

how it abuses, indicts, and retraumatizes victims and survivors. The day after Ma's big interview is one of Ma's "Gone" days—she is nearly catatonic, and Jack is unable to get her attention. Jack goes on an outing with Ma's brother Paul, Paul's wife Deana, and their daughter Bronwyn, and leaves Ma to rest. When he returns, he finds Ma unconscious in a pool of her own vomit: she has attempted to kill herself by swallowing painkillers. Donoghue suggests that Ma's suicide attempt is the direct result of the press's attack on her parenting choices, her survival mechanisms, and her very existence. Donoghue shows how despicably the media treats the most vulnerable members of society, exploiting their stories rather than uplifting their voices.

Though Donoghue uses *Room* to explore the complex nature of humanity, on one issue at least, she is clear about what's right and what's wrong. The voyeurism and sensationalism of the media, she asserts, is responsible for making the lives of survivors of violence and tragedy more difficult—and for coopting and twisting the stories of those who are victimized or voiceless.

with the practice, as it allowed Ma and Jack to sustain one another not just physiologically but emotionally. After Ma's suicide attempt, she is hospitalized while Jack stays with Grandma and Steppa, and by the time she returns, her breasts have stopped producing milk; she tells Jack his days of "having some" are over. Though Ma can no longer provide Jack with physical nourishment—and though he no longer needs it—the mutually supportive relationship they share has been firmly cemented, and Donoghue suggests that they will continue to sustain and support one another in new ways as time goes by and they adjust to life in the real world.



TEETH

Emma Donoghue uses teeth throughout *Room* to symbolize the various ways that Ma and Jack experience both their individual identities and their shared relationship. The character most obsessed with teeth is Ma, whose years of depression early on in her captivity led her to neglect her personal and oral hygiene. At the start of the novel, Jack describes Ma's teeth as "rotted." She is forced to take painkillers daily to numb the intense pain her teeth cause her, and at one point, she even loses Bad Tooth—the tooth that has been giving her the most trouble for the longest time. Ma neglected her oral hygiene for so long because she didn't care whether she lived or died—now that she has Jack, though, she has started to take care of her teeth, and makes sure that Jack brushes his teeth diligently twice a day (even though he and Ma must share one single toothbrush). Jack—whose teeth are "dazzling" thanks to Ma's attentiveness—soon adopts Ma's lost Bad Tooth as a totem of sorts, carrying it with him in his socks and even in his cheek as he and Ma execute their escape plan and venture out of Room. The world is scary for Jack, and in carrying Bad Tooth around, he believes he can feel (and even taste) Ma at any time. The more Jack sucks on Bad Tooth, though, the less it reminds him of Ma, and the more it seems to represent nothing at all, not even comfort. At the end of the novel, Jack loses Bad Tooth and becomes upset, but Ma urges him not to worry too much about it—it'll either turn up, or it won't. For both Jack and Ma, teeth represented everything at the start of the novel: they were one of the very few ways they could attempt to control their identities and their circumstances within Room. By the end of the novel, however, Jack and Ma are more whole, independent people, and are less reliant on superficial factors like teeth to shape their identities and their bond.



TV

One of the major symbols in *Room* is TV, which represents the changing way that the protagonists relate to the outside world. While Jack and Ma are imprisoned in Room, Jack believes that the entire world consists only of



SYMBOLS

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



BREASTFEEDING

One of the most poignant symbols in *Room* is the act of breastfeeding, which represents the close supportive bond between Ma and Jack. Jack refers to the ritual as "having some," and though he is five years old at the start of the novel, he "has some" from Ma several times a day. Ma is slightly reluctant to breastfeed Jack so often as he's getting older, but she continues because breastfeeding is a comfort and a balm for both of them. Breastfeeding is one component of bonding between new mothers and their infants, and a natural way of nourishing a newborn—but for Ma and Jack, the ritual of breastfeeding has become something more. Jack is not the only one being nourished by the act of breastfeeding—Ma is also emotionally comforted and nourished because the ritual keeps her close to Jack, and in this way, breastfeeding becomes a symbol of the symbiotic relationship between Ma and Jack and the mutual care and support they give to one another in the midst of their depressing, chaotic circumstances. After Ma and Jack leave Room and enter the real world, many people—including Dr. Kendrick and Dr. Clay, their doctors at the Cumberland Clinic, as well as Grandma—are confused or even put off by the fact that the five-year-old Jack still breastfeeds. Ma defensively states that there "was no reason to stop" breastfeeding Jack inside of Room, but what she doesn't say is that there were many reasons to actually keep up

Room—everything outside of Room is Outer Space, and everything he sees on TV, from cartoons to the news to celebrity interviews, is “fake.” TV, then, is a complex symbol which evolves over the course of the novel. Though originally representative of Jack’s ignorance about the world, once Ma and Jack escape from Room, Jack’s ability to have learned so much about the world through TV instead becomes a symbol of his intelligence and Ma’s resourcefulness. Though Ma constantly warned Jack while they lived in Room that too much TV would “rot their brains” and dull their senses, TV actually serves to heighten Jack’s sensitivity to the world around him and allow him a way of understanding and empathizing with others in spite of his intensely sheltered upbringing. However, TV is also one of the main kinds of media that torment Ma and Jack after their escape; it’s on TV that Jack sees himself called a victim, and it’s after a traumatic TV interview that Ma attempts suicide. Though they eventually make a kind of peace with the media’s role in their lives, the way that TV effectively re-traumatizes both Ma and Jack represents the way that the outside world, though an invaluable source of wisdom and experience, can also be dangerous and unsympathetic.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Back Bay Books edition of *Room* published in 2015.

Presents Quotes

“Up in Heaven. Was I minus one, minus two, minus three—?”



“Nah, the numbers didn’t start till you zoomed down.”

“Through Skylight. You were all sad till I happened in your tummy.”

“You said it.” Ma leans out of Bed to switch on Lamp, he makes everything light up whoosh. I shut my eyes just in time, then open one a crack, then both.

“I cried till I didn’t have any tears left,” she tells me. “I just lay here counting the seconds.”

Related Characters: Ma, Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3



Explanation and Analysis

In some of *Room*’s very first lines, Emma Donoghue expertly sets up the relationship between her two protagonists, Ma and Jack. On the morning of his fifth birthday, as Jack asks

Ma to tell him the story of his birth, Donoghue shows the depth of love Ma has for Jack, and illustrates how Jack’s arrival was, in many ways, Ma’s salvation. There are many indicators that after her capture at the hands of Old Nick but before the birth of Jack, Ma had all but given up on life—she let her teeth rot, she numbed her mind watching TV, and by her own admission, lay in bed crying and “counting the seconds.” Jack’s birth gave Ma not just company but a sense of meaning and purpose, and it forced her to summon the strength and courage to care not just for herself but for another living being. In this way, Donoghue sets up the symbiotic and mutually nourishing relationship between Ma and Jack that will continue throughout the novel. Ma provides for and sustains Jack—but Jack, too, plays a huge part in keeping Ma not just happy, but alive.

“Nothing makes Ma scared. Except Old Nick maybe. Mostly she calls him just him, I didn’t even know the name for him till I saw a cartoon about a guy that comes in the night called Old Nick. I call the real one that because he comes in the night, but he doesn’t look like the TV guy with a beard and horns and stuff.”

Related Characters: Jack (speaker), Old Nick, Ma

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

The introduction of Old Nick—Ma’s captor and rapist, and Jack’s biological father—paints the man as a nearly mythical figure in Jack’s life, someone much-discussed but rarely seen. This passage seems to imply that Ma has never learned her captor’s real name, and that she and Jack have given him the nickname Old Nick—a name rife with meaning. Jack says he “saw a cartoon about a guy that comes in the night,” and thought immediately of his captor. Old Nick comes to Room several nights a week to bring supplies and rape Ma—but Jack doesn’t understand that the latter is happening. Old Nick is, to Jack, a kind of present-bringer—just like Santa Claus, also a “guy that comes in the night” who is sometimes referred to as Old Saint Nick. The other meaning of Old Nick, however, suggests a much darker association. Old Nick is also a common nickname for the devil himself—and Jack’s description later on in the passage of a “TV guy with a beard and horns” suggests that maybe Jack didn’t see Santa Claus on TV, but some kind of

cartoon representation of the devil or a demon. This passage highlights Old Nick's duality throughout the first half of the novel. He is an evil man who does unspeakable and insane things—but at the same time, he is necessary to Ma and Jack's survival, and Jack even sees the man as benevolent in spite of Ma's constant reminders that Old Nick is not their friend. Because Ma and Jack are living in such profound isolation, everything from cultural references to their moral standpoints are skewed—they're forced to make deals with the devil, and this passage shows the point to which their isolation has brought them.

Unlying Quotes

☞ “Listen. What we see on TV is... it's pictures of real things.”

That's the most astonishing I ever heard.

Ma's got her hand over her mouth.

“Dora's real for real?”

She takes her hand away. “No, sorry. Lots of TV is made-up pictures—like, Dora's just a drawing—but the other people, the ones with faces that look like you and me, they're real.”



“Actual humans?”

She nods. “And the places are real too, like farms and forests and airplanes and cities...”

“Nah.” Why is she tricking me? “Where would they fit?”

Related Characters: Ma, Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 59-60

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ma begins “unlying” to Jack and lets slip the big secret she's been keeping—that there is a world outside of Room. Because there is too much to explain and because Jack is too young to understand the depth of his and Ma's situation, Ma has made a parenting judgment call: for the last five years, she's been raising Jack to believe that everything beyond the bounds of Room is “Outer Space,” and everything they see on TV is fake. Now, though, as the situation in Room becomes more tenuous and dangerous, Ma realizes she has to help her son begin the process of growing up and moving into the world—no matter how extra-difficult those things are under their unique circumstances. Jack's inability—and, indeed, his refusal—to


comprehend the existence of a wider world is symbolic of the existential struggles that accompany the end of any childhood, but for Jack, the blow Ma deals in this passage is even more profound. This quotation illustrates several of the novel's major themes in action: Jack's isolation has impeded him from reaching certain milestones in the growing-up process, a process that is necessary but impossible for him to go through within the confines of Room. As a parent, Ma must take the difficult steps every parent takes to push their children from the nest, so to speak, and give them room to grow—but again, this is doubly hard for her given the physical, emotional, and intellectual constraints Room has foisted upon both her and Jack.

☞ “I don't think you appreciate how good you've got it here,” says Old Nick. [...] “Aboveground, natural light, central air, it's a cut above some places, I can tell you. Fresh fruit, toiletries, what have you, click your fingers and it's there. Plenty girls would thank their lucky stars for a setup like this, safe as houses. Specially with the kid—”

Is that me? [...] I count my teeth, I keep getting it wrong, nineteen then twenty then nineteen again. I bite my tongue till it hurts.

Related Characters: Jack, Old Nick (speaker), Ma

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

This passage illustrates part of the function of one of the novel's major symbols: teeth. As Jack listens to Old Nick berate Ma after she asks for a small extractor fan to help alleviate the smell within Room, he feels an anxiety he can't place, and wonders if he is the “kid” Old Nick is referring to. Teeth, throughout the novel, are intimately tied to self-confidence and self-conception. Jack, who has never seen himself through anyone else's eyes, doesn't necessarily understand what being a “kid” is. As his anxiety about being seen through Old Nick's eyes skyrockets, he counts his teeth in order to calm himself and cope. Jack could count anything—sheep, or freckles—but in choosing to count his teeth, which Ma has taught him are such an important part of himself, he's reminding himself of the core of who he is and reassuring himself that he's the same person he's

always been. Ma's teeth are rotting and painful, a reflection of the years of self-neglect she inflicted upon herself during the early days of her captivity in Room. Jack's teeth are small, dazzling, and perfect—a reflection of how much growing he still has to do, and the potential for him to get out of Room unscathed. Though Jack doesn't understand the intricacies of these facts, he nonetheless has absorbed from Ma that teeth are an important marker of the self.

“He put a blindfold on me—”

“Like Blindman's Buff?”

“Yeah, but not fun. He drove and drove, I was terrified.”

“Where was I?”

“You hadn't happened yet, remember?”

I forgot. “Was the dog in the truck too?”

“There was no dog.” Ma's sounding cranky again. “You have to let me tell this story.”

“Can I pick another?”

“It's what happened.”

Related Characters: Jack, Ma (speaker), Old Nick

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

As Ma continues the process of “unlying” to Jack about the world around him, the circumstances of their arrival in Room, and the dire nature of their situation there, Jack resists hearing and understanding the truth again and again. This passage illustrates how difficult it is for Ma to successfully “unlie” to Jack—both from an intellectual and emotional standpoint—and how hard it is for Jack to accept this new version of the truth of everything he's ever known. As Ma attempts to tell Jack about how Old Nick captured her and brought her to Room against her will, Jack asks to listen to another story. Ma, however, insists that Jack needs to understand both logistically and emotionally the truth of their lives. Ma has let Jack grow up in ignorance of the brutality she faced as a young girl, and without true knowledge of just how bleak and dangerous Room really is—now, though, she realizes that she needs to expedite the beginning of Jack's true growing-up process, and she is not holding anything back any longer. This is an impossible task that Ma is facing down: she must shatter her sheltered boy's childhood fancies and tell him, up front, what a bad place the

world can be. This process takes many years, many stories, and many lessons for the average child to learn—but for Jack, there is only this one story of “what happened” to Ma to force him into an understanding of what the world around him is truly made of.

“So, Jack, we mustn't try and hurt him again. When he came back the next night, he said, number one, nothing would ever make him tell me the code. And number two, if I ever tried a stunt like that again, he'd go away and I'd get hungrier and hungrier till I died.”

She's stopped I think.

My tummy creaks really loud and I figure it out, why Ma's telling me the terrible story. She's telling me that we're going—

Then I'm blinking and covering my eyes, everything's all dazzling because Lamp's come back on.

Related Characters: Jack, Ma (speaker), Old Nick

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, taken from the very end of the “Unlying” section of Room, Ma finishes explaining to Jack the history of her time in Room—including her many attempts at escaping. Just as Jack realizes the truth of why Ma is suddenly telling him so much, Lamp snaps on—Old Nick has restored power to Room after days of cutting it as punishment for Ma screaming several nights ago. As Lamp comes back on, it symbolizes a literal lightbulb moment for Jack—he realizes that Ma is telling him all about her initial capture, her steady hatred of Old Nick, and her desire to get out of Room because she is preparing him for an escape. The truth is “dazzling” and stunning to Jack, and his first reaction is—as it is in the face of Lamp's sudden brightness—to hide himself away. The process of growing up is painful and scary for any child—but for Jack, who must digest an immense amount of intellectual and emotional knowledge very quickly, it is especially jarring. His reaction in this passage symbolizes his resistance to the truth about Room—a resistance which will follow him throughout the novel, even after he and Ma successfully implement their escape plan.

Dying Quotes

“Don’t you want to escape?”

“Yeah. Only not really.”

[...]

Ma’s shaking her head. “It’s getting too small.”

“What is?”

“Room.”

“Room’s not small. Look.” I climb up on my chair and jump with my arms out and spin, I don’t bang into anything.

“You don’t even know what it’s doing to you.” Her voice is shaky.

“You need to see things, touch things—”

“I do already.”

“More things, other things. You need more room.”

Related Characters: Jack, Ma (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 113-114

Explanation and Analysis

As Ma and Jack work together to come up with an escape plan, Ma is excited and eager—but Jack doesn’t understand why they have to leave Room, and he keeps asking to delay the plan until he’s six or older. Ma grows frustrated with Jack’s inability to see just how dangerous remaining in Room really is—and all the reasons why. Ma tries to explain to Jack that he can’t even see “what it’s doing” to him, and her gentle, nervous plea is emblematic of one of the novel’s central thematic concerns: the necessity of having both physical and emotional room to grow and learn. Because of how Jack has been raised, he doesn’t understand what normal life is like—and can’t see how he’s being deprived. He loves Room and everything in it, but doesn’t know how much wider and more expansive his world could be. When Ma tells Jack, heartbreakingly, at the end of this paragraph that he needs “more room,” she isn’t talking about just physical space—she means that Jack needs the full range of emotional, intellectual, and communal experiences that make up a life.

“What’ll the person do with it?”

“Read it, of course.”

“TV persons can read?”

She stares at me. “They’re real people, remember, just like us.”


I still don’t believe that but I don’t say.

Ma does the note on a bit of ruled paper. It’s a story all about us and Room and *Please send help a.s.a.p.*, that means super fast.

Near the start, there’s two words I never saw before, Ma says they’re her names like TV persons have, what everybody in Outside used to call her, it’s only me who says Ma.

Related Characters: Ma, Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is one of the first in the novel to hint at the ways in which voyeurism and the media will come to play a part in Ma and Jack’s life. As Ma helps Jack prepare to escape, she decides to send him out into the world with a small note tucked in his underwear just in case Jack has trouble talking or expressing himself to the people he sees at the hospital. When Ma includes her “TV persons” names, Donoghue is suggesting that Ma believes her case already has widespread publicity and that people are looking for her. This casts all the media attention Ma and Jack receive once they escape Room in a new light. Donoghue is hinting at the fact that Ma knows how the machine of the media and the paparazzi work, and is in fact counting on media attention to be the thing that will save her and Jack. This suggests that Ma knows attention in the press is, in American day-to-day life, equated with worth and value—and she is counting on exploiting that fact in order to save her and her son’s own lives. This kind of attempt to control or leverage the media comes up several times throughout the novel as Ma and Jack continually try to get ahead of the media’s representation of them and their case—and often fail.

“I’m too scared,” I shout. “I won’t do it not ever and I hate you.”

Ma’s breathing funny, she sits down on Floor. “That’s all right.”
How is it all right if I hate her?

Her hands are on her tummy. “I brought you into Room, I didn’t mean to but I did it and I’ve never once been sorry.”

I stare at her and she stares back.

“I brought you here, and tonight I’m going to get you out.”

Related Characters: Ma, Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *Room*, Donoghue continually engages with Ma’s central internal moral struggle: the fact that she brought Jack into Room and kept him with her. Donoghue establishes early on that Ma needs Jack just as much as he needs her—for company, for solace, and for sanity. There is something deeply sweet about this subversion of the typical mother-child relationship—but as Ma and Jack emerge into the real world, that mutual need and support is twisted by the media and presented as Ma’s exploitation of an ignorant and perhaps even unwilling child. In this passage, Ma hints at the fact that she realizes her own selfishness in keeping Jack with her for so many years, and she is determined to put an end to the circumstances she’s created. Ma clearly blames herself for Jack’s confinement, even though she had no control over her conception of him—at the same time, she has been unable to relinquish him, and has instead chosen to raise him within Room. Ma’s moral conundrum, expressed here, will be elevated to the national stage later on in the novel, as family members and journalists alike question Ma’s motivations in keeping Jack with her.

Ma’s talking in my ear, she says we need to go talk to some more police. I snuggle against her, I say, “Want to go to Bed.”

“They’ll find us somewhere to sleep in a little while.”

“No. Bed.”


“You mean in Room?” Ma’s pulled back, she’s staring in my eyes.

“Yeah. I’ve seen the world and I’m tired now.”

“Oh, Jack,” she says, “we’re never going back.”

The car starts moving and I’m crying so much I can’t stop.

Related Characters: Ma, Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

After Jack executes Ma’s escape plan—by pretending to be dead while rolled up inside Rug, so that Old Nick would take him out of Room, load him into his truck, and drive him far away to be buried—he is able to get away from Old Nick and into the care of the police. He answers enough of the police’s questions that they’re able to triangulate Room’s location, and rescue Ma. As Ma and Jack are reunited on the street outside of Old Nick’s property, Ma is tearful, joyful, and grateful. Jack, however, is overwhelmed to the point of numbness—and in this passage, he concedes that he’s “seen the world” and is ready to go back into Room. When Ma tells Jack that they are “never going back,” Jack has his first emotional response of the night. Jack’s ongoing attachment to Room is a major motif throughout the second half of the novel, and this devastating passage shows just how profoundly Jack’s isolation has affected him—and how terrified he is by the prospect of leaving Room and growing up. Jack’s complicated emotional attachment to Room encapsulates the novel’s preoccupation with the difference between physical and emotional isolation. Even once Jack’s physical isolation from the world comes to an end, he has a hard time feeling happy or free—and Donoghue shows what a long road Jack (and Ma) have ahead in terms of overcoming that deeper sense of seclusion and solitude.

After Quotes

[Ma’s] walking with me up on her hip, I cling onto her shoulders. It’s dark but then there’s lights quick quick like fireworks.



“Vultures,” says Officer Oh.


Where?

“No pictures,” shouts the man police.

What pictures? I don’t see any vultures, I only see person faces with machines flashing and black fat sticks. They’re shouting but I can’t understand. Officer Oh tries to put the blanket over my head, I push it off.

Related Characters: Officer Oh, Jack (speaker), Ma

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

From the moment Ma and Jack arrive at the police precinct in the wake of their rescue, they are bombarded by “vultures”—the paparazzi. In this passage, Jack is unable to understand what the “lights quick quick like fireworks” are or what the “machines” people are holding all around him truly are. His ignorance as to the mechanics of fame and the media are played here for comedic effect, but as the second half of the book gets underway, Donoghue is also beginning to demonstrate just how claustrophobic life in the public eye can be, drawing parallels between the constraints of Room and the constraints of media attention. Donoghue uses the events outlined in this passage—Officer Oh’s attempt to shelter Jack, and Jack’s resistance to being covered, protected, or controlled—to devastating effect in a subsequent scene in order to show how the press manipulates events to feed their own narrative. Jack has barely been free from Room for a night, and already, he is locked into another kind of prison.

“The malnourished boy, unable to walk, is seen here lashing out convulsively at one of his rescuers.”

“Ma,” I shout.

She doesn’t come. I hear her calling, “Just a couple more minutes.”


“It’s us. It’s us in TV!”


But it’s gone blank. Pilar is standing up pointing at it with a remote and staring at me. Dr. Clay comes out, he says mad things to Pilar.

“On again,” I say. “It’s us, I want to see us.”

“I’m terribly, terribly sorry—,” says Pilar.

Related Characters: Pilar, Ma, Jack (speaker), Dr. Clay

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In this short scene, Donoghue shows how the media manipulates, controls, and twists events to fit their own

narrative. As Jack watches footage of himself and Ma entering the precinct on TV at the Cumberland Clinic, he is elated to see himself and Ma on the screen. Everyone else around him, though, understands the sensationalized language the media is using to describe Jack’s appearance, demeanor, and behavior, and wants to shield him from the press’s false representation of who he is. Everyone in the “real” world understands how media and fame can warp a person’s self-image—Jack is ignorant of these dangers so far, but as the novel progresses, Donoghue will show how his repeated encounters with other peoples’ conceptions of him begin to eat away at his own sense of self. For Jack, who has for so long known TV as his only way of understanding the world and other people, seeing himself on TV is an exciting honor rather than a confusing or upsetting event—but those around him are desperate to shield him from the harmful, painful things that they know TV can bring.

“Intense interest from a number of networks,” Morris is saying, “you might consider doing a book, down the road...” Ma’s mouth isn’t friendly. “You think we should sell ourselves before somebody else does.”

Related Characters: Jack, Ma, Morris (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Ma and Jack’s arrival at Cumberland Clinic—where they’re supposed to receive psychological and medical evaluation alongside treatment, rest, and shelter from the prying eyes of the press—the world begins pressing in on them and demanding things of them. When Ma meets with a lawyer, Morris, the man encourages Ma not just to sue several newspaper and TV outlets for using her image without her permission years ago, at the time of her abduction—but also suggests she respond to the “intense interest” of the current media climate and submit to an interview or a book deal in order to secure a financial future for herself and Jack. Morris is encouraging Ma to try to control the narrative around her and Jack or leverage the press to their advantage—but as Donoghue shows throughout the rest of the novel, those things are easier said than done. *Room* examines the cannibalistic and

voyeuristic nature of the media, and explores how the press exploits victims and survivors of horrible things alike in order to satiate the public's desire for sensational news. Such a machine can't be outrun or outfoxed—and as Ma and Jack re-enter the world, they will have to learn this lesson the hard way.

“You keep talking about separation anxiety,” Ma's saying to Dr. Clay, “but me and Jack are not going to be separated.”

“Still, it's not just the two of you anymore, is it?”

Related Characters: Dr. Clay, Ma (speaker), Jack

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

As Jack and Ma attend a therapy session with their psychiatrist, Dr. Clay, Jack draws and plays with toys while Ma and the doctor discuss Jack's development—and Ma's, as well. Jack only overhears snippets here and there, and while he doesn't fully understand much of what Dr. Clay and Ma discuss (including psychological terms such as “depersonalization,” “reexperiencing,” and “jamais vu”), he's curious about what the two of them are discussing. This particular exchange reflects intensely several of the novel's major themes, including the enduring effects of physical isolation on one's emotional state. The “separation anxiety” Dr. Clay warns Ma about doesn't necessarily mean Ma is anxious about being separated from Jack or vice versa. Dr. Clay is trying to explain to Ma that simply in the act of removing themselves from Room and entering the world, Jack and Ma have induced a kind of “separation anxiety” with regards to the insular, secluded life they lived together for so long. Donoghue uses this passage—and others like it that explore Ma and Jack's difficult entry into the world—to show that even when physical isolation abates, emotional isolation can endure.

“But that's me, the Bonsai Boy.”

“The bouncy what?” [Ma] looks at the paper again and pushes her hair out of her face, she sort of groans.

“What's *bonsai*?”

“A very tiny tree. People keep them in pots indoors and cut them every day so they stay all curled up.”

I'm thinking about Plant. We never cutted her, we let her grow all she liked but she died instead. “I'm not a tree. I'm a boy.”

“It's just a figure of speech.” She squeezes the paper into the trash.

Related Characters: Ma, Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ma snatches a newspaper away from Jack's hands. The headline of the article Jack has been reading refers to the “BONSAI BOY”—the press's nickname for Jack. This passage deals with several of the novel's major themes, and shows how the media's representation of Jack as something that was “cut” down and “curled up” minimizes and belittles the survival strategies Ma devised for them within the confines of Room. There is a degree of truth in the “figure of speech” the press has seized upon to describe Jack—Ma did have to prune Jack's knowledge of the world and cherry-pick what she would teach him about life in order to keep him stable and content within the confines of Room. However, the nickname “Bonsai Boy” negates all the hard work of parenting Ma did in order to help Jack flourish in other ways—the stories she told him, the moral lessons she taught him, the “Phys Ed” classes she helped him complete, and the ways in which she gave him the gift of language and empathy in order to understand his limited world. Now that Jack is free from Room he has the space to grow—but the press's insinuation that Jack was purposefully, systematically sculpted to fit inside Room ignores Ma's intense emotional struggle throughout the years with how to carve out a physical, emotional, moral, and intellectual life for her beloved child.

“He certainly seems to be taking giant steps toward recovery,” says the puffy-hair woman. “Now, you said just now it was ‘easier to control’ Jack when you were in captivity—”

“No, control things.”

“You must feel an almost pathological need — understandably — to stand guard between your son and the world.”


“Yeah, it’s called being a mother.” Ma nearly snarls it.

“Is there a sense in which you miss being behind a locked door?”

Ma turns to Morris. “Is she allowed to ask me such stupid questions?”

Related Characters: Jack, Ma (speaker), Morris

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, taken from an extended scene in which Ma submits to a TV interview, demonstrates the ways in which the media attempts to twist Ma’s story even in conversation with her—and the demoralizing, destabilizing effect this has on Ma and, by proxy, on Jack as well. Ma’s admission that parts of life in Room were “easier” in some ways is seized upon ruthlessly by the “puffy-hair” journalist and her team, and used to misconstrue Ma’s point of view and suggest that she enjoyed controlling Jack and was grateful to Room for allowing her to do so. As Donoghue shows, word by word, how the press manipulates Ma’s honest recollections of life inside Room in order to fit a sensationalist narrative, she demonstrates just how vicious and voyeuristic the media is—and how it pursues manufactured melodrama and scandal at the expense of real victims and survivors alike. The stress Ma experiences throughout this interview as she struggles—and fails—to get ahead of the press’s manipulation of her words and her story ultimately leads her to a suicide attempt, and in this short passage, Donoghue shows just how maddening and yet inescapable the media’s power truly is.

Living Quotes

“Can you come here and swing in the hammock?”

Pretty soon,” she says.

“When?”

“I don’t know, it depends. Is everything OK there with Grandma?”

“And Steppa.”

“Right. What’s new?”

“Everything,” I say.

That makes her laugh, I don’t know why.

Related Characters: Ma, Jack (speaker), Steppa/Leo, Grandma

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

After Ma’s suicide attempt, Jack goes to live with Grandma and Steppa while Ma remains at the clinic recovering physically and psychologically from her setback. In this passage, as Ma and Jack converse on the phone, Ma casually asks Jack what’s new—and when he tells her that “everything” is new, she laughs, charmed and delighted by her son’s honest and revealing answer. Ma is struggling to reorient herself to the world and to reckon with the trauma of her time inside Room. Now that the initial joy of being back in the world has passed, Ma has some serious issues to deal with. For Jack, however, the expansive newness of the world is still so intense that it overwhelms him—and for Ma, who spent years dreaming of showing her child the world beyond Room, this fact is a pure delight. In spite of Jack’s trepidation and nervousness, he is making a home for himself in the world even without Ma—he is growing up and taking up space in the world, just as she always hoped he would.

“Did you play LEGO with your kids?”



“I don’t have any kids.”

“How come?”

Steppa shrugs. “Just never happened.”

I watch his hands, they’re lumpy but clever. “Is there a word for adults when they aren’t parents?”

Related Characters: Steppa/Leo, Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

The burdens and joys of the state of parenthood and the act of parenting are an important thematic part of *Room*. In this passage, as Jack interacts with his Steppa (or Step-grandpa) Leo—a man with no children of his own—Jack asks if there’s “a word for adults when they aren’t parents.” This innocent question reveals a great depth, and shows that Jack, in spite of his young age, already recognizes just how sustaining the act of parenting was to Ma within the confines of Room. Jack’s limited understanding of the world and his close, symbiotic relationship with Ma mean he hasn’t met many adults who aren’t parents and he is nearly dumbfounded by the fact that some adults never become parents. Jack, on some level, comprehends how important he is to Ma, and how their relationship kept them both sustained inside of Room. Donoghue demonstrates this deeply wise and empathetic point of view through Jack’s conversation with his Steppa.

☝ “Tooth’s not just a thing, I have to have him.”



“Trust me, you don’t.”


“But—”

[Ma] holds on to my shoulders. “Bye-bye rotten old tooth. End of story.”

She’s nearly laughing but I’m not.

Related Characters: Ma, Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 307

Explanation and Analysis

Since his escape from Room, Jack has been carrying Ma’s Bad Tooth around with him, tucking it into his socks or even the corner of his mouth for safekeeping. Bad Tooth, for a long while, tasted like Ma—but the longer Jack has kept it and sucked on it, the less it has retained her essence. Now, as Jack realizes that he has lost track of Bad Tooth, he


begins to panic. Teeth, throughout the novel, are a symbol tied to identity and a sense of self—Jack worries that in losing Bad Tooth, he has lost his connection to Ma, his memories of Room, and indeed a part of Ma that he made into a part of himself. Ma assures Jack that there’s no need to worry about Bad Tooth or even miss it. This demonstrates Jack’s lingering desire to hold onto the past and his experiences within Room, and the novel contrasts that desire against Ma’s need to try to forget Room in order to press forward in her life. Donoghue suggests, through this passage, that these competing desires will continue to test Ma and Jack—but Ma’s apparent joyfulness in letting go of yet another part of her horrible past inside of Room also insinuates that hopefully, Jack will soon be able to look at his days in Room with the levity and lack of attachment Ma is already demonstrating.

☝ “I don’t think this is it,” I whisper to Ma.
“Yeah, it is.”

Our voices sound not like us. “Has it got shrunk?”

“No, it was always like this.”

Related Characters: Ma, Jack (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

As Ma and Jack return to Room for one final visit, Jack sees Room from the outside for the first time and has a hard time believing the tiny garden shed is the place where he spent the first five years of his life. As he asks Ma if Room has “got shrunk,” Donoghue symbolically shows just how much growing up Jack has done in the short time since his escape from Room. Ma knew that Jack needed “more room”—not just physical room, but emotional room, as well, to grow and change. In just a few short weeks, Jack’s conception of the world—and of himself—has evolved so greatly that he hardly even recognizes Room, and is able to see for the first time what a small, confining space it really was. In this scene, Donoghue reorients Jack’s perception of Room, and thus allows him and her readers alike to absorb fully, for the first time in the novel, just how narrowly Jack escaped a lifetime of confinement and compression.



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.

PRESENTS

Jack wakes up on the day of his fifth birthday and begins asking his mother, whom he calls Ma, questions about the day he was born. Ma tells Jack about how she was miserable before he “zoomed down” from Heaven, passed through Skylight, and into Room, where he slid out of her “onto [Rug] with [his] eyes wide open.” Jack looks down at Rug and notices a dark stain—the spot he “spilled by mistake getting born.”

As Jack adjusts to the air in Room, he tries to discern whether “he” came last night to visit Ma—the air is “different” after “he” comes. Ma asks Jack whether he’d like to open his birthday present now or later. Even though it’s early, Jack says he wants his present now. Ma pulls a gift from under her pillow, and Jack unwraps it: it is a pencil drawing of Jack sleeping. Jack isn’t pleased by the gift—he says he doesn’t like it when Ma is “on at the same time [he’s] off.” Jack looks for a place to hang the drawing—he knows Ma will want it somewhere where Old Nick can’t see it. After hanging the sketch inside Wardrobe, Jack asks Ma if he can “have some.” Ma asks if they can stop now that Jack is five, but Jack insists on **breastfeeding**.

Jack counts out one hundred pieces of cereal into a bowl and carefully pours in the milk. He eats his breakfast with his favorite spoon, Meltedy Spoon, which once got leaned against a boiling pot of pasta and is now “not the same.” Jack strokes Table as he eats, hoping to make the scratches on “her” surface “better.” Ma and Jack play a version of Name That Tune involving humming, and sing each other a mix of nursery rhymes like “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” and pop songs like Kylie Minogue’s “Can’t Get You Out of My Head.”

After breakfast, Ma and Jack brush their **teeth** using Toothbrush, their shared implement. Ma compliments Jack’s “dazzling” teeth. Jack feels bad for Ma, who’s teeth are “pretty rotted” because she didn’t brush them for a long time years ago. As Ma and Jack tidy up Room, Jack laments that he can’t see “God’s yellow face” through Skylight today. Ma and Jack complete the “thousands” of tasks they have to do each morning, including watering Plant. Plant and Spider are the only two things alive in Room—Jack laments that long ago, Ma killed some ants and a mosquito that had come to visit them.

The opening lines of the novel establish Ma and Jack’s intense emotional—and physical—isolation. Ma admits to the misery she felt before Jack came to join her, and Jack demonstrates how his attachment to the objects in Room have imbued simple things, like Rug, with an almost person-like quality.



As the opening scene of the novel continues to unfold, Donoghue shows the limited resources Ma and Jack have—and insinuates that Jack is hungry for more both physically and emotionally. He wants presents and material things on the one hand, and on the other hand, he still wants to supplement food with breastfeeding—an act that provides both physical and emotional sustenance.



Ma and Jack are living in contemporary times, but other than the ghostly echoes of cultural touchstones like pop songs, they are entirely isolated. Jack’s deep attachment to the objects within Room gets explored even further as he seems to want to heal and commune with them.



Jack and Ma’s daily routine establishes several important hallmarks of their life in Room. First, it shows how important teeth are to them—though Ma’s have all rotted, symbolically illustrating how deeply she’s lost her sense of self, Jack’s are still “dazzling” and full of potential. The regimented and peculiar way Ma and Jack structure their mornings, combined with Jack’s starvation for contact with other living creatures, paints a picture of the darker side of life in Room. Everything is sunny from Jack’s point of view, but Donoghue is demonstrating how life in Room is already breaking down.



Jack and Ma take their daily pills. Ma and Jack both take vitamins, but Ma also takes a birth control pill and a “killer” for her pain—she has a bad **tooth** which Jack calls Bad Tooth, and it hurts her all day every day. Jack asks Ma why she never takes more than one killer, two in an emergency, and Ma replies that she doesn’t want to “need them all the time.”

At 8:30, Jack turns on **TV** and watches *Dora the Explorer*—his favorite cartoon. Jack understands that sometimes Dora speaks in a language called Spanish, but doesn’t think it is a “real” language. After Dora, Jack switches through the channels, which he thinks of as separate “planets.” Ma urges Jack to turn off the TV because it rots his brain, but Jack asks if he can watch a little more because of his birthday, and Ma consents. Jack gets a little scared of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and wishes he were unafraid of everything, like Ma. The only thing Ma is afraid of, Jack says, is Old Nick—a man whose real name he and Ma don’t even know. Jack started calling the man Old Nick after he saw “a cartoon [on TV] about a guy that comes in the night.”

Ma marks Jack’s height on the wall. Jack asks how tall he is, but Ma says she doesn’t know exactly—she says that maybe they can ask Old Nick for a measuring tape for “Sunday treat.” When Jack points out that he didn’t get much taller between his fourth birthday and his fifth, Ma says that’s “normal”—Jack asks what “normal” is. Ma says “normal” means things are okay.

Jack says he plans to get bigger and taller until he smashes “through Skylight into Outer Space” so that he can visit Dora and SpongeBob on their foreign planets. Ma runs a bath, and Jack plays with some homemade toys. They bathe together and then get dressed for “Phys Ed”—they rearrange the furniture in Room and run “Track” between Bed, Wardrobe, and Lamp, timing one another and cheering each other on.

After lunch, Ma and Jack play Orchestra by banging on objects in Room to make different noises. Jack uses a cereal box guitar collaged with pictures from old catalogs to make some twanging noises. As Jack looks at the pictures on the box, he laments that Old Nick no longer brings him and Ma catalogs so that they can pick out their old clothes—Old Nick, Ma says, is “getting meaner.”

Donoghue uses this passage to foreshadow Ma’s struggles with substance abuse, but also to demonstrate just how much restraint Ma exercises on a daily basis in order to make sure that she’s a good parent to Jack.



TV is a way for Jack to escape the bleak reality of Room, but Ma is concerned that if Jack becomes too reliant on it, the machine will dull his mind and erase all the hard work she’s done to instill a moral and emotional center in Jack’s life. TV, however, allows Jack to make sense of things in a different way. Ma’s captor and rapist—and her and Jack’s jailer—is called “Old Nick” because of a cartoon Jack saw on TV. The cartoon may have been of Santa Claus, often nicknamed Old Saint Nick—or a darker entity, such as a demon or the devil himself, who has also been known throughout history as “Old Nick.”



This passage shows Jack’s inability to understand what normal is, and Ma’s inability to properly explain it to him without revealing how abnormal their current existence truly is (and destabilizing Jack’s whole world in the process).



Donoghue provides more glimpses into the peculiar logic and carefully-arranged routines which govern Ma and Jack’s life. It’s clear that while Ma is trying to keep Jack active and healthy, she’s also limiting what he knows about the world—he believes the only thing beyond Room is Outer Space, and that TV allows him to glimpse other “planets.”



This passage establishes that some of the games Ma and Jack play are not just for fun—Ma is enlisting Jack’s help in making noise that might attract people to Room and secure their rescue. Ma’s remark about Old Nick “getting meaner” provides her motivation for involving Jack in such games—she’s clearly concerned about both of their futures.



After Orchestra, Ma and Jack sit together and read. There are only 10 books in Room—among them are *The Runaway Bunny*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Dylan the Digger*, *Twilight*, and *The Da Vinci Code*. Ma hardly ever reads, but Jack loves his picture books. Reading books, though, confuses Jack, who believes that women, men, boys, and girls aren't "real" except for himself, Ma, and Old Nick. After reading, Ma and Jack lie down for a nap, and Jack **breastfeeds**.

After naptime, Ma suggests Jack make his own ruler to measure the heights and lengths of things in Room, and she helps him create a ruler that seems mostly accurate. Jack excitedly runs around "counting the tall" of everything in Room. By the time he's finished measuring, it's time for dinner—spaghetti and fresh broccoli, which helps Jack and Ma to be "extra alive." While Ma cooks, Jack asks why Plant is drooping, and Ma says she needs some special food. Jack suggests Ma ask for it for Sundaytreat, but Ma says she has too much to ask for already.

After dinner, Ma and Jack make a birthday cake. Jack is excited to blow out his candles. He uses the discarded eggshells to lengthen Eggsnake, a project "longer than all around Room" he and Ma have been working on for years. Jack waits "hours and hours" for his cake to finish baking, and then helps Ma ice it and put some chocolates on top. When it's time for candles, though, Ma tells Jack there aren't any, and Jack throws a fit. He calls the cake "stinky" and yells at Ma for asking for her painkillers rather than candles last Sundaytreat. Ma tries to calm Jack down and reminds him that they need to ask Old Nick only for things he can get easily and cheaply from the store. Jack retorts that "stores are [only] in TV." Ma shuts her eyes, and Jack wonders if her "battery [is] used up."

Jack and Ma make up and enjoy Jack's birthday cake. Ma has to chew gently, using only the **teeth** in the front of her mouth. Jack pulls the chocolate pieces off the top and shows Ma the holes they've left behind. Ma says the holes are like craters. When Jack asks what craters are, she describes them as "holes where something happened." After cake, it is 8:33—too late for **TV**. Jack gets ready for bed while Ma cleans up and writes a list of groceries for Old Nick.

Books are yet another way for Jack to understand things about the world—but even as they enliven his imagination and entertain him, at the end of the day, they only confuse him further about things that are "real."



Plant's waning health seems to externalize Ma's fears about her and Jack's own longevity and ability to survive in Room. Even though Ma is able to request certain luxuries like fresh vegetables each Sunday for a "treat," she's getting worried about how to keep her and Jack healthy in the long-term.



Even though Ma is trying to give Jack nice things every once in a while, like a cake on his birthday, there simply isn't enough: Jack's demands are growing just as quickly as he is. Ma's stress is evident as Jack explodes in a tantrum. She isn't even quite angry—she's just upset that she can't seem to provide enough for her child.



As the night goes on, Ma and Jack prepare for Old Nick's arrival. His visits are both opportunities for Ma and Jack to get the things they need to survive—and dangerous, frightening ordeals to which they must both subject themselves in very different ways.



At three minutes before nine, Jack asks Ma if he can **breastfeed**. She tells him it's too late and instructs him to get into Wardrobe and lie down on his makeshift bed in there. Jack listens to Ma getting ready for bed, and they play word games through the slats in Wardrobe. Jack asks Ma why he has to get "hided away," and Ma explains that she doesn't ever want Old Nick to be able to look at Jack. She urges him to go to sleep quickly as she gets into her own bed and shuts off Lamp. Jack, though, is wired from the cake and excitement of his birthday.

After a long time passes, Jack whispers to Ma and asks if Old Nick is coming. Ma says he must not be. Jack scurries out of Wardrobe and into bed with Ma. He breastfeeds and tries to resist falling asleep—he doesn't want for it to not be his birthday anymore. In the middle of the night, Jack wakes up to Ma standing beside Lamp, flicking the light on and off. Ma does this often—Jack thinks it "helps her get to sleep." After a few minutes, Ma stops flicking Lamp, crawls back into bed, and goes to sleep.

In the morning, Ma lets Jack have cake for breakfast. After bath time, Ma helps Jack build a ball to play catch with out of scrunched-up paper. Ma plays happily even though catch "pings her bad wrist sometimes." For lunch, Ma and Jack eat pancakes, but because there's not a lot of mix left, the cakes are very thin and tasteless. While "sunbathing" under Skylight, Ma falls asleep. Jack hears a sound and quietly gets up so as not to wake Ma. He follows the sound over to Stove, where he sees a "for really real not **TV**" a live animal—a mouse. Jack tries to get closer to the mouse, but it scurries beneath the stove.

Jack opens Refrigerator and gets out some bread. He leaves some crumbs on a plate down by the stove, then crouches down and waits for Mouse to return. This time, when Mouse emerges from Stove, Jack stays very still and watches him—but is surprised by a huge whack. He turns around to see that Ma has flung a book at Mouse, breaking the plate on the floor and scaring Mouse away. Ma angrily moves Stove away from the wall and starts shoving aluminum foil in a small crack in the wall, explaining to Jack that mice carry diseases and breed quickly.

To calm Jack down, Ma reads him some nursery rhymes from a book. She changes some of the names in the book to "Jack" to make him laugh. Soon it's time for dinner, and afterwards, Ma and Jack play chess on a magnetic set and then watch a wildlife program on **TV**. When Ma shuts TV off, Jack feels like crying. After **breastfeeding** and listening to some more stories and rhymes, Jack lets Ma carry him into Wardrobe. Once he's inside, he hears the beeping of Door—Old Nick has arrived.

Ma is attempting to do her best to shield Jack from Old Nick's influence, but as Jack's curiosity grows and grows, her ability to keep her child safe from the man who has done them both so much harm is waning.



Just like Orchestra, Ma's fiddling with Lamp is a clear attempt to draw attention—and help—to Room. Jack doesn't understand that they're captives, and so he doesn't comprehend what Ma is trying to do.



The arrival of the mouse is one of the several incidents that precipitate Ma and Jack's desire—and need—to escape from Room. As Jack begins realizing that there are creatures in the world beyond himself, Ma, and Old Nick, his curiosity skyrockets, and Ma must help him develop a new understanding of what the world really is.



Just as Ma shelters Jack from Old Nick and tries to keep his health and hygiene in check, she tries to protect him from things that could hurt him—even when Jack doesn't understand why they're dangerous, and he resents her for keeping him from them.



Even the gentle, happy moments of Ma and Jack's days together in Room are clouded by the knowledge that each night, Old Nick might show up.



Jack listens as Old Nick enters Room. He points out the birthday cake and asks how old Jack is now—Ma doesn't answer, but Jack whispers "five" from inside Wardrobe. Old Nick approaches Wardrobe and asks Jack if he wants to come out, but Ma replies that Jack is almost asleep. Old Nick asks for some cake. Ma tells him that it's stale. Old Nick grows angry and begins outlining how much he does for Ma and Jack every day. Ma agrees to let him have some cake. After tasting it, Old Nick remarks that it is indeed "pretty stale." Lamp snaps off and Jack listens as Ma and Old Nick get into Bed. Old Nick begins "creak[ing]" Bed, and Jack counts the number of creaks—217.

In the morning, Jack asks Ma why Old Nick didn't bring him a birthday present. Ma says that she doesn't want Old Nick bringing things to Jack. Jack laments that he's never gotten a present in his whole life, and he says he wants Old Nick to bring him a dog named Lucky. Ma insists there isn't room for a dog, and begins pointing out all the reasons they can't have a dog. Ma and Jack argue, and Jack begins sobbing. To calm Jack down, Ma lets him **breastfeed**.

Ma and Jack begin their "busy morning." They do laundry in the bathtub, then make lunch and take a nap. After nap, it's time for "Scream," a game they play on weekdays—during this game, Ma and Jack climb up onto Table to get closer to Skylight and then scream upwards as loud as they can.

Jack draws and practices writing while Ma sucks on an ice cube to try to dull the pain from **Bad Tooth**. Jack says he wishes he had a bad tooth, too. Ma chastises him for speaking and thinking that way. It rains all day, and Jack and Ma sing songs about the rain. After a dinner of fish sticks, Ma and Jack watch a cooking program on **TV**. Ma suggests they move some furniture around Room to switch things up, but the idea upsets Jack, who doesn't want to move anything from its designated place. Ma puts Jack to bed in Wardrobe, and Jack is sad that he and Ma had so many fights in one day.

In the morning, there are two things on top of Table. Jack is thrilled—one is a remote-control jeep, a "late birthday present" from Old Nick. Jack immediately begins playing with the toy, but Ma warns him to be gentle with it and not to use up all the batteries—once it runs out, there are no more. Jack plays with his jeep while Ma cleans Room with a vinegar solution and vacuums. Jack can tell that Ma's **teeth** are bothering her because all day she holds her face and keeps letting out large, long sighs. Jack has to remind Ma to make dinner—but even at mealtime, she doesn't eat anything.

Jack has never really laid eyes on Old Nick, and Old Nick hasn't seen Jack, either. The two of them don't talk or communicate in any way—but each's curiosity about the other is slowly mounting. Jack doesn't understand what transpires between Ma and Old Nick during their visits—but readers are able to intuit very easily that Old Nick visits Room to rape Ma while Jack listens nervously, but mostly obliviously.



This passage, and the argument Ma and Jack have within it, shows that as Jack is growing older, he wants more from life—and is growing increasingly frustrated with Ma's answers as to why he can't have certain things.



Scream is yet another "game" that Jack thinks is for fun, but which Ma—and Donoghue's readers—know is meant to try to draw help to Room.



This passage shows that the increase in tension between Ma and Jack is something new in their relationship. As Jack is growing older, yearning for some measure of agency and trying to figure out more about his life, he and Ma are coming into conflict more and more often.



As teeth are a symbol connected to identity, independence, and the self, it's no coincidence that Ma's teeth pain her all day after she secures a present from Old Nick. Ma has sacrificed one of her moral standings—that Old Nick and Jack should have no interaction, and that Jack should learn to see Old Nick as an antagonist—and now feels both physically and emotionally compromised.



After dinner, Ma and Jack watch music videos on **TV**. Jack loves listening to “Rihanna and T.I. and Lady Gaga and Kanye West.” Jack asks why rap stars wear sunglasses all the time, and Ma explains it’s because they’re famous. After videos, Ma tucks Jack into Wardrobe—he insists on sleeping with the jeep. Ma says Jack can sleep with the remote, but she says the jeep itself needs to go up on a shelf over Bed. Jack asks Ma, through Wardrobe’s slats, where the two of them go when they’re asleep. Ma replies that they are “never anywhere but here.” Jack thinks Ma’s voice sounds sad.

Soon, Jack hears Old Nick arrive. He hears Old Nick complain about the “ridiculous price[s]” at the store. Soon, Lamp shuts off and Jack begins counting creaks: tonight, there are 378. Afterwards, everything goes quiet. Jack has the sudden thought that maybe Ma is letting Old Nick “have some”—he gets angry, and turns on his jeep’s remote. He begins pressing buttons and soon hears his jeep “coming alive.”

Old Nick begins screaming and Lamp turns on. Someone forces Wardrobe open, and Jack hides under his blanket. He hears a disoriented Ma ask what’s happening. Old Nick starts shouting at Ma for “try[ing] something.” Ma apologizes profusely and begs Old Nick to come back to bed, but soon Jack hears the sound of Door beeping. Old Nick is gone.

In the dark, Jack feels around for his remote, and realizes it has broken. He tells Ma, but she uses a “scary” voice to tell him to go back to sleep. Jack tries to make himself tired by counting his **teeth** over and over. Jack wishes Ma would get up and carry him into Bed with her. When she doesn’t, he gets himself up and joins her, but makes sure not to touch her under the covers.

UNLYING

In the morning, Jack notices some marks on Ma’s neck. When Jack points them out, Ma doesn’t respond to him. Jack apologizes for making his jeep fall down in the middle of the night—Ma says that Old Nick thought she was attacking him. Jack laughs, thinking the situation silly, but Ma explains it’s “the opposite of funny.” After **TV** and a bath, Ma and Jack have Phys Ed class. While Ma prepares lunch, Jack plays with his jeep, steering it around with his hands since the remote doesn’t work anymore. After lunch they read a while, and Jack can tell that Ma is sick of most of the books in Room. After reading some *Alice in Wonderland*, Jack **breastfeeds**, and then he and Ma play *Scream* again. During *Scream*, Jack can’t stop staring at the marks on Ma’s neck.

It’s hard to explain fame and celebrity to a child who doesn’t know about the mechanics of popular culture in the world—let alone that the world exists. Ma does her best, however, and as she explains fame to the clearly-fascinated Jack, Donoghue sets up the dominant theme of the second half of the novel: the voyeurism and cannibalism of the media.



Jack doesn’t understand the nature of Ma and Old Nick’s relationship, or what happens during their visits—but he’s beginning to develop a curiosity about them, and even resentments about the idea that Old Nick could be as close to Ma as Jack himself is.



This passage shows how distrustful Old Nick is of Ma—he seems to be waiting on tenterhooks for her to “try something” to get rid of him.



Jack doesn’t understand the gravity of the situation with Old Nick—and just how much he could hurt and endanger himself and Ma by making just one wrong move.



Even though Ma tries to continue with her and Jack’s “normal” routine, Jack is realizing more and more that there is a dark underside to their life in Room. Throughout this section of the novel, Jack’s burgeoning curiosity and increasing distrust of Old Nick will pave the way for his and Ma’s realization that they need to find a way out of Room.



After *Scream*, Ma and Jack amuse themselves with more games. They play “Keypad,” where Jack enters various numbers into the keypad by Door in hopes of making it open. After Dress-up and measuring things with Ruler, Jack and Ma play cards. When it is 5:01, Jack proclaims that it’s dinner time. After dinner, Ma and Jack watch **TV**—and Jack is startled when an advertisement for Ma’s painkillers is on. Jack is confused, and tells Ma that Old Nick must “go in TV” for the supplies he brings them. Ma quickly hurries Jack to bed.

Jack asks more questions about the difference between “real” and “**TV**”—and Ma tries to explain that the things they see on TV are actually “pictures of real things.” Jack is shocked, and asks if Dora is real. Ma tries to explain the difference between TV and cartoons. Jack believes Ma is “tricking” him as she tries to tell him that there is a world outside Room—a world that is not Outer Space. Jack begs Ma to tell him everything, but she says she can’t think of the right words, and will explain the rest tomorrow.

In the morning, Ma is “Gone”—occasionally, she has Gone days where she is not present and stays in bed all day. Jack fixes himself breakfast, gets dressed, and tries to pass the “hundreds” of hours in the day by watching endless programs on **TV**. He is mesmerized by the idea that TV is “pictures of real things.” He cannot imagine all the things he sees on TV existing in the world, and he “can’t breathe right” suddenly.

Jack makes himself lunch at lunchtime and measures more things in Room with Ruler. He reads himself all of his books, including *Alice in Wonderland*. Occasionally, he goes over to Bed and checks on Ma—the marks around her neck have turned purple, and Jack wishes he could kick Old Nick. Jack watches so much **TV** he starts to feel sick, but he is unable to find anything else to do. He continues pondering which things on TV are actually real—he wishes he could ask Ma, but he knows she won’t respond. After eating some cold canned beans for dinner, Jack puts himself to bed in Wardrobe—but “want[s] some very much.” Even though he’s afraid Old Nick might come, Jack gets into Bed with Ma and lies near her.

The next morning, Ma is up and about, and Jack helps her complete chores like flipping Mattress, dusting, and making a grocery list. Jack begs Ma to ask for candy for their Sundaytreat, but Ma doesn’t want Jack to end up with bad **teeth** like hers. After chores, Jack and Ma read together, and Jack stares at the marks on Ma’s neck wondering if they’ll ever go away. That night, in the middle of the night, Jack wakes up to Ma flicking Lamp on and off again over and over.

Jack noticing the advertisements for the painkillers is yet another turning point in his life in Room. He’s beginning to understand that there is some overlap between what’s on TV and what’s real—and as he investigates that overlap, he will find answers he never imagined.



As Jack demands to know the truth about the world, Ma is overwhelmed and struggles with how to properly explain things to Jack. The central struggle of her life, it seems, has been a battle with herself about how much to reveal to Jack—or not reveal—in order to keep his confusion and isolation to a minimum. Being asked to undo the work she’s done to keep Jack safe is a lot, and Ma is not sure how to respond immediately.



Without Ma’s guidance, Jack’s imagination goes wild—and he feels himself panicking as he struggles to make sense of the world without Ma’s guidance.



Throughout Ma’s “Gone” day, Donoghue allows her readers to see how Jack’s thought process and imagination function without Ma’s input or mediation. Jack is confused and frightened, and seeks emotional closeness with Ma by breastfeeding even though she’s not really psychologically present for the act.



Even though Ma has gathered herself up emotionally after her “Gone” day, she still doesn’t broach the subject of things that are “TV” or “real” with Jack. She busies herself with her routine instead, and tries desperately to attract attention by using Lamp—she seems to know that the need to get Jack out of Room is more pressing than ever.



On Saturday, after a day of cartoons, games, and a diner of mini pizzas, Jack asks for a brand-new story. Ma begins telling Jack a story about a mermaid who is captured by a fisherman. The fisherman brings the mermaid home to his cottage, where he forces her to marry him and have a baby. The mermaid searches each day while the fisherman is out fishing for an escape—and one day, she finds it, and returns to the sea. The story upsets Jack and makes him cry. Ma looks at her watch and sees that it's nearly 8:30—she hurries Jack into Wardrobe.

Old Nick arrives and complains about the pungent smell of food in Room. Ma suggests putting in an extractor fan to help with the stuffiness, but Old Nick berates Ma for her stupidity and says he might as well “stick a flashing neon arrow on the roof.” Old Nick reminds Ma how “good” she and Jack have things in Room, and Ma quickly agrees, thanking Old Nick for taking such good care of her and Jack. Jack nervously counts his **teeth**. Soon, Lamp shuts off, and Jack counts 97 creaks. Even after everything goes quiet, Jack can't fall asleep.

Sunday night, during dinner, Ma reaches into her mouth and pulls out a bite of food—**Bad Tooth** is stuck in the mush. Ma says she's relieved to be rid of Bad Tooth. Jack says Ma should put Bad Tooth under her pillow, but Ma says the tooth fairy doesn't know about Room. Jack begins thinking about what's outside of Room, and starts wondering if he and Ma are “still real” if they're the “only ones” not outside. After dinner, when Ma tells Jack a story, Jack asks her if her fairy tales are real. She explains that they're a “different kind of true.” Jack asks if the Berlin Wall is “true.” Ma says there was a wall, but it's not there anymore. Jack feels exhausted and falls asleep quickly.

That night, Jack awakens to the sounds of Ma and Old Nick arguing. Ma is begging for more vitamins and fresh vegetables, but Old Nick complains about money. He explains, in a fit of frustration, that he's been laid off from his job for six whole months. When Ma asks Old Nick how he's going to pay the bills, Old Nick speaks roughly to her. Jack, afraid Old Nick is going to hurt Ma again, makes a sound. Old Nick comes over to Wardrobe and peers in through the slats at Jack, asking Ma if she keeps him locked up “all day as well as all night.” Ma insists that Jack is just “shy,” and begs Old Nick to come to bed. Old Nick warns Ma not to forget about where she got Jack. Lamp shuts off, and though Jack tries not to count the creaks tonight, he can't help it.

When Ma tries to convey her experience with Old Nick through a heavily-disguised fable about a mermaid, Jack still reacts violently and emotionally to the story. Though Jack wants to know more things about the world and experience new stories, he's still unprepared for how cruel the world can be—even when it's presented through a veil.



Old Nick's tactic for silencing Ma is to point out “how much” he does for them and “how good” things are in Room. He is trying to gaslight Ma into believing he's a good person while actively distancing her from reality. Jack's nervous tooth-counting—an act tied to the desire to remind himself of who he is and establish an identity—seems to reflect those anxieties about what's real and what isn't.



As Ma and Jack begin discussing the nuance of what's “real” and “true” and what's false, Jack feels fatigued and even more deeply confused than before. The idea that some things on TV are real—and some things that are “fake” are real in ways beyond the literal—is too much for him to process.



Old Nick's confession to Ma about having lost his job—and having been unemployed for months—is in many ways the last straw in terms of Ma's determination to get out of Room. Old Nick's increasing instability is a warning sign to Ma that things may soon get even worse for her and Jack. This passage also strongly hints (as others have before) that Old Nick is Jack's father.



Jack wakes in the middle of the night. Curious to see what Old Nick looks like, he steps out of Wardrobe and stands over Old Nick, watching him. Old Nick's eyes snap open and he calmly greets Jack—but Ma, hearing what's happening, begins screaming at the top of her lungs for Old Nick to leave Jack alone. Jack races back into Wardrobe. Old Nick calls Ma a “basket case.” Ma reminds Old Nick of a deal they struck long ago—she stays quiet so long as Old Nick leaves Jack alone. Even after Jack hears Door beep, Ma doesn't come for him—inside Wardrobe, scared and alone, he has trouble falling asleep.

In the morning, Jack wakes up in Bed with Ma. He apologizes for the night before and asks Ma what Old Nick meant by where Ma “got” Jack. Ma explains that Old Nick thinks Jack “belong[s]” to him. Jack laughs at the idea. Ma tries to turn Lamp on, but nothing happens. Ma looks at Thermostat and realizes that Old Nick has cut the power in Room. It is freezing outside, and as Ma and Jack go about their routine, Jack's ears, toes, and fingers hurt from the cold. Jack asks Ma if the cold will get worse—Ma assures Jack that it's nearly April, and the weather is getting warmer.

Ma and Jack try to ignore the cold by playing games as they wait for the power to come back on. They nearly run out of things to do as the hours pass. When it's time for dinner, Ma prepares all the food that's most perishable—cheese and broccoli. Ma and Jack sing songs as they get ready for bed, and Jack asks if the power will be back on tomorrow. Ma apologizes to Jack and explains that the power has been cut because Old Nick is angry with Ma for screaming the night before.

When Ma and Jack wake up the next morning, the air is even colder. Jack says he's happy that Old Nick didn't come in the night, and he wishes aloud that Old Nick would never come back. Ma explains that if Old Nick stayed away forever, they'd have no food. After breakfast, Ma and Jack do lots of Phys Ed to try to warm up, but they both get tired very quickly.

Ma tells Jack that she wants to tell him a story and pulls him into her arms inside Rocker. Ma begins telling Jack a story. She asks him to think about Alice, and how she wasn't always in Wonderland—Jack remembers how Alice fell down a large hole by accident into the other realm. Ma explains that she is like Alice: she's “from somewhere else.” Ma tries to tell Jack about her life before Room—she explains she had a mother and father who adopted her, and a brother named Paul, and they all lived in a big house with a hammock in the yard. Jack has a hard time understanding the story as real and focusing, but Ma insists he keep listening.

Even though Old Nick is the one with total control over Ma and Jack, this passage makes it clear that he has an abject fear of being discovered—and realizes that she could topple his life to the ground with little more than a well-timed scream while Door is open.



Jack clearly doesn't understand that Old Nick is his biological father, and he has no idea how much power Old Nick has over him and Ma. Now that Old Nick has cut the power, however, Jack is getting an introduction to the kind of absolute control Old Nick exercises over his and Ma's circumstances.



Ma feels guilty that the power cut is her fault, but she attempts to be honest with Jack about why things are happening the way they're happening. Ma focuses so hard on protecting Jack sometimes that she doesn't realize her actions could actually harm the both of them.



As much as Ma hates to admit it, she needs for things with Old Nick to be civil—otherwise, she and Jack will just suffer more.



Jack's confusion about the nuance of “real” and “fake” in terms of stories—and his limited understanding of the world beyond Room—make the task before Ma a difficult one. Nevertheless, she remains determined to try and educate Jack about the reality of their circumstances in preparation for finding a way to escape Room.



The more Ma tries to tell Jack about her life outside of Room, the less Jack seems to understand. He asks her if she really “lived in TV one time,” and the frustrated Ma responds that she once lived in the real world—a world of which Room is just one “tiny stinky piece.” Jack accuses Ma of trying to trick him, but Ma promises that she wouldn’t lie to Jack. When he was smaller, he was too little to understand, so she had to simplify things—but now, she says, she is “unlying.” Jack begins listening more intently to Ma, and asks her questions about how Old Nick made Room. Ma ruefully explains that Room is entirely sound-proofed, a fact about which Old Nick loves to boast.

When Ma spots a leaf on top of Skylight later in the afternoon, she helps Jack climb up on Table to get a better look. As Jack looks up at the leaf, he becomes confused and upset and accuses Ma of lying about “Outside.” Jack sits on the floor and plays alone with his jeep while Ma angrily bustles around the kitchen, counting how many rations she and Jack have left. Room grows colder and colder.

After a dinner of cereal, Ma and Jack get into bed early—there is nothing else for them to do. They play word games until they grow tired. As he gets sleepier, Jack asks some questions about the world outside, and Ma answers them.

In the morning, the air in Room is still frigid. Ma is on the floor, banging on the ground. Jack asks Ma what she’s doing, and she tells him she “need[ed] to hit something.” As Ma and Jack share a bagel for breakfast, Jack notices that they can see their breaths. Jack asks Ma if her parents and brother can come visit Room—Ma says she prays they will every night before bed, but admits that her family doesn’t know where Room is. Jack suggests they consult Dora’s map. Ma tells him that Room is “not on any map.”

After Phys Ed, Jack spots through Skylight an airplane flying overhead and is excited to see something “real.” There is hardly any food left in Room—for lunch, Ma and Jack are forced to share seven crackers and some rancid cheese. Jack asks Ma if they can go Outside “tomorrow.” Ma explains that they are held prisoner by Old Nick, and since he is the only one who knows the code to Keypad, they cannot leave. Ma begins crying. Jack gets scared and worries aloud that Old Nick will never uncut the power or bring more food. Ma says she’s sure he will.

Ma has done a lot of very painful and difficult work over the course of Jack’s life—she has lied to him about the way things really are in hopes of simplifying the world and shielding him from the more difficult truths of their unique existence. Now, even as she tries to explain her motives for lying to Jack and usher in the process of “unlying,” she has a hard time connecting to her son and re-teaching him the ideas he has clung to for years.



This passage demonstrates how Jack’s refusal to believe Ma about the world is quickly becoming a matter of life and death. If he’s unable to go along with what she tells him—and aid her in her hopes of escaping—they may suffer a terrible fate.



This passage shows that, in spite of his reservations, at the end of the day, Ma is the only thing Jack knows—and slowly but surely, he’s growing more and more willing to trust her.



Ma’s increasing frustration with Old Nick’s show of power turns from anger to resignation to depression very quickly.



Even though Ma had hoped to help Jack understand that there is a world outside Room—and make it sound appealing enough that he’d want to help them both escape—in light of their new circumstances, Jack’s optimism and excitement just makes Ma more anxious and upset.



It is growing dark outside, and Jack is getting hungry again. Ma tells Jack that she needs to share a new story with him—a story about how she came to be in Room. Ma explains that when she was 19, Old Nick “stole” her from a parking lot on her college’s campus after telling her that he needed help with his sick dog. The story confuses Jack, who keeps asking questions about details such as the dog’s name and how many wheels Old Nick’s truck had. Ma begs Jack to focus on what matters as she continues her story. She tells him that Old Nick blindfolded her and drove her away from her college. Jack tells Ma that he wants a different story, but Ma insists on Jack listening to “what happened.”

Ma explains that, at first, she slept 16 hours a day due to the depression she felt at being sequestered in Room. She was sick and scared, and she left the **TV** on for such long stretches of time that she started to hallucinate. Ma tried to escape Room by attempting to crack Skylight and dig through the floor—but once she got through the cork floor, she realized that Old Nick had lined the walls and ground of Room with chain-link fence.

Jack says he wants to “have a mutiny” against Old Nick and hurt him. Ma says hurting Old Nick doesn’t work—one time, she smashed the lid of the toilet tank over his head as he walked in Door, but she didn’t do it hard enough and Old Nick shut Door. Ma pressed a knife to Old Nick’s throat and ordered him to give her the code—but he gave her false numbers, and while she was pressing them into Keypad, he twisted her wrist and broke it, taking the knife back from her. Jack now understands why one of Ma’s wrists always hurts her. He begins to cry, and though he wishes he could say something to Ma, no words will come out.

Ma explains that she and Jack can’t try to hurt Old Nick again, and then goes quiet. Jack understands why Ma has told him her “terrible story:” she wants them to escape. Jack falls asleep, and when he wakes again in the middle of the night, Lamp has come back on—the power is back.

DYING

In the morning, Room is warm again. There is some food on Table and in Refrigerator, and Jack springs around the room excitedly at the thought of having so much good food to eat again. Ma, however, isn’t eating and doesn’t even seem happy. Instead, she’s touching Plant—who has shed three more leaves and died during the cold spell. Jack is devastated and attempts to tape Plant’s leaves back on, but he begins crying as he realizes that Plant is really dead.

Ma has been telling Jack a version of her story, coded in fake characters and circumstances, for days now—but when confronted with the real thing, Jack is even more upset and confused than ever. He insists he doesn’t want to hear Ma’s story—but Ma is at the point where she’s refusing, flat-out, to let Jack back away from the truth any longer.



As Ma recalls the early days of her captivity, Donoghue paints a picture of the total isolation of Room and the sheer misery Ma encountered when she realized that escaping on her own was an impossibility.



Jack is horrified to hear the truth about his mother’s painful past inside of Room and scared to think of her pitting herself against Old Nick time and time again and failing over and over.



Just as Jack realizes that Ma has been laying the groundwork for plotting an escape, Lamp comes on, symbolizing a literal “lightbulb moment” for Jack.



Ma and Jack were concerned about Plant before the power was cut—and now, even though it’s back on, Plant has died. Plant serves as a metaphoric reflection of Ma and Jack’s health and viability, and her death does not bode well for them.



After breakfast, Jack and Ma take their first hot bath in days and then do some laundry while they watch **TV**. Even though things are better today, Ma still isn't happy and "her face is flat." Jack wonders if she misses Plant. Ma goes back to bed after Phys Ed, and Jack amuses himself by playing with Eggsnake and creating imaginary games, but when he tries to get Ma to play along, she insists she's busy "thinking."

Later in the day, Ma admits to Jack that she's been thinking all day of ways to escape. None of her methods over the years have worked—playing **Scream**, flicking **Lamp** on and off, and hiding notes in the trash have all proved ineffective. Ma says she's worried that no one will ever rescue them. Jack tells Ma that she doesn't "know everything," and then asks to **breastfeed**. Ma feeds him, and when she's done, she tells him that they need to get out of Room—all by themselves. Ma tells Jack she needs his help in figuring out a plan. Jack begins brainstorming crazy tricks he's seen on TV such as explosions and smashing down the walls with a bulldozer, but Ma tells him to think seriously.

Jack suggests the two of them pull off a "cunning trick" just like the one Old Nick used to lure Ma to his truck years ago. Ma tells Jack he's "brilliant"—the two of them could pretend Jack is ill with a terrible fever that requires a hospital visit. Jack says he's nervous about getting "cutted open" at the hospital, but Ma assures him that the doctors wouldn't have to touch him because he won't actually be sick. The illness will just be a ruse to get him to the hospital, where he can ask for help. Jack says he's afraid to go alone, but Ma says her voice will be in his head the whole time. Jack starts getting agitated. Ma crankily tells Jack to forget the idea—he's clearly not ready.

Later that afternoon, Ma calls Jack over to the bed, asking if he wants "some." Jack hungrily accepts and begins **breastfeeding**—while he's feeding, Ma asks him to remember a documentary they saw on **TV** once about people escaping from the Nazis. She reminds him that the escapees had to be very brave and go through a tunnel "one at a time." She tells Jack that if he wants them to escape Room, he will have to be brave and go to the hospital alone so that he can bring the police back to Room. Ma tells Jack he's the only one who can save them, and she asks if he'll try. He agrees.

Ma and Jack eat a snack while they iron out the specifics of their plan. Ma compares the sequence of events Jack will have to remember to a *Dora* adventure: *Sick, Truck, Hospital, Police, Save Ma*. Ma goes over the plan with Jack again and again, drawing out the steps on a piece of paper and even making a visual map of what will happen to Jack.

Ma is clearly preoccupied, and even though Jack tries to distract her with games, he cannot get through to her. Ma is the opposite of "Gone" though—the wheels of her brain are turning, and she is plotting a way out for both of them.



As Ma confesses to Jack just how badly she needs his help in forming a plan to escape Room, Jack insists on breastfeeding. The act is a symbol of Ma and Jack's symbiotic relationship, and the ways they physically and emotionally feed and nurture one another. Ma needs Jack just as much as Jack needs Ma, and the goings-on within this passage externalize that.



Even though Jack comes up with a great idea, he quickly gets scared and upset when Ma pushes things further. To Jack, so many of the things Ma does each day in hopes of securing attention and rescue seem like games—so it makes sense that he sees brainstorming as yet another game, and gets upset when things become too real.



There is a lot going on in this passage as Ma slyly attempts to bribe Jack for attention—and make him more complacent—by breastfeeding him. At the same time, she invokes TV, which she knows is a touchstone, a comfort, and a motivator for Jack all wrapped up in one. Ma knows what must be done—and she is not above manipulating Jack into doing what is best for both of them.



Ma wants to prepare Jack for his "adventure" as best she can, and she knows that the quickest way to do so is by incentivizing the journey and making it seem as safe and comforting as a television episode.



Ma tells Jack that in order for him to be pretend-sick, she will have to make his forehead very hot with a bag of water. Worst of all, Jack will have to let Old Nick touch him—just once—to see how high his “fever” is. Ma has Jack get into Bed and practice “being all floppy” without laughing.

While eating dinner, Ma asks Jack if he’s ready to go through with their “Great Escape” tonight. Jack doesn’t feel ready, but Ma says there’s no way of predicting what Old Nick might do to them next. Jack begs Ma to wait a couple days. Ma relents, agreeing that she’s putting too much on Jack too quickly. Jack says when he’s six, he’ll be ready. Ma becomes upset and asks Jack if he wants to escape or not. Jack says he doesn’t “really” want to leave Room. Ma says they have to leave—Jack can’t even see what Room is doing to him. She says Jack needs to see grass, have more room to grow, and meet real people. Jack says he doesn’t want to. Ma tells Jack that she’d give him more time if she could—but there simply isn’t any. They’re not safe any longer inside Room.

Ma wakes Jack up in the middle of the night and pulls him out of Wardrobe to show him the huge moon outside of Skylight. Ma explains that the moon is different shapes all the time. Jack says that only happens on **TV**, but Ma insists it’s real—she tells Jack he’s going to love being in the world.

Jack asks if Old Nick came tonight—Ma says he did, and that she told him Jack was coming down with something in order to lay the groundwork for their trick. Jack is angry at Ma for putting their “stupid dumb plan” in motion. Ma gets angry, and, “nearly roaring,” says that she’s Jack’s mother—which means sometimes she gets to choose what happens for the both of them.

The next morning, after Jack and Ma both have bowel movements, Ma doesn’t let them flush—she breaks their stool up in the bowl with a wooden spoon so that it looks like diarrhea. There are no games to play today—Ma makes Jack practice being floppy and quiet all day. Jack says he’s feeling scared, but Ma insists he’s being brave—she tells him “scave,” or “scaredybrave,” is how he’s really feeling.

It is only after making parts of the adventure seem exciting and fun that Ma gets down to the nitty-gritty of what will be required of Jack—and reveals that some of it will not be pleasant.



The revelation within this passage that Jack doesn’t actually want to escape Room is a major narrative thread that will become a source of tension between Ma and Jack for the rest of the novel, even after they pull off their escape. Ma knows that Room is a bad environment for Jack—but it is all that he has ever known, and on a very real level, he loves it like a home.



Ma knows that Jack is struggling with what she’s asking of him, and in this sweet passage, she attempts to incentivize escape by showing him how beautiful the world can be, rather than manipulating Jack into it.



Even as Ma tries to get Jack excited about leaving Room, he continues belittling her out of an inability to grasp the gravity of their situation. Ma realizes she must put her foot down and choose for them both—she is at her wit’s end.



Ma has dropped all pretenses in preparation for what must be done. She doesn’t even try to make games out of the things she’s having Jack do in hopes of securing their escape—she’s done pretending.



Jack worries that when he gets to the hospital, he won't be able to get the right words out. Ma admits that she keeps forgetting Jack has never talked to a living soul other than her. She agrees to write a small note that Jack will keep tucked in his underpants—the note will explain everything, and all Jack needs to do is give it to the first person he sees. Jack is surprised that “TV persons can read,” but Ma reminds Jack that the people he's going to see in the world are real, just like them. Jack remains skeptical of this. Jack examines Ma's note and sees that it contains her “Outside” name—the sight of it makes Jack unhappy.

That night, at 8:41—twenty minutes before Old Nick's arrival—Ma fills a plastic bag with hot water and presses it against Jack's face. Jack protests, claiming the bag hurts, but Ma insists that if their plan is going to work, he needs to keep it on for just a few minutes. Jack begins crying not from the heat but from fear—Ma encourages him to keep crying because it will make him “look sicker.” Ma begins to panic that Jack doesn't look or smell bad enough. She sticks her finger down her own throat and forces herself to gag into her hand, then covers Jack's hair with her bile. Jack tells Ma she's “mean.”

The door beeps. Ma pulls the blanket up over Jack and hides the bag of water beneath the bed. As soon as Old Nick walks in, he comments on how bad it smells in Room—Ma tells Old Nick that Jack has “had it coming out both ends” for over thirty hours. Jack cowers as Old Nick approaches him and places a hand on his cheek. Old Nick says he'll pick something up from the pharmacy, but Ma hysterically states that Jack is too sick to keep anything down—he needs to go directly to the ER. Old Nick refuses to bring Jack in. Ma begs Old Nick, stating she'll “do anything,” but Old Nick enters the code into the keypad and leaves Room.

Jack sits up and sees Ma sitting on the floor, “staring at nothing.” Jack asks if he messed up and says he's sorry—but Ma is almost gleeful as she tells Jack he gave a “star” performance, and things are going to work out just fine. Ma admits that she knew “Plan A” was a risk all along—but she has a Plan B waiting on deck. Jack accuses her of lying to him and refuses to listen to Plan B. They get into Bed, but Jack has trouble “switch[ing] off” to fall asleep.

Even as Ma pushes Jack forward in pursuit of their plan, she's forced to recognize that there are certain things Jack may not be able to do—or will at least struggle with intensely—because of the way he's been raised. Ma problem-solves at every turn, however, desperate to ensure rescue for herself and her son.



Ma is so desperate to make sure that her plan works that she resorts to disgusting methods of trying to make Jack look convincingly ill. Even though Jack hates going along with the plan, he knows now that he has no choice but to be brave and do what Ma has told him to do.



In spite of all of Ma's preparations—and Jack's concessions in the name of the plan—Old Nick refuses to bring Jack out of Room. It seems, for a moment, as if all of Ma's work and Jack's suffering has been for nothing—but Ma and Jack have come too far to give up and will be forced to make this setback work in their favor.



Even though Ma has told Jack she's in the process of “unlying” to him, there are still certain things she needs to keep hidden for both their sakes.



The next morning, Jack asks Ma if he can take a bath and wash the smell out of his hair, but Ma says Jack needs to keep smelling bad. She begins to tell him Plan B, which is based on the plot of [The Count of Monte Cristo](#). Ma wants Jack to pretend to be dead. She will roll him up inside Rug and instruct Old Nick to take him far away to be buried. During the drive, Jack will wriggle out of Rug, leap from the back of the truck at the first stop sign, and ask the first person he sees on the street for help.

After breakfast, Ma helps Jack pretend to be dead. She tells him that while yesterday, he had to be “floppy,” tonight he will have to be rigid as a robot. Ma rolls Jack up inside of Rug and has him practice wriggling out, then attempts to describe to him the feelings of the different stages of a car being in motion so he’ll know when to jump out. Jack doesn’t have a lot of confidence in the plan, but Ma explains that because Old Nick has lost his job, his house may be taken away from him. If that happens, Ma says, he’ll do something terrible to them. This is their last chance at escape, and Ma is determined to get Jack out of Room—because she is the one who brought him into it.

Ma runs through the rest of the plan, trying to make it sound like as much of a game as possible so that Jack will be more amenable to attempting it. Ma walks Jack all the way through, from start to finish, and instructs him to tell the first person he sees he’s been kidnapped. If he’s unable to make the words, she says, Jack should show them his note. As the hours pass, Ma and Jack go over the plan several times. They try to play Checkers and eat dinner, but neither of them can focus. As it gets later, Ma helps Jack put on a pair of thick socks to protect his feet from the pavement, and he tucks **Bad Tooth** deep inside one of them.

As dark falls, Jack begins begging Ma to do the plan the next day, but Ma insists it’s now or never. She tells Jack that she’s sorry for putting him in such a predicament and sending him out alone, but she urges him to remember that she’ll be with him in his head every step of the way.

As 9:00 approaches, Ma and Jack share a long, tender hug before Ma rolls Jack up inside Rug. The two of them sit in silence waiting for Old Nick to come. He is late, but soon enough, they hear the *beep beep* of Door. Jack makes himself extra stiff, even though his heart is beating wildly in his chest. As Old Nick enters, Jack can hear him handing Ma a package he tells her is antibiotics. Ma slowly tells Old Nick that Jack got worse in the night last night and wouldn’t wake up in the morning. Old Nick tells Ma what a “poor girl” she is, and then says that if Jack was sick enough to die, no pills would have worked anyway.

This new plan is more macabre—and dangerous—than the first, but Ma knows that it is now or never in terms of her and Jack finally making their escape.



Ma has been in the habit of playing her cards close to her chest and keeping Jack in the dark about a lot of things throughout his life. Now, though, she realizes that this is their last chance to escape Room—and she is willing to tell Jack the full truth in hopes of motivating him. As Jack is getting older, like any child, he’s taking on new responsibilities and taking in new information.



As Jack prepares to embark on Plan B, Ma does everything she can to make him feel comfortable and ready. She tells him the truth and explains the gravity of the situation—but then lightens the situation up by treating the preparation for the plan like a game or a Phys Ed exercise. She even helps Jack take a piece of her with him so that he feels stronger as the journey gets under way.



Jack has some last-minute reservations about the plan, but Ma is staunch. She knows what’s best for them, and is unwilling to waste their last chance at freedom.



As Ma’s charade begins, it doesn’t seem like Old Nick has a whole lot of empathy for her, or is affected in the least himself by the news of Jack’s “death.” This shows how disposable Ma and Jack are to Old Nick—and cements that Ma’s instinct to get herself and Jack out as soon as possible is even more necessary than she realized.



Old Nick tells Ma he needs to take Jack away. Ma warns Old Nick that if he buries Jack in the backyard, she'll be able to "hear him crying." She begs Old Nick to take Jack far away—and not to unwrap Rug and "look at him with [his] filthy eyes." Ma threatens Old Nick one last time, saying that if he buries Jack in the backyard, she'll know—and will "never be quiet again."

Jack feels himself being grabbed and lifted up—he knows Old Nick has him. As Old Nick carries Jack out the door, Jack urinates and defecates in his pants because of how scared he is. He tries to calm himself down by counting his **teeth**.

Jack falls down onto "something hard," and within a few seconds feels a metallic rattling beneath him. He realizes that he must be in the truck bed—and the truck must be on the move. Jack wonders briefly if he's still himself even though he's not in Room.

Jack starts trying to wriggle out but struggles to do so. He feels the car come to a stop and realizes he has already missed the first stop sign. As the truck rattles to life again, Jack continues wriggling—but it takes him so long to get free that he misses yet another stop sign. Finally, Jack is able to free himself from Rug, and takes a deep breath of the night air. As he looks around at trees, houses, lights, and other cars, he feels he is inside "a cartoon [...] but messier."

When the truck rolls to a stop, Jack is too scared to jump out—but as he leans over the edge of the truck bed, he falls out and screams. He begins running, even as he hears Old Nick exit the truck and start following him. Jack runs as fast as he can, unable to hear Ma's voice in his head. He sees a dog followed by a baby pushing a stroller and a tall man following both of them. Jack keeps running toward the dog and is stunned when it bites him on the finger. While Jack freezes, the owner of the dog chastises the animal—and Old Nick comes up behind Jack and scoops him up.

Jack begins screaming wordlessly and hitting at Old Nick, and the owner of the dog intervenes, asking Old Nick if his "little girl" is okay. Old Nick insists everything's fine. The dog owner attempts to apologize for the dog having bitten Jack, but Old Nick tries to walk away as quickly as possible, telling the dog owner to mind his own business. The man, uncomfortable with the situation, begins calling the police. Jack is happy that he has reached the *Police* step of the plan—but he's perturbed by how "backwards" the path there has been.

Ma does her best acting in order to ensure that Jack won't encounter any variables or unknowns as Old Nick takes him out into the world. Ma has tried to prepare Jack for one set of specifics, and is now attempting to make sure nothing that could rattle Jack or ruin the plan takes place.



Jack falls back on his old comforting habit of counting his teeth as Old Nick takes him away from Room—he is reminding himself of the core of who he is.



As Jack realizes that he is out of Room for the first time in his life, he has a minor identity crisis—he is uncertain of what leaving Room means for who he is.



Jack experiences disorientation and depersonalization as he takes his first breath of fresh air and his first look at the world outside of Room. He is struggling to remind himself that what's happening to him is real.



Jack's mad dash towards the first people he sees shows that he remembers Ma's plan, even as he worries that he can't hear her voice echoing inside his head. As Old Nick catches up with Jack, it seems that all may be lost—but Jack knows just how much is riding on his ability to carry out Ma's plan.



Thanks to the kindness of a stranger, Old Nick is unable to thwart Ma and Jack's plan. Jack remains disoriented and decidedly not in control of what's happening, but he's done the job of drawing enough attention to himself that he no longer needs to do so much work.



As Old Nick keeps walking towards the truck with Jack in his arms, the dog owner shouts that he's got Old Nick's plates and begins reading them off into his phone. Old Nick drops Jack and runs towards the car—Jack marvels at the “magic numbers” that have saved him. Old Nick drives away quickly, leaving Jack immobile on the ground.

The dog owner approaches Jack and asks him what his name is. Jack answers very quietly. The dog owner introduces himself as Ajeet, then explains that his dog is called Raja and his little girl is called Naisha. Ajeet tells Jack he looks sick—Jack replies that Ma threw up on his shirt. Ajeet asks Jack to repeat himself because he's talking too quietly, but Jack is too scared to get any sound to come out. Ajeet assures Jack that the police will arrive soon. Jack wants to run away, but he is afraid of Raja biting him again.

Soon, a cop car pulls up—Jack recognizes what it looks like from **TV**. Two officers emerge: one is a woman with dark hair, and the other is a man with blond hair. The female cop approaches Jack and introduces herself as Officer Oh. She asks Jack his name and age, and he answers her shyly. She asks him something “about a dress”—Jack doesn't understand that she is asking for his address. Officer Oh asks Jack where he sleeps at night—he replies simply, “In Wardrobe.” Jack says that his Ma is the one who has dresses. Officer Oh asks Jack where Ma is. Jack responds that she's “In Room.” Officer Oh asks where Room is. Remembering Ma's words from earlier in the week, Jack quietly replies that Room is “not on any map.”

As the male cop talks into his radio, Officer Oh continues asking Jack questions, such as whether Old Nick is his father and how he got scraped up. Jack answers in his peculiar way of speaking, stating that “The dog is a vampire” and “The street, it hit me.” The male officer, frustrated by Jack's inability to respond to their questions, suggests calling Child Protective Services, but Officer Oh insists on a little more time with Jack.

Officer Oh tells Jack that she bets he's great at telling stories. She asks him to tell her a story about what happened tonight. Jack, answers, slowly and clearly, that he and Ma “did a trick.” Jack explains the plan he and Ma came up with, including the part where he was supposed to jump out of the truck at the first stop sign—but admits that he didn't get to jump out until the third time the truck slowed down. Officer Oh decides to work backwards to find the location of Room. She calls into her radio for her fellow officers to search certain streets, and then helps Jack into her own patrol car.

Jack doesn't understand what's happening or why Old Nick has released him, but he seems to understand that he is free of Old Nick at last.



Jack is overwhelmed and intimidated by all that has just transpired. Just as he feared, he's unable to really speak up for himself or articulate what's happening to this stranger. Even though Jack has escaped his physical isolation, he is still isolated in other significant ways.



As the police arrive, Jack remains frightened and still has trouble answering their questions. Luckily, Jack's unique way of thinking about the world—and his memories of things Ma has told him—may yet help the officers fill in the blanks Jack cannot.



Officer Oh's insistence on listening to Jack and having some patience with him shows that, in spite of the verbal and emotional isolation Jack is still facing even after his escape from Room, there are people in the world willing to help him and try to connect with him.



Again, Officer Oh's patience and willingness to try connecting with the peculiar, isolated Jack—an act of good faith in the face of cynicism—leads to a major breakthrough in terms of her ability to help him and his ma.



While her partner drives, Officer Oh asks Jack more questions about Room in order to try to narrow down its location. Jack is quiet and overwhelmed, but eventually is able to tell Officer Oh that Room has a skylight and is freestanding. Using this information, Officer Oh and her partner pull up satellite images of the neighborhood and are eventually able to work out the potential location of Room. Officer Oh's partner turns on his lights and speeds towards the address while Officer Oh assures Jack that they are going to rescue his ma.

Soon, the car pulls over, and Officer Oh and her partner step out. They leave Jack with a new officer and assure him everything is going to be fine. Jack is intensely nervous as he waits and waits—and soon hears a “terrible noise.” Jack looks out the window for “hundreds of hours” until he sees Officer Oh walking back towards the car with Ma at her side. Ma rushes up to the vehicle, opens the door, and scoops Jack up in her arms, thanking him for saving her.

Ma smiles at Jack and tells him that they can do “anything now”—they are “free.” Jack replies that he wants to go to Bed. Ma says the officers will help them find a place to sleep soon. Jack replies that he wants to go to Bed in Room—he has seen the world, he says, and he’s “tired now.” Ma tells Jack that they are never going back to Room. As the police car starts moving, Jack begins sobbing.

AFTER

At the police precinct, as Ma and Jack get out of the car, there are “lights quick quick like fireworks” all around. Officer Oh mutters “vultures” under her breath and attempts to shield Jack with a blanket, but Jack pushes her aside and looks at the people holding flashing machines.

Inside, Jack is overwhelmed by the bright lights and the people all around. He is mesmerized by the sight of a vending machine, but Ma pulls him through the lobby to a small room where a “huge wide man” is waiting for them. The man apologizes for the “media presence,” and thanks Jack for his courage, calling him a brave young man. Jack is confused at being called a “man,” and even more unsettled when the chair in the corner of the room doesn’t rock like Rocker did back in Room.

Officer Oh is a dedicated cop whose hunch about Jack, and her willingness to work through his anxiety and shyness, ultimately result in a successful approximation of Room’s location. Though Room is “not on any map,” it has several unique features, and Jack and Officer Oh’s collaboration allows law enforcement to track it down.



Jack and Ma have successfully escaped Room—all of their hard work has paid off, and Ma is overwhelmed with a sense of freedom and gratitude. Their quarantine from the world has come to an end, and they are able to rejoin society.



Though Ma is elated to be free from Room, Jack is overwhelmed by what he’s seen of the world and wants to return to the safety and isolation of Room. His lingering nostalgia for Room will become a major obstacle between him and Ma in the second half of the novel.



The paparazzi have already arrived at the precinct by the time Ma and Jack get there, foreshadowing the far-reaching media attention their case will garner as the days and weeks go by.



Though the precinct is an ordinary place filled with ordinary things like vending machines and chairs, Jack is mesmerized by all of it. He has escaped the isolation of Room—but remains isolated from an understanding of the larger world.



The large man—the police captain—tells Ma that he needs to take a statement from her. After that, he says, she and Jack will be released to the Cumberland Clinic, a psychiatric care facility. Jack sits with Ma as she begins talking to the man, who calls her by her “other name.” Jack wants some, and tries to pull Ma’s t-shirt up, but she tells Jack she’s busy. Jack continues prodding her, though, and finally she lets him **breastfeed**. The captain asks if Ma wants some privacy, but Ma says she wants to get things over with.

After a few minutes, Jack tells Ma that he needs to go back to Room—he has to use Toilet. Ma says that there’s one in the precinct, too, and leads him to the bathroom. Jack is frightened of the toilet’s automatic flush, and surprised when Ma, seeing his soiled underwear, takes them off of him and drops them in the trash. Ma insists they’ll find Jack new ones. Jack asks if he’ll get them for his Sundaytreat, but Ma says that they can get things any day they want now. “That’s weird,” Jack thinks. “I’d rather on a Sunday.”

Jack falls asleep while Ma finishes up her interview with the police captain. She wakes him when it’s time to go to the hospital. Jack is confused—a hospital was part of Plan A. He is drowsy and disoriented during the car ride in the police cruiser—and frightened when a “person with no face” opens the door for them at the hospital’s entrance. The doctor greeting Ma and Jack introduces himself as Dr. Clay and explains to Jack that he’s wearing a mask to help keep Jack safe from germs. Dr. Clay hands Jack and Ma masks to wear, too. Jack is surprised that germs are in the real world, too, and not just in Room.

Inside the hospital, Dr. Clay tells Ma that she needs to be separated from Jack for a few minutes so that the medical resident on duty, Dr. Kendrick, can collect “evidence” from Ma’s body. Jack tries to follow Ma into the exam room, afraid to be parted from her—but he is comforted when he sees a **TV** on the wall near the reception desk. The admissions coordinator, Pilar, watches over Jack while he watches TV. Jack is exhausted and nearly nods off to sleep, but he perks up when he sees himself and Ma suddenly appear on the television screen. Jack calls out to Ma, telling her that they’re on TV, but Pilar quickly shuts the screen off.

Jack and Ma have more to contend with in the real world than just the voyeuristic media—they must face down others’ opinions about their routines and the ways they’ve made life bearable for themselves. The sight of a five-year-old breastfeeding is highly unusual in the world—but Ma is defensive of her and Jack’s rights to do the things that have sustained them and brought them comfort for years.



This passage highlights Jack’s continued preference for the way things were back in Room. He longs for the familiarity and the routine of life in Room, and is confused by the freedom he and Ma have.



Jack is continually shocked that all the things that existed in Room exist in the outside world, too. Jack had perhaps begun to believe that everything outside of Room would be vastly different, and is disoriented rather than comforted by the knowledge that there are some constants between the two places.



Though Jack is delighted to see himself and Ma on TV, the other people around him know that the invasive, sensationalist media coverage of their case will only prove damaging to Jack, so they attempt to shield him from seeing or hearing things that will upset him.



Jack rejoins Ma in her exam room once Dr. Kendrick is done looking at her. Dr. Kendrick asks if she can give Jack a checkup—Ma insists he doesn't need one. Dr. Clay says that in "other trauma situations," patients are usually examined right away. Ma says that she has never let Jack out of her sight once in his life, and "nothing like what [they're] insinuating" has happened to him. Ma begins crying as she begs the doctors to understand how safe she kept Jack for so many years. Dr. Clay asks if Ma is okay with them simply taking Jack's height and weight and cleaning his scrapes. Ma assents.

Jack is spellbound when Dr. Kendrick cleans his scrapes and applies Dora band-aids to the wounds, but he is nervous when she asks to take a blood sample. Ma promises Jack that he'll get a treat if he's brave, and Jack chooses a lollipop, but doesn't like its flavor. He is shocked when Ma tells him he can choose another one.

In the morning, Jack wakes up to find he has peed the bed in the night. He wakes Ma to tell her, but she urges him not to worry about it—the nurses, she says, will come and change the sheets. Ma gets out of bed and raises the blinds covering the window. Jack is mystified by the "wooden stripes," and Ma slowly explains how blinds work. Jack is confused by Ma's semantics as she describes how blinds "stop you seeing."

Ma tells Jack it's time to wash up. Jack is confused—bath, he says, comes after breakfast. Ma explains that they can do things in whatever order they like now, and hurries off to the bathroom. Jack is confused by the shower and afraid to go into it. When Ma throws out Jack's dirty t-shirt, Jack is upset, even though Ma insists he'll soon get lots of new ones to replace it. Ma goes into the shower, and though Jack is frightened, he follows her in. As Ma makes noises of relief beneath the hot stream of water, Jack asks her if she's in pain—she replies that she's simply enjoying her first shower in over seven years. After the shower, Jack is surprised that he and Ma each get their own white fluffy towel and robe.

After their shower, Jack asks if they can go outside of their room and explore. As Ma helps him put some slippers on, however, he becomes afraid, and asks if Old Nick will find them again. Ma blithely assures Jack that Old Nick doesn't know where they are and won't be able to get to them again. As Ma and Jack wander the halls of the clinic, Jack looks out the windows and asks if the world outside is real. Ma assures him it is.

The doctors know that Ma was raped repeatedly for years by Old Nick and they are worried that Jack, too, may have been a victim of physical or sexual abuse at the man's hands. Ma breaks down as she tries to impress upon the doctors just how fiercely she protected Jack, desperate for them to understand all she has sacrificed and given up to ensure that her son's safety has always come first.



Even though things are frightening and disorienting for Jack, there are some familiar touchstones—and new incentives—that show him the world might be an okay place to be.



It is Jack's first morning in the world, and already there are many new things for him to contend with and try to understand. From his new physical surroundings to Ma's carefree attitude, a lot has shifted overnight.



Jack's desperation to adhere to routine and his fear of taking on new things speaks to the kind of emotional isolation and disorientation he's experiencing. Jack is free now—but the possibilities of freedom, the abandonment of routine, and the newness of so many things actually feels more constraining and frightening to him than being in Room ever did.



Jack clearly still has a great deal of fear about being in the world—and about being tracked down by Old Nick—but Ma, on the other hand, seems determined not to waste a second worrying or looking back.



Jack and Ma run into a nurse named Noreen who seems surprised and nervous to see them out and about. She urges them to use the buzzer in their room if they need anything, but Ma says that she and Jack want to eat breakfast in the cafeteria. Noreen lets them by, and Ma and Jack enter the large room. Jack is overwhelmed—being in the cafeteria feels like “a TV planet that’s all about [him and Ma].” Everyone wants to stop and talk to them, welcoming them and congratulating them. Jack is intimidated by all the attention, and he clutches tight to Ma as fellow patients and clinic staff approach him to say hello.

Ma eats the breakfast brought over to their table hungrily, gulping juice and scarfing bacon, but Jack is overwhelmed and occasionally disgusted by the feast. He doesn’t like the cutlery, which is different from the knives and forks inside Room, and he cannot stomach the pulpy orange juice. Dr. Clay comes over to say hello to Ma and Jack and notices that Jack seems overwhelmed—he suggests that maybe breakfast in the cafeteria is too much for “day one.” Jack wonders what Day One is. Noreen offers to make Jack and Ma some plates and bring them up to the room. Ma, clearly annoyed with Jack’s inability to sit through breakfast, hurries him up and away from the table back towards their room.

That afternoon, after a nap, Jack and Ma wake up to find Dr. Clay knocking on the door. He comes in to check on Ma and Jack. He prescribes Ma some sleeping pills once she tells him she was too wired to really sleep the night before. Ma asks if she can keep her medications in her room rather than having a nurse bring them to her several times a day, “like [she’s] a sick person.”

Dr. Clay reveals that he needs to give Jack several vaccines. Dr. Clay asks Jack to be brave, but Jack hides in the bathroom and insists he “used [his] brave all up doing Plan B.” Ma and Dr. Clay manage to wrangle Jack onto the bed and coach him through the vaccinations.

After the shots, Jack plays by himself while he listens to Ma and Dr. Clay talk. Dr. Clay discusses the challenges that surely lie ahead for Jack, including issues with social adjustment and special perception. A distressed Ma tells Clay that she’d thought she was helping Jack to be “more or less” OK, even in Room—she is overwhelmed by all the trials still ahead of them both.

Again, Ma is determined to plunge Jack right into life in the real world. She probably thinks he’ll enjoy being free and experiencing new things, since she herself has missed being in the world so much—but she doesn’t account for Jack’s lingering nostalgia for Room and the prolonged sense of emotional isolation he will endure in the coming days and weeks.



Because of Dr. Clay and Noreen’s sensitivity to extreme situations, they understand that dining in the cafeteria is probably not the best thing for Jack to do on his first morning in the world. Ma, though, is obviously frustrated with Jack’s inability to recognize the positivity of what has happened to them—or afraid of confronting her own lingering feelings of fear and isolation.



Ma is not dependent on pills, but Donoghue is clearly laying the groundwork for Ma’s future trouble with her medications. Ma doesn’t want to be treated differently—for the first time in seven years, she just wants to be normal.



Jack has had a lot demanded of him in the last few days, and he is exhausted, wired, and desperate for the world to stop coming at him quite so fast.



Even though Ma did her best within the confines of Room to try to keep Jack healthy, educated, and as “normal” as possible, she is now forced to confront the fact that nothing she could have done within Room could have prepared Jack for life outside it. She did her best—but her circumstances were impossible to begin with, and the deck was stacked against her all along.



Soon, Noreen brings a policeman into the room, and the two of them begin talking with Ma and Dr. Clay. Jack puts his fingers in his ears to blot out the noise. Ma soon runs over to Jack and shows him a picture—the picture is of Old Nick with a “sign around his neck.” Ma explains that the police have put Old Nick in jail. Dr. Clay warns Ma that showing pictures of Old Nick to Jack might “trigger” him—or her, for that matter—but Ma insists that “after seven years of the real deal,” she’s strong enough to handle a photograph.

Dr. Clay asks Jack if Old Nick ever hurt him. Ma interjects, insisting she never let such a thing happen, but Dr. Clay urges Jack to answer for himself. Jack says the only time Old Nick hurt him was when he dropped him on the ground during “the Great Escape.” Dr. Clay tells Ma that she and Jack may need to submit to DNA testing—when Ma protests, Dr. Clay begs her not to allow a “monster” like Old Nick get “let off on [a] technicalit[y].”

After the doctors and police leave, Ma tells Jack it’s time for lunch. Jack isn’t hungry, but he is worried about skipping lunch. Ma reminds him once again that they can do anything they want to do now, whenever they want to do it. Jack says he’s tired and wants a nap. Ma lays with him in the bed, but reads the paper instead of going to sleep. Jack is confused as to why Ma would rather do something on her own than something with him.

After Jack’s nap, he wakes up to a knocking on the door—it’s Noreen, who has brought new clothes for him and Ma. Jack tries on shoes for the first time in his life, but finds them hard to walk in. As Ma dresses in a trendy outfit, Jack tells her that she’s not wearing her “real clothes.” Another nurse comes in to tell Jack and Ma they have visitors—seconds later, a woman rushes into the room and embraces Ma. Ma laughs and cries as she greets her mother for the first time in seven years. Ma happily introduces Jack to his grandma.

Grandma thanks Jack tearily for bringing her “baby” back to her. Jack is confused—he doesn’t know “what baby” she’s talking about. While Ma and Grandma “talk and talk,” Jack distracts himself by looking under his bandages at his scrapes. Soon, a man with a beard enters the room—Grandma introduces the man to Ma and Jack as Leo. Ma is confused and asks where her father is. Grandma replies that Ma’s dad is in Australia—there have been “a lot of changes,” she says, in the years since Ma’s been gone.

Again, Dr. Clay is trying to be hypersensitive to any potential triggers or fears Jack might have—but Ma remains determined not to coddle Jack. She and Jack have been through enough, she asserts, to know that anything happening to them now is easy to handle in the face of what they’ve endured. Ma’s attitude, though, will be called into question as the novel goes on.



Ma is so determined to prove to the doctors that she never let anything bad happen to Jack that she resists the red tape and bureaucratic details that must be dealt with. Dr. Clay urges Ma to slow down and stop being so bull-headed—she is free, but there are still things she must do and rules she must follow to ensure her and Jack’s happiness and safety.



In Room, Jack and Ma did every single thing together at exactly the same pace and exactly the same time, with remarkably few exceptions. Now that Ma is free to reject such a tight schedule, she’s eager to do so—but doesn’t realize that Jack takes comfort and solace in their highly regimented routines.



Jack is just barely keeping up with the new demands and routines of life outside Room, but there is still more newness to come in the form of brand-new clothes and strange new visitors. The world is not slowing down for Jack, and as more and more of it seems to go over his head, his isolation and anxiety increase.



So far, Jack has been the one most overwhelmed and disoriented by simply being in the world—now, though, as Ma reunites with her family and sees how much has changed in the seven years she’s been away, her own sense of instability and uncertainty begins creeping in.



Ma and Grandma talk for a long time while Jack listens surreptitiously. Grandma tells Ma how miserable she's been since Ma was taken, and how tortured she was by the confusion over whether Ma had been abducted or killed, or had simply run away on her own. Grandma tells Ma that Ma's brother Paul has a baby girl of his own now, and the two discuss all that's transpired in the years they've been apart. Soon, it's time for Grandma to leave, and she bids both Ma and Jack a tearful goodbye, promising to come back soon.

After dinner, Ma and Jack go to bed—but Jack can't sleep. He wonders why he and Ma can't go back to Room just for sleeping, and he is anxious about staying in the clinic forever. Though Ma has told him they simply “need a bit of help while [they] sort things out”—as well as protection from the paparazzi—Jack wishes they could leave. Jack wakes Ma to ask her if they're locked in at the clinic, but Ma comforts him by assuring him they're free as birds.

The next day is full of even more strange, new things. Jack is surprised when cleaners come to take the sheets and wash them—he thought he and Ma would have to wash their sheets in the bathroom forever. He tries syrup on his pancakes for the first time, and continues adjusting to all the strange new sounds in the clinic.

Ma and Jack meet with Dr. Clay for a therapy session, and after going over Ma's feelings with her and discussing terms like “depersonalization” and “jamais vu,” Dr. Clay asks Jack how he's liking the clinic so far. Jack says he doesn't like “persons looking” and “sudden things.” Dr. Clay asks Jack to tell him about Room, and Jack obliges. Ma complements Jack's memories of Room with her own, and laments that she couldn't have made a better life for Jack or gotten him out faster. Dr. Clay reminds her that no one is judging her, but Ma seems distressed.

After therapy, Ma and Jack take a nap. When Jack wakes up, he isn't feeling well, and Ma tells him he has caught his first cold. Jack cries and says he doesn't want to go to Heaven yet. Ma laughs and assures him that while doctors can't cure a cold, they are surrounded by people who are helping to make them “better”—nothing, she says, is going to happen to Jack.

Though Jack overhears the conversation between Ma and Grandma, he does not visibly pay attention to them, ask questions, or otherwise attempt to participate. This is a symptom of Jack's ongoing sense of isolation, counterintuitive though it is.



Though Jack and Ma have escaped Room and are now free, Jack cannot get past the feeling of being trapped, locked in, or otherwise controlled. He both wants the familiarity of Room and fears replicating Room's circumstances somewhere else.



The next day is just as full of new things, but is slightly less overwhelming to Jack as he begins developing a sense of what to expect and how to cope with all the newness around him.



As Jack's fears seem to abate somewhat, Ma's begin rearing their head. Now that Ma has taken Jack out of Room and exposed him to the world, she feels she must answer for the choices she's made for both of them—and is worried that she will be judged by her caretakers, by her family, by the media, and eventually by Jack himself.



Though Jack knows many things that children his age do not, there are certain things he's learning about for the first time—such as what it feels like to endure a common cold.



Jack and Ma go down to the lobby of the clinic and look at some fish in a tank. Jack asks if the fish are also resting at the clinic “because they’re famous.” After observing the fish awhile, Ma tells Jack it’s time for them to go outside and get some fresh air. Even though Dr. Clay helps Jack put on a mask and sunglasses, as soon as Jack steps outside, he feels frightened of the wind and sun. Jack begins having a mild panic attack, and Noreen helps him breathe into a paper bag to calm down. Ma brings Jack back inside and up to their room, where she lets Jack **breastfeed** for a while.

Grandma comes by to visit Ma and Jack. She brings some books for Jack to read along with her. As Jack looks at the books, he hears Grandma begging Ma to tell her “every detail” of her time in Room, but Ma refuses, insisting she doesn’t want her mother “thinking about that stuff every time” she looks at her. Grandma only stays a while, but after she leaves, there is another visitor—a lawyer named Morris. As Ma talks Morris, he urges her to file suits against several newspapers who used pictures of her over the years. Ma says legal action is the last thing on her mind—but Morris urges her to “consider [her and Jack’s] futures” and all the expenses they’ll need to pay for soon.

Morris opens up a plastic bag he’s brought with him and produces packages and letters—donations and gifts, he says, from Ma and Jack’s “fans.” As Jack marvels over the toys inside, Morris once again urges Ma to get ahead of the media attention—Ma sarcastically asks if they should “sell [themselves] before somebody else does.” Morris tells Ma to take things “one day at a time.” Ma urges Jack to pick out just five toys to keep—the rest, she says, should go to kids who need them more. Jack surreptitiously chooses six and puts them away quickly before Ma can count.

While Jack squirrels his toys away in the other corner of the room, Morris and Ma talk about the impending trial and Ma asks how long Old Nick will go to prison for. As Morris lists the charges against Old Nick, he estimates the man will get “twenty-five to life.” Ma asks about “the baby”—the first one she had—and whether it “count[s] as some kind of murder.” Jack listens, intrigued—Ma has never told him this story. Before Jack can hear any more, though, Noreen enters the room to tell Ma and Jack it’s dinner time.

Jack is trying to process and take in all the new rules and information coming at him. He knows that he and Ma are in the clinic partly to be sheltered from the paparazzi, and so he wonders if everyone else in the clinic is there for the same reason—even the fish. When Jack grows too overwhelmed by the world around him, he seeks comfort in his and Ma’s old routines—and Ma, no doubt, draws comfort from them as well.



Ma must contend with people who want things from her at every turn. Her own mother wants the details of her capture, imprisonment, and escape—details Ma doesn’t want to relive or inflict upon others. Meanwhile, Morris urges Ma to try to get ahead of the media machine—and get paid while she’s doing it. Ma is no doubt beginning to feel less free and fearless as she confronts the pressing demands coming at her from all sides.



One of the central themes of the second half of the novel is the voyeuristic and sensationalist nature of the media, and the ways in which it preys upon victims and survivors. Ma’s lawyer urges her to head all that off by agreeing to level with the press—but he doesn’t tell her what she’ll be sacrificing and subjecting herself to if she does.



The revelation that there was another baby before Jack shifts the foundation beneath his feet. It becomes clear that although Ma has been “unlying” to him for some time now, there are still many things she hasn’t shared with him.



After dinner, while Jack **breastfeeds** on the bed, he asks Ma about “the first baby.” Ma explains that a year before Jack was born, she gave birth to a baby girl. The umbilical cord, Ma says, was tangled around the baby girl’s neck, and though Old Nick was in Room while Ma delivered the baby, he refused to help Ma at all—and as a result, the little girl died. Ma tells Jack that when Jack was about to be born, she didn’t let Old Nick anywhere near the room—she wanted it to be just the two of them. Ma tells Jack that she believes the spirit of the baby girl was Jack all along, and got “recycled” when she died to come back as Jack himself.

Ma and Jack sleep fitfully, and Jack even falls out of bed at one point. Ma suggests they use both beds in the room and push them together to make one large bed, but Jack insists on staying in the smaller bed with Ma. In the morning, Ma has caught Jack’s cold, and when Dr. Clay comes by to check on them, he gives Ma the okay for her and Jack to stop wearing their masks. Dr. Clay helps Jack with some art therapy, and they discuss Jack’s habit of counting when he’s nervous. Dr. Clay tells Ma that it’s good she got Jack out when she did—at five, he tells her, children are still “plastic.”

Later that day, Jack asks Ma what Dr. Clay meant when he called him “plastic.” Ma explains that Dr. Clay believes Jack might forget all about Room one day. Jack asks if he’s supposed to forget, and Ma admits she doesn’t know. Jack thinks about how often Ma has been saying she doesn’t know things lately—in Room, she never said the phrase.

After lunch, Ma and Jack go outside again for more fresh air. Jack is scared again, but Noreen is with them, and encourages Jack to pretend he’s watching their outside adventure on **TV**. Soon, Jack is excitedly exploring the parking lot, marveling at the cars, flowers, grass, and small insects all around. When Jack points out a helicopter overhead, Noreen and Ma hurry him inside, and explain that the helicopter is full of paparazzi.

Later that afternoon, Grandma arrives with Ma’s brother Paul and his wife Deana. The visit is intense and emotional—Paul cries repeatedly as Deana comforts both him and the confused Jack. Deana tells Jack that she and Paul have a three-year-old daughter, Bronwyn, who is “psyched” to meet him soon. As Jack listens to the adults converse and catch up, he struggles to keep track of who and what they’re talking about. The visit passes in a blur, and Jack’s ears soon grow “tired.” Even after Paul and Deana leave, though, Grandma stays—and brings Leo into the room to spend time with Ma and Jack. Grandma tells Jack he can call Leo “Steppa,” since Leo is his Stepgrandpa.

Ma agrees to tell Jack the story about the first baby she bore Old Nick, but tries to couch the story in optimism and reassurance that Jack is the baby she wanted all along. Ma’s intense devotion to keeping Jack safe—and away from Old Nick even in the confines of Room—begins to make a lot more sense in light of this new information.



Ma and Jack’s colds symbolize their shared and twinned difficulties with entry—or in Ma’s case, reentry—into the world. First Jack, who suffered more intensely with feelings of being confused and overwhelmed, got the cold—though Ma didn’t get it until later, it comes for her as well, just as her feelings of instability, insecurity, and fear resurface, too.



Back in Room, Jack relied on Ma for the answers to everything—and he is perturbed and puzzled by the fact that, out in the world, there seems to be a lot even she doesn’t know. Ma is experiencing her own kind of growing up: she is learning new things about the world and questioning the things she thought she understood.



Just as Jack was able to cope with things more capably once Officer Oh asked him to tell her a story, he is able to experience things with less anxiety when he pretends they’re TV. Being distanced from what’s truly happening allows Jack to process life in the world more deftly.



Jack remains overwhelmed by the presence of too many new people and too much new information. Though he and Ma are surrounded by their family, Jack feels more intensely isolated than he ever did inside of Room. This speaks to the controversial central question at the heart of the novel—whether perhaps, in Room, as awful as it was, Jack felt more at home than he does in the world.



Jack, who is tired of visitors, asks Ma if he can “have some.” Ma tells him he can later on. Grandma asks what Jack means, and Ma tells her he’s talking about **breastfeeding**. Grandma is shocked to realize that Jack still breastfeeds, but Ma explains that “there was no reason to stop,” and curtly admonishes Grandma for judging her. Steppa suggests he and Grandma leave and let Jack and Ma rest, and Grandma bids them goodbye. Ma falls asleep soon after they leave, but Jack isn’t tired.

Jack picks up a newspaper and reads the headline: “HOPE FOR BONSAI BOY,” it says, and the article below describes Jack and Ma’s ordeal in sensationalized detail. Ma wakes up and snatches the paper from Jack’s hands. He asks her what a bonsai is, and Ma explains that bonsais are tiny trees that people keep inside and cut every day “so they stay all curled up.” Ma tells Jack not to take the paper seriously and urges him to come to sleep. She takes some painkillers for her headache and Jack strokes her hair as they fall asleep, disturbed by the fact that Ma is “still [...] hurting in Outside.”

Jack has terrible nightmares all night, and when he wakes up in a sweat, Ma lets him **breastfeed**. Afterwards, he confesses to her that he kept six toys, not five. Ma says it’s all right, and she urges him to go back to sleep.

In the morning, Ma and Jack lie in bed counting the friends they have made in the world: they list Noreen, Dr. Clay, Dr. Kendrick, Pilar, and Ajeet, as well as Grandma, Paul, and Deana. Jack includes Steppa, but Ma calls him a “rebound.” After counting friends, Ma and Jack head down to breakfast, and then meet with Dr. Clay for therapy. Jack tells Dr. Clay about his frightening dreams, and Clay hypothesizes that Jack’s brain is “doing a spring cleaning”—working through all his unneeded “scary thoughts” from Room now that he’s out. Jack, however, believes that Room was the safe place, and Outside is the scary one.

After therapy, Ma and Jack use the computer for a little while. Ma looks up some of her old friends on a social media website, and then lets Jack watch some Dora videos on YouTube. When they get back to their room, Ma finds a present Paul has sent—it is a device with a “million” songs on it, and Ma starts listening to music happily. When Jack roughly grabs the device, Ma urges Jack to be gentle with her present—Jack is disturbed, because in Room, “everything was [theirs.]”

When Ma tells Grandma that there was no need for her to stop breastfeeding Jack inside of Room, what she’s not saying is that there was every reason to keep it up. The act of breastfeeding nourishes Jack and comforts Ma—they each need one another as much as the other needs them.



The “BONSAI BOY” headline is cruel but apt, and Ma is angry about it because it forces her to confront the ways in which she had to “prune” Jack’s life and education over the years in order to keep him the right “size” for Room.



Ma and Jack are both navigating rocky new terrain—and the act of breastfeeding continues to provide a comfort for both of them.



Dr. Clay tries to tell Jack that the scary dreams he’s having are just part of his subconscious at last recognizing all the scary parts of his life in Room, but Jack doesn’t understand—he believes, still, that Room was actually the safe place. Jack is still isolated from the world and scared of everything in it, but he doesn’t realize that he’s in the process of growing and changing to live inside of it.



Things between Ma and Jack are changing. Now that they’re not in Room anymore, they don’t do every activity on the same schedule—and, as Jack is realizing, there are certain emotional and material things that they no longer share.



The next morning, Jack asks what day it is. Ma tells him it's Thursday, and Jack asks her if they should start thinking about what to request for Sundaytreat. Ma simply shakes her head in response.

That afternoon, Ma and Jack are driven in a van to a dentist's office—the clinic has arranged a “special visit” for Ma and Jack, with only the dentist and an assistant present. On the drive over, Jack looks out the window and marvels at all the “hes and shes on the sidewalks.” When Jack asks about people's hair and why it's not all long like theirs, Ma explains that some people have short hair. Jack says he doesn't want to get rid of his hair and “lose [his] strong,” like Samson in the Bible.

At the dental appointment, the dentist checks Jack's **teeth** and finds that they're in good shape. Next, the dentist moves onto Ma while Jack plays with some toys and reads some books. Ma's appointment takes a very long time.

That night, while Ma and Jack eat dinner, Noreen knocks at the door and tells Ma that her father has arrived from Australia. Ma runs off, leaving Jack behind. Noreen stays with him while he finishes his meal, and then brings him into the common room where Ma and Grandpa are. As soon as he sees Jack, Grandpa jumps out of his seat and shakes his head. Ma tries to introduce Jack to Grandpa, but Grandpa says he can't bear to be in the same room as the boy. Grandpa hurries towards the door, promising to call from the hotel. Ma begins screaming and banging on the table, urging her father to accept Jack and warning him that if he doesn't stay, he won't get another chance with either of them. Grandpa comes back into the room and politely greets Jack.

Later, back in their own room, Jack asks Ma why Grandpa didn't want to see him. Ma says that Grandpa thinks she'd be better off without Jack. Jack points out that without him, Ma wouldn't be Ma—and Ma agrees. Ma promises that soon Grandpa will behave better.

Ma is disturbed by Jack's inability to accept that the rules of Room no longer apply.



Even though Jack is beginning to realize that there are certain things about him that mark him as different from anyone else, he sees the ways he's different as a source of strength. He doesn't want to conform to the ways of the world just yet.



The extensive dental work Ma undergoes allows her to reclaim her teeth—and her identity.



Ma is furious and indignant when her father refuses to accept or even acknowledge Jack. She has spent so much of her time outside Room justifying her choices about parenting Jack to other people—but the prospect of justifying Jack himself is too much for her to bear, and she puts her foot down.



Ma is optimistic even in the face of judgement and cruelty from someone she loves. Her love for Jack is so strong that it renders everyone else's opinions irrelevant.



The next day, Ma tells Jack that while he's taking his afternoon nap, she is going to go downstairs to Dr. Clay's office to talk to some **TV** people, and later that night, she will be on TV. Jack asks her why she's going to talk to the "vultures," and Ma tells him that if she answers their questions just once, they'll stop asking. Jack seems nervous about the plan, and so Ma reminds him that tomorrow they are scheduled to go on an adventure to the Natural History Museum with Paul, Bronwyn, and Deana. Jack wraps his arms and legs around Ma and begs her not to leave their room. As Ma tries to push Jack off of her, his head hits the edge of the bedside table, and Jack begins screaming.

Dr. Clay comes into the room at the sound of Jack's screams. Ma holds Jack and strokes his face, trying to calm him down. Dr. Clay tells Ma that she can still "pull out" of the interview, but Ma insists she needs to go ahead with it for Jack's college fund. Ma tells Jack that he can come downstairs with her if he stays silent, and Jack agrees. Dr. Clay warns Ma that plan might not be the best idea, but Ma ignores him and helps Jack put his shoes on.

Downstairs, Jack enters Dr. Clay's office to find it full of "persons and lights and machines." Morris is there, and he barks orders and reminders at the television crew. Ma shakes hands with a woman with "puffy hair" whom Jack recognizes from **TV**. He is shocked to meet an "actual person from TV," and watches intently as Ma sits down and the interview begins.

Over the course of the interview, the puffy-haired journalist asks Ma probing, invasive, and sensationalist questions about whether she experienced Stockholm syndrome while living inside Room, about "the tragedy of [her] stillbirth," and about Jack. Morris pushes back against the questions that go against Ma's contract, but Ma presses forward and attempts to answer as many questions as she can. The interviewer presses Ma about her decision to **breastfeed** Jack throughout his childhood, about "deceiving" her child about the reality of the world outside Room, and about whether Ma believes Old Nick cared "in a warped way" for her and Jack.

Ma has decided to submit to the press's demands for an interview, but the idea of being separated from Ma fills Jack with intense fear and even panic. Thinking about or pretending to be in TV is normally a comfort for Jack—but the idea of Ma actually going onto TV is perhaps too close to home for him to handle.



Since coming to the clinic, Ma has been almost bullheaded in her approach to doing what she wants when she wants to. She's so happy about her newfound freedom—and feels so invincible—that she even disregards the opinions of her doctor.



TV has long been a comfort for Jack—a way of escaping to other worlds. Now, though, as Jack sees the mechanics of TV up close, the whole concept makes him just as nervous as everything else in the outside world.



Ma has attempted to get ahead of the press, and to leverage her brief celebrity in order to secure a financial future for herself and Jack. Unfortunately, Ma cannot outfox the cannibalizing media, and the ruthless, indiscriminate way sensationalized press preys on victims and survivors of enormous tragedies.



Ma begins talking about how irritated she is by all the media attention. She tells the interviewer that even as difficult as her life in Room was, there are people suffering worse all over the world. Ma invokes the injustice of the prison system and the practice of solitary confinement, as well as abuses in orphanages and child-labor-run factories in other parts of the world. Ma says she wants to shine a light on “people [who] are locked up in all sorts of ways,” but the interviewer quickly redirects the interview and begins asking more invasive questions. She asks if Ma misses being “behind a locked door.” Ma calls the question “stupid,” and Dr. Clay suggests ending the interview. Ma insists on getting it over with.

The journalist resumes the interview and asks Ma whether she ever considered giving Jack away, “so he could be free.” She accuses Ma of knowing what Jack was missing and yet keeping him with her out of selfishness and a desire to put an end to her own loneliness. Ma begins crying, unable to answer the question. Jack runs over to the couch and leaps onto Ma’s lap, and Morris quickly orders the camera people to shut their devices off and stop the interview.

In the morning, when Jack wakes up, Ma is having a Gone day. Jack is surprised that she has days like this even outside of Room. Noreen comes into the room, and Jack explains Ma’s Gone state. Noreen tries to ask Ma if there’s anything she can get her, but Ma answers in a monstrous voice that she just wants to sleep. Noreen helps Jack get dressed and tells him that Paul is waiting downstairs.

Noreen brings Jack to visit Dr. Clay, who greets him happily and asks him if he’s okay going out to the museum with just Paul, Deana, and Bronwyn. Jack is worried that if he doesn’t go with them today, the dinosaurs at the museum will disappear, so he agrees to the outing. Noreen brings Jack to meet Paul in the cafeteria, and they eat breakfast. Paul says it’s probably good that Ma isn’t coming with them today, because “after that TV show last night, everybody knows her face.”

Paul leads Jack outside to the parking lot, where Deana is waiting in the car. Bronwyn is in a car seat in the back, and Jack sits in a booster seat beside her. As the four of them begin driving, Jack reminds himself not to be scared—he is on an adventure. Paul tells Jack they’re going to make a stop at the mall to pick out a present for Bronwyn to take to a birthday party later. Paul plans on going in by himself, but once they get to the mall, Bronwyn insists on going in, and Deana says they should all go together.

As the interview continues, Ma tries to regain control of the situation and steer the conversation towards causes more worthy of attention and discussion than her own—but the journalist one-ups Ma and brings the conversation back around to the ways in which Room has warped her.



Jack cannot stand to see Ma upset, and as Ma realizes she has completely lost control of the interview, she breaks down in tears. Jack knows that she needs him in such moments, and goes to her in an attempt to ease her pain.



Ma’s Gone state seems to be a direct result of the stress she suffered during the TV interview—and the self-loathing she seems to be feeling in its wake.



Even though Ma is in a terrible state, Jack is excited for the first time about going out into the world beyond the clinic. He is learning that he and Ma can do different things and still be okay on their own—a hard lesson to learn, and one that will soon suffer a great setback.



Paul and Deana don’t seem to realize how fragile Jack is and how little he knows about the world. A trip to the mall is a deviation from the agenda—and a potential minefield.



Inside the mall, Jack is amazed by how big the building is, and he almost immediately seizes on a Dora bag at a department store. Deana helps Jack put the backpack on and offers to buy it for him. Deana pays for the backpack but hurries the family out of the store when Bronwyn begins throwing a temper tantrum. Jack takes his shoes off as they walk to the next store, and a woman picks them up and gives them to Deana. Deana becomes nervous that someone is going to recognize Jack, and says as much to Paul. Jack, sensing the tension, asks if they can return to the clinic. Deana assures Jack that they'll soon be leaving for the museum.

On the way to the toy store, the group passes the food court and stops for snacks. Jack asks to use the bathroom, and Deana takes him and Bronwyn. They all go into a stall together. Jack pees into the toilet, and then Deana flushes, lowers the seat, and sits Bronwyn down. Intrigued by Bronwyn's private parts, Jack reaches out to touch her—Deana hits him, and her wedding rings scrape his hand. Jack begins screaming. Deana apologizes profusely, and after wiping Bronwyn, she helps Jack wash his hands and put some pressure on the little cut. Deana leads Jack and Bronwyn out of the bathroom and tells Paul they need to leave—they can find a gift for Bronwyn's party later.

Jack, however, spots his favorite book from Room, *Dylan the Digger*, in the window of a nearby book store. He runs toward it, and the whole family goes into the store. Deana shoves a book for the party in Paul's hand and asks him to go pay for it—meanwhile, Jack shoves the Dylan book into his Dora bag. On the way out of the store, a man pulls Paul aside and tells him that Jack has the book in his bag. Paul reprimands Jack, but at the same time, tells Deana how bad he feels about how little of the world Jack understands.

Paul brings Jack back to the clinic right after the mall. Noreen leads Jack back up to his room, and Jack snuggles into bed with Ma. He notices right away, though, that the pillow smells bad. Jack realizes Ma has vomited and tries to shake her awake, but she doesn't move or respond. Jack runs to get Noreen and brings her back to the room. As soon as she sees Ma, she calls for a code blue, and nurses and doctors swarm into the room. Jack notices that almost all of Ma's painkillers are gone from the bottle. "Bad idea," Jack screams at Ma as a nurse pulls him out of the room.

The mall is a cacophony of chaos as Paul and Deana attempt to juggle their own agenda with Jack's peculiar needs. Paul and Deana want to keep Jack happy—but they also want to keep him safe, and are uncertain of what they should do if he's recognized in public.



Jack knows right from wrong when it comes to complicated moral problems—but simple social cues like keeping his hands to himself and understanding the concept of "private parts" are beyond Jack due to the lack of boundaries he and Ma had in Room.



Again, this passage illustrates how Jack doesn't understand a lot about social norms and cues that most people take as a given from a young age. Paul and Deana perhaps didn't realize the degree to which Jack lacked socialization—but after their trip to the mall, they understand just how behind Jack is.



Ma's suicide attempt on the heels of her Gone day shows just how deeply affected she is by the disastrous TV interview—and the claims made against her parenting style and choices about raising Jack. Ma is in the grips of an existential crisis about her time in Room and the decisions she made there, and the isolation she feels as a result has been exacerbated by the probing media scrutiny.



LIVING

That night, Jack is at Grandma and Steppa's house. He has come to live with them in spite of Dr. Clay's recommendation that he stay on at the clinic—Grandma thinks it's best for Jack to live with his family. As Grandma, Jack, and Steppa eat dinner, Jack keeps **Bad Tooth** tucked in the corner of his mouth carefully. He asks if Ma is dead, and tells Grandma that if Ma isn't alive, he doesn't want to be alive either. Grandma starts to cry. She tells Jack that though the clinic hasn't yet called with an update, she thinks Ma is going to be okay.

Grandma shows Jack to the spare room where he'll be staying, but Jack says he doesn't want to sleep in it. Grandma offers to put a blow-up mattress in her and Steppa's room for the night, and Jack says he'd like that. He brings his Dora bag upstairs with him, worrying all the while about Ma. Grandma hurries Jack into bed. He asks for a story, but Grandma says she's tired. Grandma tries to leave the room, but Jack stops her and asks where she's going. She says she's going to watch TV. Jack points out that Grandma just said she was tired. Grandma explains that she's not sleepy, but tired in a different way. She tells Jack to lie down and close his eyes, but he tells her he can't sleep alone. Grandma calls Jack a "poor creature," and then lies down beside him on the mattress.

In the morning, Jack wakes up and starts counting all the things he has in his Dora bag inside his head. He feels "Gone." Grandma leaves the room but comes back a while later to tell him that Dr. Clay has called—Ma is stable. She asks Jack to come down for breakfast, but he stays in bed counting his fingers, toes, and **teeth**. Grandma comes back up to tell Jack to come downstairs and say goodbye to Grandpa, who is flying back to Australia. Jack tells Grandma that Grandpa "wants [him] not born." Grandma tells Jack to come have a pancake. When Jack insists he can't eat without Ma, Grandma points out that Jack is "breathing and walking and talking and sleeping" without Ma—surely he can eat without her, too.

Later that afternoon, Grandma comes into the living room, where Jack is watching **TV**, and shuts the "goggle box" off. She tells Jack that Dr. Clay has just called—Ma is still in stable condition, but Dr. Clay doesn't want Jack sitting around worrying or watching TV all day. Grandma suggests they go to the playground, and then she helps Jack get dressed and ready to go out. On the walk there, Jack is overwhelmed by all the things on the street and sidewalk around them.

Jack is oddly unemotional as he declares, on his first night at his grandparents' house, that he doesn't want to live if his mother isn't alive. His devotion to her is further made evident in his attachment to Bad Tooth, which he keeps in his mouth in an attempt to be as close to Ma as possible.



Just as Jack had trouble reading and following social cues at the mall, he also has trouble understanding other people's emotional states and limits. Jack takes everything literally—and when Grandma says she's tired, he doesn't understand the myriad ways in which people can be tired. Grandma pities Jack as she begins to see just how disconnected from normal experiences he is—and how alone in the world he would truly be without Ma.



Grandma felt so bad for Jack the night before once she saw, for the first time, just how dependent he truly is on Ma. Rather than coddle Jack or get lost in pity, however, Grandma decides to take matters into her own hands and try to show Jack that he can be strong without Ma by his side—he can move through the world on his own.



Just as Ma didn't want Jack to become too dependent on TV in Room, Grandma doesn't want Jack become too dependent on TV in real life. TV has always been an escape for Jack—but now that he's out in the real world, Grandma wants him to learn how to actually navigate it.



At the playground, Jack is scared to play with the other children, but Grandma insists that he can play alongside them even if he's afraid to talk to them. Jack, though, would rather watch the other children play on the swing sets and monkey bars than actually join them. After a little while, Grandma and Jack walk back home. While Jack eats lunch, he notices that his whole body feels "red and hot"—he has gotten sunburnt. Grandma begins crying, ashamed of having been neglectful of Jack's sensitivity. Jack asks if his skin is going to fall off, and Steppa tells him "little bits of it" soon will.

The next day, Jack has learned the rules of Grandma and Steppa's house a little better. Steppa spends a lot of the time alone in the den, and Grandma explains to Jack that sometimes people like to be alone. Jack has lots of toys and art materials to play with, but he has a hard time focusing on games given how worried he is about Ma. Later that afternoon, the phone rings. Grandma takes the call, and when she hangs up, she tells Jack tearfully that Ma has "turned the corner." "What corner," Jack asks. Grandma explains that Ma is going to be fine.

Jack takes a nap, and when he wakes up, Grandma asks what he wants to play. Jack says he wishes he could play with his jeep—but it's back in Room. Grandma says that maybe she can call the police and ask them to get it for him. Jack is amazed that people can go into Room. Grandma explains that the police have been in and out collecting evidence. Jack asks what evidence is, and Grandma tells him it's proof of something that happened.

Grandma helps Jack put on some sunblock, and together they go outside to spend some time in the yard. Jack asks lots of questions about everything he sees, but Grandma doesn't have answers to the things he wants to know about trees, pollen, and more. Jack is once again overwhelmed by how much is in the world. Jack gets a bee sting while playing with a flower, and after Grandma puts some ointment on it, Jack helps her put up an old hammock—the one Ma told Jack about. Jack swings in the hammock by himself for a while, thinking about whether Ma really sat in this very hammock herself years ago.

The phone rings, and Grandma goes inside to answer it. Soon she comes back out with the phone and tells Jack that Ma wants to talk to him. Jack is hesitant at first, but soon he gets on the phone with Ma and asks if she's "not poisoned." Ma insists she's getting better. Ma asks Jack "what's new" at Grandma and Steppa's, to which Jack replies, "Everything." Ma laughs.

On the one hand, Grandma isn't trying to rush Jack into socialization—she wants him to move at his own pace. On the other hand, however, she doesn't realize how sensitive he is in other ways, and as a result, Jack is unprepared to be in the sun for so long and sustains his first sunburn.



Jack's anxiety about Ma has been keeping him from really enjoying his time with Grandma and Steppa. He is relieved to hear that his Ma is going to be okay, and just as Ma turns a corner in the hospital, Jack, too, turns a kind of corner in terms of adjusting to being in the world without her by his side.



Grandma is tasked with explaining to Jack that while he can't go back and live in Room, there are still people going in and out of it. Grandma no doubt knows about Jack's attachment to Room—and the lingering nostalgia he has, not just for the things he left behind there, but the place itself.



Jack is learning that he can feel close to Ma in other ways, even when they're physically apart. He is experiencing things she once experienced, exploring places that were once special to her, and bonding with their shared family.



Jack's innocuous response about how "everything" is new charms and delights Ma. Everything is new to Jack—and Ma is glad that he's experiencing the world just the way she always wanted to, even if she's not alongside him as he does.



That night, Steppa makes pasta carbonara while Jack and Grandma watch. Jack plays with a match and nearly burns himself. Steppa reprimands Jack and asks whether he ever learned not to play with fire, but Jack replies that “there wasn’t” fire in Room. When Steppa recalls that his brother got burnt as a child and now has an arm that’s “rippled like a chip,” Jack says he’s seen potato chips on **TV**. Unable to believe that Jack has never tried a potato chip, Grandma lets him have one from an open bag—but Jack doesn’t like it. He asks more about Steppa’s brother, and Steppa replies that his brother is technically Jack’s uncle. Steppa compares their family to LEGO—bits of things stuck together. Jack admits that he’s only seen LEGO on TV.

The next day, Dr. Clay comes by for a visit. He asks Jack all about his stay at Grandma and Steppa’s so far, and Jack says he’s enjoying being in the real world—even though “nothing in TV ever stinged [him.]” Jack asks when Ma is coming home, and Dr. Clay tells him she’s working her best to get better. As Dr. Clay leaves, Jack hears him arguing with Grandma—she is defending herself against Dr. Clay’s inquiries about Jack’s sunburn and bee sting.

The next morning, Grandma wakes Jack very early so that they can go to the playground before anyone else gets there and have it all to themselves. Grandma encourages Jack to run and play on all the different parts of the playground, and Jack enjoys himself as he explores. He lets Grandma push him on the swings—but becomes startled and upset when a little girl arrives at the playground and starts swinging next to him. Jack retreats into himself and refuses to play or explore any longer, and Grandma takes him home.

Later that day, Jack listens from upstairs while Grandma meets with her book club. The ladies in her club all want to know about how Jack and Ma are doing, and they comment on how darling Jack is. Grandma is startled to realize that the women have seen photos of Jack, but they tell her that “everything gets leaked these days.” As Jack listens to the women continuing to talk about him and Ma’s escape, he puts **Bad Tooth** in his mouth and sucks on it—but he is sad to realize it doesn’t taste like Ma anymore.

Jack and Steppa play LEGOs, and Steppa remarks on how long it’s been since he played with the pieces. Jack asks if Steppa ever played LEGO with his kids, but Steppa tells Jack that he doesn’t have any kids. Jack asks if there is “a word for adults when they aren’t parents,” and Steppa laughs. He says that there are “other things to do” than be a parent that are easier than having kids with “stinky diapers”—at this, Jack is the one who laughs.

Steppa and Grandma are continually shocked by how little of the world Jack has faced. They clearly want to help him learn more about the world and explore all he can, and they delight in seeing him have new experiences—even if Jack doesn’t understand why it’s so significant to try a potato chip or play with a LEGO set.



Dr. Clay remains slightly oversensitive about Jack’s experiences of being in the world for the first time. He is so worried that something terrible will befall Jack and trigger an emotional or physical reaction in him that he doesn’t realize Jack is having many normal experiences that average little boys his age have every day.



Even though Jack is slowly opening himself up to new experiences, it’s clear that he still suffers from a lot of social anxiety and isn’t sure how to interact with other children his age. He remains emotionally isolated even as he has new experiences in the physical world.



*As Jack listens to Grandma and her friends discussing him, he grows more and more anxious. He tries to find comfort in **Bad Tooth**—but the totem has lost its flavor and its power to make him feel more connected to Ma.*



Jack’s innocuous and earnest question about whether there is a name for adults who aren’t parents shows that he has learned from how much Ma needs him that the bond between children and their parents is strong enough to change the core of a person.



One day, Grandma tells Jack he needs a bath. Jack is nervous to bathe by himself and asks Grandma to come in with him. Grandma is hesitant at first, but after putting on a bathing suit and a shower cap, she joins Jack in the water. After the bath, as Jack is drying himself with a towel, he notices little pieces of his skin coming off. Steppa comes into the bathroom to fetch his slippers, and when he sees Jack, he offers to help him peel his first sunburn.

The next morning, Jack cuts his ponytail off in the kitchen using Grandma's scissors. When she sees what he's done, she offers to help him tidy the haircut up, and makes him a bracelet using the special hairs from his first-ever haircut. Jack checks his muscles and is relieved to find he still has his "strong."

Jack has been at Grandma and Steppa's house for a whole week—that makes it two weeks he's been "in the world." Jack feels like time is passing more slowly without Ma around. As the days go by, he runs errands with Grandma and sees the library, the post office, a car wash, a coffee shop, and the building where Paul works. As Jack experiences more of the world, he notices that "persons are nearly always stressed and have no time." In Room, Jack thinks, he and Ma had endless time. Jack has also noticed that adults "mostly don't seem to like" kids—even their own. Jack starts interacting more with other children his age that he meets while out and about, and as he grows more socially confident, Grandma has to teach him about space and personal boundaries.

One day, Steppa announces that a delivery has arrived for Jack. He cuts open a huge box and begins removing its contents—it is stuff from inside Room. Jack is delighted to see many of the objects, even though Grandma and Steppa think most of them—including grimy old Rug—should be thrown out. Jack is also reunited with his jeep, remote, and even Meltedy Spoon. He is happy and content as he plays with his old things.

One afternoon, Grandma and Steppa take Jack out for a surprise. They drive a long way, and when they arrive at their destination, they ask Jack if he can guess where they are—but he can't. They are at the seaside, a place Jack has never been. As Grandma and Steppa take Jack down to the water he feels scared of the ocean, but after they talk to him a little bit about his surroundings, he begins to feel more at ease.

Jack talks to Ma on the phone and tells her about all the things he, Grandma, and Steppa have been doing, and all the things he's learning. Jack asks Ma if she can come home tonight, but Ma says the doctors at the clinic are still helping her get better and figuring out what she needs. Jack replies that what Ma needs is him.

Grandma, Jack, and Steppa are enjoying more of these small, intimate family moments and spending more time doing things together. Grandma and Steppa are willing to indulge Jack's peculiar needs and desires in order to spend more time with him and make him feel at home.



Though Jack was afraid cutting his hair would make him lose his strong, the act is actually one of immense strength and confidence—and a sign he's moving on and growing up.



As Donoghue shows Jack experiencing more and more of the world each day, she peppers the narrative with his peculiar and singular observations about the world. Though Jack is naïve and sheltered in many ways, he's wise about more existential topics and perceptive about social and emotional cues on a deep level.



Even though Jack is growing up quickly and making enormous emotional, social, and physical strides, there's a part of him that remains profoundly attached to Room and the life he and Ma had there.



Again, Donoghue shows Jack continuing to have brand-new experiences and step out of his shell more—even as he struggles to let go of the parts of him that are still attached to Room.



This passage speaks to the symbiotic relationship Ma and Jack have always had. Jack has needed Ma to survive—but he knows that on a very real level, Ma needs him just as much as he needs her.



After dinner one night, Jack watches **TV** and is surprised to see a group of men sitting at a big table talking about him, Ma, and Room. The men are discussing Jack as a symbol of “the sensory overload of modernity.” Grandma quickly comes in and turns the TV off, then puts Jack to bed by reading him *The Runaway Bunny*. The book unsettles Jack, who begins wondering what the story would be like “if it was the mother bunny that ran away and hid.”

Grandma takes Jack to the mall one afternoon to buy him a soccer ball, but after he gets on the wrong escalator, Jack finds himself separated from her. As Jack wanders around a store, a sales associate asks him where his mother is— Jack replies “She’s in the Clinic because she tried to go to Heaven early. [...] I’m a bonsai.” Jack goes on to explain that he used to be locked up, but is now a “rap star.” The sales associate recognizes Jack from **TV**, and gathers her coworkers around to gawk at Jack. Suddenly, Grandma rushes into the store and yanks Jack out by the hand.

In the car, Grandma chastises Jack for running away, and warns him that he could get snatched by a stranger. Jack asks if Old Nick is coming back for him. Grandma replies that while Old Nick is in jail, there are still people like him out in the world. Jack asks to go back to the mall for the soccer ball, but Grandma refuses. Back at the house, Jack is so angry that he packs his things in his Dora bag and heads for the front door, shouting that he’s going back to the clinic. Grandma tries to stop Jack, but he yells at her. Steppa picks Jack up and drags him back up the stairs, refusing to drop him even as Jack hits and kicks. Upstairs, Steppa sits on the edge of Jack’s blow-up mattress until Jack calms down.

One afternoon, Jack is painting at the kitchen table when he looks up to see Ma at the window. He is so excited that he knocks his paints over. Ma comes into the house and hugs Jack, marveling at how different he looks with his hair cut. Jack gives Ma the bracelet strung with his hair. Ma asks Jack if he’s ready to leave, but Grandma insists they stay for supper. After dinner, Ma starts hurrying Jack to pack again—she tells him they have their own apartment to go to now. Grandma seems uncertain about the idea, but Ma assures her that it is an independent living facility with round-the-clock counselors. Grandma, wringing her hands, tells Ma she’s “never lived away from home before.” Steppa lets out a huge laugh.

Jack was once excited about seeing himself on TV—now, though, hearing other people discuss his life gives him anxiety that bleeds into to other arenas of his life and his psyche.



After Jack gets lost in the mall, he accidentally spills the beans about who he is when someone tries to help him. The way Jack thinks and talks about himself is made clear in this passage—and it is evident that his new self-conception is heavily influenced by the way he’s heard himself discussed in the media and the press.



Even though Jack is learning a lot about the world around him, he still has trouble mediating and controlling his own emotions. Luckily, he has people who love him around him at all times. Even though Grandma and Steppa struggle at times, this passage makes it clear that they are doing their best to meet Jack halfway and accept his feelings no matter how challenging they may be.



Ma is fiercely determined to push ahead as quickly as possible and regain some of her independence. The irony of Grandma’s assertion that Ma has never lived away from home both negates Ma’s experiences over the last seven years—and hits home regarding an undeniable truth about the strange, difficult, piecemeal way she’s had to learn to be an adult.



Grandma drives Ma and Jack to the Independent Living Residential Facility and helps them to bring their things inside. The doorman smiles at them as they enter the building, and Jack asks if the man is going to “lock [them] in.” Ma assures Jack that his job is to keep them safe. Jack feels nervous again, though, when Ma has to put a special code into the elevator to get them up to their apartment.

Grandma helps Ma and Jack unpack some groceries, but seems afraid to leave them alone. Ma, though, insists that she and Jack are going to be fine on their own. After Grandma leaves, Ma and Jack get ready for sleep and climb into bed. Jack pulls Ma’s t-shirt up to **breastfeed**, but Ma tells him that she has no more milk for him. Jack kisses Ma’s breasts “bye-bye,” and the two of them fall asleep.

The next morning, as Ma and Jack finish unpacking their things, Jack gets worried when he can’t find **Bad Tooth**. He asks Ma what will happen if he’s eaten something that’s “not food.” Ma assures him he’ll be fine. Jack and Ma spend the day setting up the apartment, and Ma suggests they have separate rooms. Everyone, Ma says, “should have a room of their own.” Jack is nervous about the idea of having his own space—and about the idea that Ma wants room away from him—but he agrees to give the idea a try just for the day.

As Jack is filling his room with his own things, he insists on keeping Rug on the floor. Ma doesn’t want Rug in the house, but Jack is adamant about keeping “her.” Ma says that Jack can keep Rug if he agrees to leave it rolled up in the wardrobe where she can’t see it. She leaves Jack’s room. Jack follows her into the kitchen and, in a fit of rage, breaks a vase. He tells Ma that he doesn’t want to be her “little bunny” anymore before hiding away in the wardrobe in his room for “hours and hours.”

Jack comes out of his wardrobe after he hears the doorbell, followed by voices in the living room. Dr. Clay and Noreen have come for a visit, and they have brought with them some take-out and a computer. While Noreen plays on the computer with Jack, Dr. Clay and Ma have a therapy session and discuss the “secondary trauma” of Ma and Jack’s newfound celebrity. Jack overhears Dr. Clay suggest a new surname, perhaps, for Jack to make the transition to school easier. Jack doesn’t think he’ll “ever be ready” to go to school.

There are certain environmental triggers that make Jack worry they are going to be back in a situation like Room—even in spite of how badly he has, on occasion, longed to return there.



Ma’s ability to breastfeed has come to an end. It is time for Jack to grow up—and for her and Jack both to explore some measure of independence from one another as they embark on a new chapter in their lives.



Jack has had a steady amount of anxiety about Ma’s desire to have some independence from him since their arrival at the Cumberland Clinic. Now, as they move into a home that is entirely their own, Jack continues to worry that he and Ma will never be as close as they were back in Room.



Ma and Jack have been divided on their feelings about leaving Room ever since the night of their “Great Escape.” Now, as they are alone for the first time again since Room, all their feelings come to a head. They feel isolated from one another for the first time in their lives and struggle to cope with the new differences between them.



Even though Ma and Jack are on their own now, they still have a lot of baggage to work through—luckily, they have a strong support system willing to help them navigate their feelings about the past (and the future) every step of the way.



That night, Jack tells Ma that he has lost her **Bad Tooth**. Ma tells him that things get lost all the time, and that Jack will be fine without the “rotten” old thing—“end of story.” Jack wonders if Bad Tooth will stay hiding inside of him forever. That night, Ma and Jack go to bed together in Ma’s room after deciding their separate rooms are just for daytime—but neither of them can sleep very well.

The next day, as Ma and Jack prepare to go on an outing, Jack apologizes for throwing the vase. He tells Ma that she can ask for another “for Sundaytreat,” before remembering that Sundaytreat doesn’t exist anymore. Ma assures Jack that he will never have to see Old Nick again—though she’ll have to, just once, at his trial. Ma and Jack walk around town window-shopping and taking in the sights. They eat ice cream, play, and talk about the future. By the end of the outing, Jack is exhausted and wonders if “people in the world [are] tired all the time.”

As the weeks go by, Ma and Jack spend time at their own apartment as well as visiting Grandma and Steppa at their house. Paul comes to visit Ma and Jack, and brings Jack a new soccer ball to play with. Jack and Ma do new things all the time, and decide to “try everything one time so [they] know what [they] like.” They go to museums, parks, and concerts, and Jack learns how to ride a bike. They visit churches and attend plays, and make lists of all the new things they do—as well as lists of things they hope to try one day once they’re both “braver,” such as “Driving a car,” “Inventing something,” and “Having jobs.” One night, in bed, Jack asks Ma if she ever wishes that they didn’t escape from Room. After a long pause, Ma says she never wishes for that.

The day before May Day, Ma is telling Jack about the parade they’re going to attend. Jack asks if it will be May Day in Room, too. Ma says she supposes it will be. Jack asks if they can go back to Room, just to visit. Ma gets frustrated and says she doesn’t want to go. She asks if Jack likes Outside more than Room, and he says he does—“mostly.” Jack promises to hold Ma’s hand if they go back to Room. Ma says she still doesn’t want to, but Jack replies that he is “choosing for both of [them.]” Ma takes the phone into her room and closes the door.

Jack’s anxiety over losing Bad Tooth shows that there’s a part of him that’s not ready to move on from the past—even though Ma is borderline gleeful to hear that he’s lost the object which reminds her of so much pain and suffering.



Ma and Jack’s new life is defined by moments of extreme sadness and anxiety interspersed with stretches of joy and relief. Their emotions are a series of highs and lows—but in spite of the roller coaster ride they’re on, at least they are in it together.



Even as Jack gleefully describes all the new things he and Ma are trying, all the deep emotional and social connections they’re making, and all the dreams they’re having for the future, he can’t stop wishing that they were back in Room. When he admits this fact to Ma, her response comes after a very long pause. Donoghue might be suggesting that Ma is so disturbed by Jack’s desire that she doesn’t know how to respond—or she could be saying that perhaps there’s a part of Ma that secretly thinks the exact same thing as her son.



Even though Ma and Jack are moving on with their lives, experiencing the world together, and figuring out a way forward, there is a part of Jack that needs to see Room one more time—and, as much as she hates to admit it, Ma probably has a part of her deep inside that wants the same thing.



The next day, Officer Oh shows up at the door. Jack and Ma ride with her in her police car a long way until Officer Oh announces they've arrived. Ma unbuckles her seatbelt and tells Jack that she wants to get their visit over with—she is never coming back again. Jack and Ma approach the door of Old Nick's house and find yellow caution tape strung all over. A male police officer lets Ma and Jack into the house and they walk through to the backyard. Officer Oh points out the fifteen-foot hedge surrounding the yard.

There is a hole in the ground, and when Ma sees it, she stops and says she doesn't know if she can go forward. Jack asks if the hole is where Ma's first baby was buried, and Ma says it was—she asked the police to dig her remains up so that Ma could move them somewhere better. Jack suggests buying her in Grandma's garden, but Ma cries and shakes her head. Ma points out a gray shed in the corner of the yard and tells Jack that it's Room. Jack doesn't believe her and goes closer to investigate. When Ma doesn't follow him, he turns around and sees that she is vomiting onto the ground. Officer Oh asks her if she wants to go back inside, but Ma steadies herself and follows Jack into Room.

Inside, Jack thinks Room looks all wrong—it is smaller than he remembers. Jack whispers to Ma that he doesn't think they're in the right place, but Ma assures him that they are. Jack asks if Room has "got shrunk," and Ma answers that it was always this size. After looking around and touching a few things, Jack concludes that while this "really was Room one time," it isn't anymore. Ma says she needs to leave, and Jack asks her if he can say good-night to Room in the day. Ma tells Jack he could say "good-bye." Jack wanders around Room, bidding good-bye to everything left inside of it. Ma quietly says good-bye, too. As they leave Room, Jack looks back one last time, thinking that Room is like a crater—"a hole where something happened."

Ma is clearly unhappy about going back to Room—but just as she chose her and Jack's "Great Escape" for both of them, Ma recognizes that Jack must sometimes be allowed to be the one to do the choosing.



Returning to Room is intensely difficult for Ma—traumatic, even. She goes along, however, because she knows that Jack has unresolved emotions about the place and wants to help him move on. Ma is putting her child's needs before her own and doing what she knows will ultimately help both of them most in the long term.



Jack's poetic characterization of Room as "a hole where something happened" along with his surprise at how Room seems to have "got shrunk" shows that he has started to grow up and move on. He is prepared to leave Room behind, and recognizes on some level the ways in which holding onto his emotional attachment to Room (and all that "happened" there) no longer serves him.





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