

The Simple Gift



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF STEVEN HERRICK

Steven Herrick was born on New Year's Eve of 1958, the youngest of his parents' seven children. He dropped out of high school after his sophomore year and spent the next three years working a series of jobs and dreaming of a professional soccer career. When that failed to materialize, he completed his high school equivalent and went to the University of Queensland where he studied poetry. After college, he began performing poems at pubs and nightclubs in Sydney. His artistic output includes travel books, novels, poetry collections, and verse novels. He also spends time traveling to schools around Australia as a speaker where he talks to kids about books, life, and soccer. He lives with his family in the mountains outside of Sydney, Australia, where he focuses on writing and playing soccer on local all-age teams.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Set in the late 1990s, *The Simple Gift* explores a time on the cusp of the technological changes that characterize the contemporary world. Caitlin has a personal computer and a cell phone, but the novel portrays both as notable possessions and markers of her family's wealth. In the fictionalized town of Bendarat, the book also explores how technological change affected local economies. When Billy arrives, he sees signs of economic stress, like every shop advertising sales as if they are desperate for money. Later, Old Bill explains that the town once served as a major shipping hub for goods traveling across the country by train. Two major changes upended the economy: the increased use of semitrailers to move goods faster and more nimbly than trains—a shift that coincided with heavy government investment in upgrading outback roads in the 1990s and beyond—and increasing automation. The economy of Bendarat in the book, then, faces the same challenges of many other industries in the early decades of the 21st century, including the growing use of machines and automated processes to accomplish jobs that used to be done manually.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

With its two teenaged protagonists, both of whom are working to figure out how they fit into the world around them, *The Simple Gift* can be considered a coming-of-age novel. It has particularly notable resonances with J.D. Salinger's 1951 classic of the genre, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Like Holden Caulfield, Billy Lockett has experienced deep trauma in his young life. Both run away in part to avoid this trauma. And while both teenage boys initially believe that they are entirely

self-sufficient, both come to realize how much they need the love and support of others. Billy also reads two specific books in *The Simple Gift*, putting this novel in conversation with each. One of the books Billy reads is William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Published in 1954 and deeply influenced by Golding's pessimistic ideas about good and evil, this novel follows a group of boys stranded on a deserted island without adults and imagines the social breakdown that ensues without authority figures. In contrast, Billy escapes a life of brutality and violence in the home of his alcoholic, physically and emotionally abusive father and finds peace, order, and meaning in life outside of the social organizations of biological family and school. Billy also reads John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which follows the Joad family as they try to escape the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma for the promise of work in California. Billy tells Caitlin that the book portrays the honor of poverty, an honor he feels he shares thanks to living nearly penniless on the fringes of society. Additionally, *The Grapes of Wrath* thematically explores the fates of the people who get left behind in society either because of social and technological change (like the railroad workers who, in *The Simple Gift*, lost their jobs due to economic shifts in Bendarat) or personal trauma and circumstance.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Simple Gift
- **When Written:** Late 1990s
- **Where Written:** Australia
- **When Published:** 2000
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Verse Novel
- **Setting:** A small town in Victoria, Australia in 1998
- **Climax:** Old Bill gives Billy a chance to stay in his house and convinces the local welfare officer to leave the young runaway alone.
- **Point of View:** First Person (alternating between the views of the three main characters)

EXTRA CREDIT

The Esoteric Herrick. In the 1980s, shortly after graduating from college, Steven Herrick began performing his poetry in pubs and nightclubs around Sydney. A recording studio liked his work so much that they helped Herrick record two spoken-word albums, *The Esoteric Herrick* and *The Herrick Manifesto*, which gained some local popularity on alternative music stations.

Notable Transportation. In his youth, Steven Herrick did some hitchhiking and rail-hopping of his own, just like Billy Lucket in *The Simple Gift*. In fact, Herrick based the episode where Billy hides in a boat strapped to a rail car and nearly freezes to death on his personal experience riding in such a boat.



PLOT SUMMARY

At just 16 years old, Billy Lockett loads his backpack with some clothes and food and writes a goodbye note to his alcoholic, abusive dad before running away. He jumps a freight train, hiding in a boat strapped to one of its cars. Ernie, the conductor, discovers him during the long, cold night and treats him compassionately, offering him a warm place to rest and **food** in the guard's car. In the morning, Billy disembarks in Bendarat. He spends his first day at the local library, reading under the watchful but kind eye of chief librarian Irene Thompson. That night, he establishes camp in an abandoned freight train car near the train station.

The next day, Billy visits the local McDonald's at dinnertime, where he quietly helps himself to uneaten fries and other scraps left behind by other patrons. His actions draw the attention of Caitlin, a local teenager who works there. Caitlin comes from a wealthy but emotionally cold family. She feels as out of place in her world as Billy seems to be in his. She chooses not to report him to her manager, and the two become friends.

Billy wakes up early one morning to the sound of shattering glass. He stumbles outside where he meets Old Bill. Old Bill has lived in the train yard—or, as he calls it, the “Bendarat Hilton”—for four years, between bouts of drunkenness. Over months of shared meals, Old Bill and Billy grow close. Eventually, Billy learns Old Bill's tragic story: five years earlier, his twelve-year-old daughter Jessie fell out of a tree to her death. Within a year, his wife also died in a drunk driving accident brought on by her grief. Old Bill quit his job as a lawyer, abandoned his **house**, and moved to the train yard. He drinks to dull his grief, but he also clings to the memory of his family.

Eventually, Caitlin and Billy become romantically involved, and Caitlin meets Old Bill. Billy fears that he will have to leave his adopted home, Old Bill, and Caitlin after a police officer suspects that he's an underage runaway. But Old Bill invites Billy to live in his house then convinces the welfare officer to leave Billy alone. Caitlin and Billy prepare to live in Old Bill's home while Billy figures out if he wants to go back to school or find a job, and Old Bill leaves to travel the country, visiting places he never got to take Jessie.

Billy Lockett – Billy Lockett is a 16-year-old Australian boy who runs away from his abusive and alcoholic dad. After he arrives in Bendarat, he falls in love with Caitlin Holmes and becomes a surrogate son to Old Bill. Billy is streetwise—as demonstrated by his ability to fend for himself on the road and living on the margins of society in his train car. He's also intelligent—although he frequently skips classes before dropping out of high school altogether, he reads voraciously, and he thinks deeply about the books he encounters. The neglect and physical and emotional abuse Billy experienced from his father did not destroy Billy's kind and sensitive soul. He's quick to understand that Old Bill, slowly dying of a broken heart over the tragic loss of his family, needs companionship. And he provides it, befriending Old Bill over shared **breakfasts** and encouraging him to stop drinking and to slowly begin to deal with his past. Billy accepts and loves Old Bill unconditionally, despite Old Bill's alcoholism, battered appearance, and impoverished existence. This is one of the ways in which Billy shows his maturity, despite his youth. Furthermore, Billy has a mature, philosophical understanding of value. In contrast to Caitlin's family, which measures itself by material possessions, Billy knows that true value in life lies beyond material possessions. He finds value in the beauty of nature, personal freedom, and the joys of friendship.

Caitlin Holmes – Caitlin Holmes is a 17-year-old girl living in Bendarat where she attends a private high school and works at the local McDonald's. It is there that she meets Billy Lockett, with whom she develops a friendship that later turns into a romance. Though her wealthy parents make sure she has more material things than anyone could need, they fail to give her the love and acceptance she craves. Thus, although she initially responded to Old Bill's poverty and desperation with repulsion, Caitlin ultimately finds herself more comfortable with Billy and Old Bill than with her family or her friends Kate and Petra. She repeatedly demonstrates a desire to push herself outside her comfort zone, first by befriending Billy instead of turning him in, and then by inviting Old Bill and Billy to **dinner** at her **house**. Although she comes from wealth, like Billy she understands that love, friendship, and the beauty of nature mean so much more than fancy electronics and nice computers. At the end of the novel, she prepares to introduce her parents to Billy and begins creating her future on her own terms rather than giving in to her parents' dreams for her.

Old Bill – Old Bill is a middle-aged man who lives in a train car on the outskirts of the Bendarat train station. He used to be a successful lawyer with a family, a dog, and a **house** in the nice part of town. However, he chose to abandon his home and live a wandering lifestyle after a pair of tragedies: first, his daughter Jessie fell out of a tree to her death, then his wife died in a car accident a year later. At the beginning of the novel, Old Bill embodies desperation and loss; his traumas have driven him to the margins of society and to excessive drinking. But he finds



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

redemption in the friendship he develops over shared **breakfasts** with Billy. Eventually, Billy becomes a surrogate son to Old Bill, and Old Bill eventually offers his empty house to the teenager as a place to stay while he figures out his next steps in life. Old Bill also finds redemption in the figure of Caitlin, who learns to see beyond his circumstances and recognize his humanity despite the disarray of his life when she meets him. Bolstered by his relationship with the teenagers, Old Bill finds the strength to quit drinking. By the end of the novel, he has begun to lay the ghosts of his family to rest.

Jessie – Jessie is Old Bill’s daughter. When she was 10 years old, she fell out of a tree to her death. This tragedy upended Old Bill’s life and led him to where the beginning of the novel finds him: living on the margins of society and wasting his life on bouts of drinking. Through Old Bill’s memories of his daughter, the reader sees who Old Bill was before his tragedies—a loving, if somewhat distant, father.

Ernie – Ernie is the conductor of the train that Billy Lucket jumps when he runs away from home. Ernie treats Billy with kindness and compassion rather than calling the authorities on him. In this way, he—like Irene Thompson—contrasts with Billy’s abusive father and offers a pointed reminder that the truly valuable things in life are relationships with others.

Irene Thompson – Irene Thompson is the chief librarian in Bendarat. When unhoused teenager Billy Lucket begins to spend his afternoons reading books in the library instead of school, she treats him with kindness and compassion. Like Ernie, she shows how people can support and care for each other. Instead of turning him in, she supports his reading habit by talking with him about the books. And, later, she encourages Billy to consider going back to school with government assistance.

Kate – Kate is a friend of Caitlin Holmes and Petra. Caitlin talks with Petra and Kate about her growing relationship with Billy rather than her parents because she has a deeper connection with her friends than her family. At one point, Kate admits describes her underwhelming first experience with sex. Her romantic life thus contrasts with Caitlin and Billy’s, helping to emphasize the importance of building strong relationships.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dad – Billy Lucket’s dad is an abusive alcoholic whose terrible behavior eventually drives Billy to run away from home. Dad contrasts with Old Bill, who becomes an alternate father figure to Billy.

Petra – Petra is a friend of Caitlin Holmes and Kate. Caitlin talks with Petra and Kate about her growing relationship with Billy rather than her parents because she has a deeper connection with her friends than her family.



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.



RICHES AND POVERTY

When teenager Billy Lucket leaves his abusive, alcoholic Dad, he has only \$50, a few changes of clothes, and a handful of apples to his name. Being poor and unhoused aren’t easy: without money, Billy gets out of town by jumping on a freight train on which he nearly freezes and he survives on stolen table scraps from McDonald’s. But Old Bill and even the town of Bendarat—now only a ghost of its former self due to economic changes—show how easy it is to slide between wealth and poverty. Caitlin’s experience demonstrates that being wealthy doesn’t necessarily make a person happy, either. Her parents can afford a big **house** and more clothes and makeup than Caitlin knows what to do with. But they can’t give her the things she really wants: love and acceptance. And while Old Bill loved his wife and child deeply, he realizes too late that the pursuit of wealth through his job as a lawyer kept him away from them during the brief time the family had to be together. For him, being rich in time stands at direct odds with accumulating monetary wealth. Thus, while always acknowledging how precariously Billy lives (and thus not glamorizing poverty or becoming unhoused), *The Simple Gift* clearly argues that money cannot provide the things that are truly valuable in life: freedom, companionship, and love.

Billy values his freedom more than money. And his simple lifestyle allows him to take advantage of many free things, from the river where he washes his clothes, bathes, and finds solace in nature to the public library where he can leave Bendarat and his life behind just by immersing himself in a book. He eats fruit plucked from the trees of the local orchards for breakfast. Having money means having to make more choices—including bad ones like Old Bill drinking his wages away—and facing more stress and anxiety. And not having money doesn’t prevent Billy from making friends, including Ernie the train conductor, Irene Thompson the librarian, and Caitlin. Every time Caitlin visits Billy in his tidy but small train car, she (and the book) directly contrast the growing richness of their emotional intimacy with Billy’s impoverished circumstances. It doesn’t matter to Caitlin that Billy is poor because he is smart, kind, and he loves her. In the end, these qualities have far greater value than a big house, fancy belongings, or money in the bank.



REDEMPTION

In *The Simple Gift*, runaway teenager Billy meets Old Bill at the “Bendarat Hilton,” the abandoned freight train cars where each secretly lives. Billy gained freedom by leaving his abusive, alcoholic Dad in search of life on his own terms. In contrast, Old Bill fell into the life of an unemployed, unhoused alcoholic after the accidental death of his daughter, Jessie, who fell out of a tree, and his wife, who died in a drunk driving accident a year later. When Billy meets him, Old Bill vacillates between holding onto the ghosts of his family and drinking heavily to blunt the full pain of his loss. Bereft of a sense of purpose and direction in his life, Old Bill begins to rediscover these after his accidental meeting with Billy. And as he stops drinking and starts to forgive himself for the past, he discovers redemption and a renewed sense of purpose.

In exploring the growing friendship between Billy and Old Bill (and to a lesser extent, between Caitlin and Old Bill), the book shows how the love and acceptance in relationships can lead to redemption. Billy is around the same age that Jessie would have been if she had lived, and he quickly becomes a surrogate son to Old Bill, who wants to share his knowledge of living on the margins of society with the youngster. Likewise, Billy comes to treat Old Bill like the loving father-figure he never had. Even Caitlin participates in Old Bill’s character growth when she acknowledges his humanity by inviting him to dinner at her house along with Billy. There, Old Bill finds relief from his ghosts and for a few brief hours finds himself reminded of how pleasant it is to spend time with friends. His desire to repay Caitlin’s and Billy’s simple but priceless gift of normalcy leads to the enormous gift he later gives Billy in the form of his empty **house** as a place to stay. As long as he was able to keep himself isolated, Old Bill remained stuck in his grief and trauma. But when he allows himself to grow close to Billy, he begins to think of others besides himself and his ghosts. In becoming interested in Billy’s future, he finds a purpose in his own life and begins to move on from the tragedies that marked him.



LOVE AND FAMILY

None of *The Simple Gift*’s trio of main characters and narrators has a functional family at the beginning of the book. Billy never mentions his mother, and his Dad is a physically abusive alcoholic; Old Bill’s daughter Jessie and wife both died tragically; and although Caitlin lives with both her parents, she finds her relationship with them distant and unfulfilling. Yet by the end of the book, their lives have become entwined. Old Bill can leave town to quiet his ghosts knowing that Billy and Caitlin look after his **house**; the house gives Billy a place to live without having to return to his Dad; and Caitlin finds love and acceptance in Billy’s arms. Thus, while illustrating the importance of friendship for a person’s wellbeing, the book also shows various

ways in which a person can create their chosen family. Billy and Old Bill adopt each other in the places of father and son; the fact that they share a name makes this feel even more natural. Old Bill takes “the kid” under his wing, and Billy renews the sense of purpose Old Bill lost when his daughter died. Likewise, a shared sense of rootlessness and desperation draws Caitlin and Billy quickly into a friendship and romance. Neither has found love and acceptance in their families of origin, but they offer these to each other unconditionally—despite their differences. Most importantly, their desire to be kind and good people unites them: Billy unselfconsciously takes care of Old Bill from their first meeting, and while Caitlin is initially repelled by the unkempt, unhoused old man, she pushes herself to see and treat him as a human being. When the three of them sit on the floor in her house eating dinner, they fill an empty brick shell with love and companionship. It’s this moment that cements their relationships for the rest of the book—the gift of Caitlin’s and Billy’s companionship directly foreshadows and instigates Old Bill’s gift of the house to them—and shows how important and powerful it can be to forge a family on one’s own terms.



RULES AND FREEDOM

Billy Lucket’s life has taught him to be self-reliant and suspicious. He distrusts living by the rules, because they didn’t protect him from his alcoholic Dad. Caitlin lives unhappily by her parents’ stifling rules. Old Bill followed the rules when his daughter Jessie was alive, but working overtime kept him from his family, a loss he feels with acuity after his wife and daughter both tragically die. Subsequently, all three exempt themselves from the rules: Billy by running away, Old Bill by becoming an alcoholic, Caitlin by getting a protest job at McDonald’s. But their freedom doesn’t come at the price of morality; all three continue to operate according to their internal moral compasses. Old Bill still takes care of the yard around his old house, while Billy keeps his train car scrupulously clean. Likewise, when her parents leave for the weekend, Caitlin hosts a small dinner for Billy and Old Bill, not a raging party with all her friends. In *The Simple Gift*, freedom means self-determination and the ability to live life on one’s own terms. And the book shows how this self-determination provides the space necessary for each character to heal from his or her respective traumas and trials enough to face the future. With Billy and Old Bill, Caitlin finds the acceptance and love she longs for. After four years living down and out in the freight yard, Old Bill recovers enough to go visit places he never got to take his daughter. Free from the threat of being returned to his father, Billy seriously considers going back to school. Early in the book, Billy expresses distrust for those who break the rules and those who make rules for others. He decides to avoid the rules entirely, and by honoring his own self-determination in this way, he finds his right place in the

world.

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SYMBOLS

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



HOUSES

In *The Simple Gift*, houses represent the possibility of stability and family. As such, they are complicated symbols, because a house alone doesn't guarantee stability or love. Billy Luekett runs away from his childhood home to escape his alcoholic and abusive dad, and Old Bill abandons his house in an attempt to escape the ghosts of his wife and daughter Jessie, who both died tragically. And the opulence and size of Caitlin's home contrasts markedly with the lack of emotional intimacy she finds in her family. Still, although Billy loves his temporary home in Carriage 1864, an abandoned train car, he knows it is only temporary. And eating a **meal** together in Caitlin's home solidifies the new family-like group of Billy, Caitlin, and Old Bill. Thus, when Old Bill offers his house to Billy and Caitlin—at least temporarily, while Billy figures out his next steps—this gift rehabilitates the idea of a happy home, providing the stability that Billy has never had in his young life. And, with Caitlin and Billy caring for the house as if it were their own, Old Bill knows that his home has the benefit of a new loving family to replace the one that he lost there.



FOOD

In *The Simple Gift*, food symbolizes the healing, transformative potential of human connection. Food is the glue that binds together the relationships in *The Simple Gift*. It's also a way that people express kindness and a shared sense of humanity. Thus, Ernie gives runaway Billy Luekett temporary shelter and food on his train ride out of town. Later, searching for free food at McDonald's leads Billy to meet Caitlin Holmes. Their budding romance develops over the coffee and apple pies Caitlin brings to Billy's train car at the end of her shifts and picnics by the river. Likewise, Billy initiates and grows his friendship with Old Bill by bringing him breakfast each day. And Billy, Caitlin, and Old Bill find their fates bound together when Caitlin invites Old Bill and Billy to her **house** for dinner. There, Billy and Caitlin treat Old Bill like a human being, and their compassion sets him on a path toward recovering from the traumas that have shaped his life.

Chapter 1: Champagne Billy Quotes

☺☺ I love this place.
I love the flow of cold clear water
over the rocks
and the wattles on the bank
and the lizards sunbaking,
heads up, listening,
and the birds,
hundreds of them,
silver-eyes and currawongs,
kookaburras laughing
at us kids swinging on the rope
and dropping into the bracing flow.
I spent half my school days here
reading books I'd stolen
from Megalong Bookshop
with old Tom Whitton
thinking I'm his best customer
buying one book
with three others shoved up my jumper.
I failed every Year 10 subject
except English.
I can read.
I can dream.
I know about the world.
I learnt all I need to know
in books on the banks
of Westfield Creek,
my favourite classroom.

Related Characters: Billy Luekett (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *The Simple Gift*, Billy Luekett prepares to run away from the home he shares with his abusive, alcoholic father. Before he goes, he leaves farewell notes for his dad and his teachers, then he visits Westfield Creek, which he describes in this passage. Billy loves his creek “classroom” in part because he appreciates the beauty and abundance of nature. All the creatures in and around the creek live in peace and harmony with one another, in marked contrast to Billy's traumatic home life.

This passage also demonstrates Billy's hunger for knowledge and his determination to forge his own path in





QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of Queensland Press edition of *The Simple Gift*

life. When the adults in Billy's life—namely his parents and his teachers—fail to protect him or give him the encouragement he needs to thrive, he finds his own way to fulfill his needs. Sometimes, his choices verge on criminality, such as skipping school and shoplifting. But they also constitute the desperate cry for help of a teenager who is capable of so much more than his current life allows. Billy doesn't skip school because he isn't interested in learning; instead, he finds the books that teach him what he wants to know and give him hope for a better future, and he spends his time cultivating an understanding of the world rooted in what's valuable to him.

☞ 'Hey kid,
get outta there.
You'll freeze to death.
That'll teach you
to hitch a ride with National Rail.
No free rides with this government, son.
Just kidding.
I hate the bloody government.
Get your bag
and come back to the guard's van.
There's a heater that works,
and some coffee.[']

Related Characters: Ernie (speaker), Billy Lucket

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

To run away from home, Billy jumps into a speedboat tied to an empty carriage on a westbound freight train. The boat leaves him exposed to the wind and the elements, and he nearly freezes to death overnight. Fortunately, while the train waits at a crossing, the engineer, Ernie, discovers the teenager huddled in the bow of the boat. Notably, this is the only poem in the book voiced by someone other than the three main characters, indicating Ernie's importance in Billy's life. While Ernie literally saves Billy from the dangers of exposure, even more importantly, he also offers Billy kindness and compassion, sending him back to a warm, enclosed car for the rest of the trip to Bendarat.



Thus far, Billy's life has taught him to distrust adults, since many of them seem to abuse or neglect him. But Ernie

reminds him that good, trustworthy adults do exist. In so doing, Ernie helps restore Billy's faith in humanity. He does this, in part, by offering Billy food. Throughout *The Simple Gift*, food serves as an important symbol of the power of kindness, friendship, and intimacy. Food binds people together, and by offering food to Billy, Ernie both shows his own kind spirit and forges a bond with the otherwise isolated teenager. By allowing Billy to stay on the train, in part because he recognizes the inhumanity of the government which denies help to the vulnerable, Ernie places himself alongside Billy in the camp of rule-defiers.

Chapter 2: Bendarat Quotes

☞ [...] I settle down
with a book about these kids
stranded on a deserted island
and some try to live right
but the others go feral
and it's a good book
and I'm there, on the island
gorging on tropical fruit,
trying to decide
whose side I'm on.
And then it hits me.
I'm on neither.
I'd go off alone,
because you can't trust
those who want to break the rules
and you certainly can't trust
those who make the rules,
so you do the only thing possible,
you avoid the rules.
That's me,
on the deserted island
of a soft lounge
in Bendarat Library.

Related Characters: Billy Lucket (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 23-24

Explanation and Analysis



On his first day in Bendarat, Billy visits the public library and reads William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies* from cover to cover. In this passage, Billy describes the book's plot in broad strokes. The book concerns a group of schoolboys stranded on a deserted island without adults. Some of the

boys try to impose the rules of civilization, and the other boys revert to a brutish, natural state of violence and terrorism. While the book contrasts civilization and wildness, Billy's reading finds another lesson: neither the rule-makers nor the rule-breakers can be trusted, since neither group ultimately protects the stranded boys. And Billy's experience backs this up: his father's violence qualifies as rule-breaking, since parents are generally expected to care for their children, not abuse them. But even the rule-makers in Billy's life—represented most clearly by his clearly despised teachers—did anything to help Billy escape this violence.

In running away, Billy takes control of his own life and places himself in the third camp, that of rule-defiers. This passage also give readers further insight into comments Billy made earlier about how powerful a force reading has been in his life, giving him both knowledge about the world and an escape from the occasional brutality of his existence. Despite the fact that, as a runaway, he doesn't have a place to spend the night or even much food to eat, he feels rich sitting in the library and reading the book, imagining the abundance of tropical fruit on the island. This passage thus contributes to the book's argument that a person can't buy the things with real value in life—especially, in this case, freedom—with money.

●● I finished the book
nodded goodbye to Irene
and walked out
into the late afternoon cloud
and a slight drizzle.
No sleeping in the park tonight.
Two options:
a church
or a railway station.
Churches are too spooky and cold.
I walk to the station.
Men in suits, like tired penguins,
wait for the bus
and throw furtive glances
at the woman on the seat
reading a magazine.
She ignores them.

Related Characters: Billy Lockett (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 28



Explanation and Analysis

After leaving the Bendarat Public Library, Billy quickly realizes that he will need to find shelter from the elements if he's going to survive. The cold, spooky church seems to represent the rule-makers that Billy distrusts, suggesting an emotional as well as a physical reason for discounting that option. The train station seems safer because it's a place of flux and movement—no one truly belongs there. Although his life and housing situation are in flux, Billy won't stand out too much. After arriving at the train station, Billy observes the people around him with his characteristic attentiveness. He sees the stress and fatigue of people living the normal life that society expects: men tired from working long days to earn money returning home in rumpled suits, people patiently waiting to be ferried from place to place on crowded busses. Billy's observation validates his choice to try living outside of society's normal rules and expectations, since it doesn't seem like following the rules makes these commuters happy. Billy also notices a pervasive sense of isolation at the train station. Despite the commuters' common traits, no one in the crowd connects with anyone else in any meaningful way.

Chapter 3: Caitlin Quotes

●● I don't need to work at McDonald's.
Dad would rather I didn't.
He buys me anything I want.
But Mum and I have a deal.
Whatever I earn, she doubles
and banks for me,
for university in two years.
Dad says why bother.
Dad is too rich for his own good.
It was his idea I go to
Bendarat Grammar School
instead of Bendarat High School
where all my old friends went.
[...]
And I can't wait for university
so I can leave home
and that's why I work at McDonald's
and mop floors.

Related Characters: Caitlin Holmes (speaker), Billy Lockett, Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

On his second night in Bendarat, Billy meets Caitlin Holmes at the McDonald's where she works (and where Billy has gone to take leftover fries for a free meal). Just after that meeting, Caitlin reflects on the emotional emptiness of her home life and her desire to create her own path in life apart from her family. This passage conveys some of her musings. It demonstrates some of the important similarities between Caitlin and Billy while also contributing to *The Simple Gift's* exploration of which things in life do and don't have real value.

Both Billy and Caitlin think deeply about life, and both long for freedom and self-determination. Moreover, both have realized that possessions cannot make a person happy. As a runaway, Billy Lockett has next to nothing in terms of worldly goods or shelter; he has \$50 to his name, and he sleeps in an abandoned freight train car. In contrast, Caitlin has security and privilege to spare—her wealthy parents buy her everything she needs and more. Yet, material security doesn't make her happy; instead, she seems almost as desperate to leave her home as Billy was to escape his. The only difference is that Caitlin's parents, although aloof, aren't abusive, unlike Billy's dad. The growing relationship between Billy and Caitlin will confirm their belief that material possessions matter less than a person's character and have little value compared to loving relationships.

●● And yes I've been out with boys
'on dates'

but mostly with Petra and Kate
and a whole gang together,
not alone.

And I've done some things,
you know,

at parties with boys,
just mild stuff really.

So I'm normal,
a normal seventeen year old.

I think about boys
but only in a general way
like not a boy I know

or anything
but just some good-looking guy
and me

and what we'd do
if we had the chance.

Pure fantasy really.

Nothing wrong with that,
but nothing real about it either.

Related Characters: Caitlin Holmes (speaker), Billy Lockett, Kate, Petra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 44-45

Explanation and Analysis

When Billy and Caitlin meet in a Bendarat McDonald's, Billy has taken control of his life by running away from home and his abusive father. In contrast, while Caitlin yearns for independence and self-determination, her sheltered and privileged experience has protected and prevented her from taking control of her life. In turn, this keeps her from experiencing the intimacy, love, and acceptance she craves. In this passage, she reflects on the kind of general, diffuse experience she's had compared to the specific and life-changing experiences she longs for. She describes a generic fantasy life, which serves to keep her emotionally uninvolved with the boys she meets at parties and with whom she does "mild" stuff—implying activities that, while sexually responsible, also keep her from cultivating a true sense of intimacy with other people.



Likewise, Caitlin's relationships with Kate and Petra seem shallow because they are founded on generic experiences like flirting and going to parties rather than being rooted in true knowledge of each other. Later in the book, for example, Kate will shock her friends with the revelation that she's already had sex—the fact that she keeps her

experience (and her disappointment with it) to herself for so long suggests a lack of true trust and intimacy among the girlfriends. Importantly, her encounter with Billy starts Caitlin musing on the quality of her platonic and potentially romantic relationships, foreshadowing the friendship and romance that the pair will develop over the course of the novel.

Chapter 4: The Hobo Hour Quotes

●● His grey beard was stained with smoke,
his hair long and swept back,
his face lined but
when you looked closer
he wasn't that old,
forty-five, maybe fifty.
He got up to go to bed
to sleep off his sorrow
or so he said.
As he left he turned
and said,
'Welcome to the Bendarat Hilton,
I've been here since March 2nd, 1994.
May your stay be as long,
if you wish it.'
Then he stumbled off,
an old man
before his time,
sleeping in a carriage,
and I shivered
as the sun came up.

Related Characters: Billy Lockett (speaker), Old Bill

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 50-51

Explanation and Analysis

Not long after he arrives in Bendarat, Billy awakes one night to hear Old Bill, another unhoused man living in the freight yard's abandoned train cars, stumbling around in the dark. This passage introduces readers to Old Bill through Billy's eyes. Old Bill and Billy share not just a living situation but also a name, which immediately foreshadows the adoptive father-son relationship they will develop over the course of the novel. In part, Billy's kindness and compassion underwrites this relationship; he looks carefully at Old Bill, and instead of seeing a generic bum or unhoused alcoholic, he sees a man, tragically and mysteriously old before his

time.

By calling the freight yard the "Bendarat Hilton," Old Bill implies his intention to keep his stay temporary, but the fact that (as readers later learn) he's been there for several years contradicts this. At this point in *The Simple Gift*, Old Bill drifts aimlessly through his life, having lost his sense of purpose in the aftermath of his family's deaths. His losses have washed him up in the freight yard. In contrast, Billy finds himself there as a direct result of taking control of his life. By contrasting the two Bills—one old and hopeless, one young and hopeful—this poem suggests that everyone can choose to take control over their destiny. Old Bill hasn't yet, but as long as a person is still alive, they have the opportunity to seize control of their lives and assert their freedom.

●● I slept badly.
I dreamt of myself
as an old man
in a pub, at the bar,
watching the races on TV
with my smokes and my plans
for winning \$5 on the grey horse
running second last.
All night
I could hear Old Bill
snoring, coughing,
swearing in his sleep.
He made more noise
than the wind
whistling through the freight yard.
I lay in bed
listening
afraid to fall asleep
and dream again
of myself
getting old
long before my time.

Related Characters: Billy Lockett (speaker), Old Bill, Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Billy left home to escape the violence he suffered at the hands of his dad and what felt like a dead-end existence in a small, rural town. In doing so, he seized control of his own

life and committed himself to creating his own path. Yet, because Billy didn't have anywhere else to go, his decision also landed him in a precarious spot, squatting in an abandoned train car and living on the fringes of society. While he could ignore the instability of his situation for a while on his own, Old Bill's arrival makes it impossible to continue to do so. The fact that he coughs, snores, and swears in his sleep drives this point home, demonstrating how it's impossible for Billy to ignore or forget his presence.

Billy's dreams warn him that unless he figures out how to eventually leave the freight yard, he could end up as lonely and desperate as Old Bill. This warning—that Billy needs to continue to shape his own life rather than allow circumstances to dictate it for him—becomes an important gift from Old Bill to Billy even before they begin to develop their mutually beneficial friendship. Because they share a name and similar circumstances, Billy worries about turning into an Old Bill someday. But their similarities have other, more beneficial consequences, too: later in the book, both characters will do what they can to help and save the other. And in lifting each other up, they save and redeem themselves, too.

●● I guess I shouldn't be surprised
by anything anymore.

The kid must be fifteen,
or sixteen at the most,
and here he is,
living in the Bendarat Hilton
with a bag of clothes
and some smokes
to give away
to a bum like me.
And when he gave me
those smokes
I almost cried,
a kid like that
with nothing
giving stuff away.
But I took them
and I sat in my carriage
smoking
and trying to place
the past five years
and my memory
flickered and grew dim
like the cigarette
and I stopped remembering [...]

Related Characters: Old Bill (speaker), Billy Lucket, Jessie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis



Old Bill is as surprised to find Billy in the Bendarat freight yard as Billy is to find Old Bill. When he first enters Billy's life, Old Bill has completely lost his sense of purpose, still reeling from the tragedies that he hints at in this poem (readers will later learn that five years earlier, his daughter and wife both died within the span of a year). Old Bill is living a precarious, impoverished life, squatting in the abandoned train cars and spending what little money he has on drinking to drown his sorrows.

Yet, Billy immediately sees through the ways that suffering has ravaged Old Bill's mind and body and turned him into a "bum." Instead, Billy recognizes Old Bill's humanity. To try to cheer the old man up after he accidentally spilled his birthday beer on the ground, Billy offers him some cigarettes. Old Bill's reaction to Billy's gift of cigarettes implies that it's rare for other people to treat him with kindness or generosity, and this small moment becomes the beginning of Old Bill's redemptive arc. After five years, a "kid" has come along who can help Old Bill regain his sense of humanity and purpose. This passage also hints at how difficult it will be for Old Bill to overcome the trauma of his past; coming too close to remembering his family makes him instinctively want to forget.

Chapter 5: Work Quotes

☝ I stuffed the notes
into my jacket pocket
and walked into town.
I thought of what to do
with all this money—
a big meal at a restaurant,
some clothes,
a new sleeping bag,
a radio for the long nights,
and then I realized
how Old Bill felt—
with nothing
you're rich.
You've got no decisions,
no choice,
and no worry.
Here I am walking
in the sunshine of another day
buying the world
and worrying over choices
I didn't have to make a week ago.
I wanted to spend the money
quickly
so I could go back to nothing,
go back to being rich
and penniless again.

Related Characters: Billy Lucket (speaker), Caitlin Holmes, Old Bill

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis


Old Bill and Billy end up working for a week at the local cannery, each earning more than \$400 for their labor. While Old Bill plans to spend all his money on alcohol as fast as he can, Billy ruminates on the decision for much longer in this passage. Billy realizes that money cannot determine how someone uses it: he can waste it on luxuries like a nice restaurant meal (or Old Bill can waste it on alcohol) just as easily as either one could spend it on necessities like clothing or a warm sleeping bag for the winter. In this way, although money can provide security and access to important material resources, Billy sees that it has no value in and of itself.


Indeed, having too much money can dangerously tempt a person into collecting things that he or she doesn't

need—and that won't make them happy. Readers have already seen Caitlin explore a version of this argument; her parents can buy her everything she needs and wants, but her possessions don't make her happy. Billy—and in a larger sense, the book generally—claim that true value lies in intangible things like friendship, freedom, and love rather than possessions. The money becomes, then, both a blessing and a curse, and Billy longs to return to a state of equilibrium where he isn't overwhelmed by the choices his newfound wealth affords him.

☝ Because when I was
twelve years old
and my dad chased me
out of the house
with a strap,
I'd hidden in the neighbor's
chook shed, waiting for night
when I could climb
through my bedroom window
and sleep,
hoping Dad wouldn't wake angry.
After an hour,
our neighbor came out
and placed a bowl of soup
and some bread
on a tin
outside the chook shed door.
She left me dinner
and walked away.
I ate my fill
and waited till late.
A few weeks later
that neighbor moved away
and I never thanked her,
and that's why I help Old Bill,
for no reason
other than he needs it.

Related Characters: Billy Lucket (speaker), Caitlin Holmes, Old Bill, Dad, Ernie

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 85-86



Explanation and Analysis


As days and weeks go by, Billy finds his life ever more entwined with Old Bill's. Sometimes, when he finds the older man collapsed in a drunken stupor outside the train cars, he helps him get into shelter. In this passage, Billy explores the reasons he helps Old Bill. Some are recent—like repaying the kindness of Ernie when he ran away—and some are much older. Billy's memory gives readers some insight into just how terrifying his abusive father could be. Young Billy would prefer to go hungry than to face his dad's wrath.

The neighbor's kind actions also give Billy a template for his own relationship to Old Bill. She saw and understood Billy's vulnerability, then offered him food to help out. Food in *The Simple Gift* symbolizes the importance of nourishing relationships. Her gift parallels the sandwiches Ernie feeds Billy on the train and the breakfasts Billy in turn shares with Old Bill. It also foreshadows the picnics and dinners over which Billy and Caitlin build their relationship later in the book. The very idea of Billy helping others in honor of those who have helped him suggests redemption. In the past, others helped him through dark times; now he finds purpose in doing the same for Old Bill.

●● It's simple, really.
I have more clothes
than I'll ever wear.
I have a TV and a CD player
in my room
which has its own bathroom
which is always a mess
full of make-up and lip gloss
and moisturizer and special soaps.
I have a large desk with a computer
and next month,
when I turn eighteen,
my own bloody car.
And I'm not a spoilt brat OK,
but I am spoilt,
spoilt to boredom,
and I'm smart enough
to realise that none of this
means anything
except my parents are rich
and think I want this stuff
or need this stuff
and I know what I really need
and it's not in my bedroom.
And it's not able to be bought
in any damn store.

Related Characters: Caitlin Holmes (speaker), Billy Lucket

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter of *The Simple Gift*, Billy and Old Bill have found temporary work at the cannery and each made some money. Many poems in the chapter thus consider the true nature of wealth and value. In this poem Caitlin looks around her bedroom. She's already visited Billy's abandoned train car and knows how little it holds. In contrast, she has more things than she can imagine what to do with. And, as she reveals, these things have next to no value to her. She suspects her parents buy her things both to show off their wealth and to try to make her happy. But what she really wants—love, acceptance, and companionship—doesn't come from a store. By focusing on material goods instead of far more important relationships, Caitlin's parents misappraise the value of the things—and people—in their lives. While Caitlin frets about the mountains of stuff in her room, Old Bill drinks away his wages in town. Money hasn't brought him happiness or security either; only developing meaningful relationships with Billy (and to a lesser extent, Caitlin) can help him out of his situation. Likewise, Caitlin understands that relationships are the only way to find meaning in her life.

●● But look at me.
Kids fall out of trees
all the time.
They sprain their ankle,
or get the wind knocked out of them,
but my Jessie,
my sweet lovely Jessie,
fell
and I fell with her
and I've been falling
ever since.
And this pub,
this beer, these clothes,
this is where I landed.

Related Characters: Old Bill (speaker), Jessie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 97-98

Explanation and Analysis

In town, Old Bill sits at a dive bar and drinks through his wages from the cannery as fast as possible. As he becomes drunk, he reflects on the events that caused him to fall into alcoholism, poverty, and hopelessness—the tragic death of his daughter Jessie and the subsequent death of his wife.

The circumstances of Jessie's death offer a pointed reminder that unexpected and tragic events can happen in anyone's life, no matter how closely they try to follow the rules or how privileged and happy their existence has been. So many other outcomes to the accident were possible, yet Jessie died.


Importantly, this poem provides the first example of Old Bill truly grappling with his past. At other moments when memory has threatened to overwhelm him, he has run away and tried to quiet his thoughts with drinking and distraction. Yet, redemption requires Old Bill to take ownership of his life rather than continuing to live at the mercy of circumstance and his past tragedies. Only by confronting the painful facts and accounting for how they have affected his life subsequently can he regain the power to make choices about how he will live going forward and find his purpose once more.

Chapter 6: Friends Quotes

☝ He gives me advice
on how to live cheap,
and how to jump trains
late at night,
and how to find out
which trains are going where,
and which trains have friendly guards.
He encourages me to travel,
to leave here
and ride the freights.
He makes it seem so special,
so romantic,
and I ask him
why he doesn't do it,
you know,
if it's so special,
and he tells me
about his Jessie
and his wife
and the house he visits
when too much drink
has made him forget
because without his ghosts
he's afraid he'll have nothing to live for.
And at that moment I know
I am listening to
the saddest man in the world.

Related Characters: Billy Luekett (speaker), Caitlin Holmes, Old Bill, Jessie, Dad

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 104-105

Explanation and Analysis

As Billy and Old Bill become closer, Old Bill shares more information about his life and its tragedies with Billy. Although the traumas of their pasts differ, the fact that both Old Bill and Billy have suffered brings them closer together. Hand in hand with this growing intimacy, Old Bill begins to treat Billy in a fatherly way, giving the teenager advice about riding the rails. But this advice points toward an essential, important difference between the two at this point in the novel: Billy could theoretically leave town, continuing to make his own way in life as he did when he ran away. In contrast, Old Bill's ghosts—his memories of his wife and daughter—tie him to Bendarat. Although he's taking steps


toward redemption by taking Billy under his wing, Old Bill still can't allow himself to fully face and move beyond his own traumas. Only as Billy starts to fill some of the empty space left behind by Old Bill's family will Old Bill begin to experience some relief.

This passage also reminds readers of the double-edged symbolism of houses in the book. In general, a house represents safety, security, and the possibility for meaningful relationships. However, exceptions exist: Caitlin's home provides shelter but no emotional intimacy with her family; the home Billy shared with his dad was a site of danger for him. And, although Old Bill's house used to provide safety and belonging, with the loss of his family it becomes a malignant prison, tying him so tightly to the town and to the past that he can't gain enough distance from his tragedies to rediscover a sense of purpose or meaning in life.

●● I've got the weekend off.
 No McDonald's,
 no schoolwork,
 and thankfully no parents—
 Mum has a conference interstate,
 with Dad going along
 'for the golf'.
 It only took three days
 of arguing to convince
 Mum and Dad that, at seventeen,
 I can be trusted on my own,
 even though I can't.
 And what is trust, anyway?
 No, I won't burn the house down.
 No, I won't drink all the wine.
 No, I won't have a huge drug party.
 But
 yes, I will invite Billy over
 and yes, I will enjoy myself
 in this house,
 this big, ugly, five-bedroom
 million dollar brick box
 that we live in.

Related Characters: Caitlin Holmes (speaker), Billy Lucket

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis



Caitlin, gifted with a sudden, unexpected window of opportunity, makes plans to develop her relationship with Billy even further by spending the weekend with him while her parents travel. This passage, in Caitlin's voice, touches on all the main themes of the book. Caitlin reminds readers that her home lacks love and companionship despite her parents' material wealth—she notes the size and ugliness of the house, implying a sharp contrast with Billy's warm, welcoming, cozy train car. Since she and Billy already share an increasingly intimate relationship, she wants to fill the house with truly valuable things like love and companionship. This will help make the house a place of intimacy and safety, redeeming her experience there, at least in part.

Finally, the dinner at her home shows Caitlin for the first time taking the active role in creating her own destiny that she wants to have. Earlier in the novel, she wished for college as an escape from her stifling life and her parents. Now, she finds ways to start creating the life she wants in the moment, without waiting for some relief to come to her from outside. Having decided to throw herself into her relationship with Billy, she works to create the circumstances necessary to do so.

Chapter 7: The Simple Gift Quotes

I sat through Maths
 and Science
 and English
 trying to understand why I ran
 and all I can think
 is that seeing Billy
 with that old hobo
 made me think of Billy
 as a hobo
 and I was ashamed,
 ashamed of myself
 for thinking that.
 Hadn't I known how Billy lived?
 Hadn't I seen him
 stealing food,
 and hadn't I seen where he sleeps?
 By lunchtime
 I decided
 I was a complete fool
 and maybe I was more spoilt
 than I thought,
 maybe there was something
 of my parents in me,
 whether I liked it or not.
 And I walked through the school gates,
 and I walked slowly and deliberately
 back to the railway tracks,
 determined not to run away again.

Related Characters: Caitlin Holmes (speaker), Billy Lockett, Old Bill

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 116-117



Explanation and Analysis

Early one morning, before school, Caitlin visits the freight yard to invite Billy to dinner at her house. When Billy isn't in his train carriage, she goes around back, where she witnesses Billy bringing Old Bill his breakfast. The sight of the two together alarms her, and she spends most of the rest of the day (covered in this passage) trying to understand why she ran away. In part, seeing Billy, the young "hobo" with Old Bill (the old "hobo") forces her to confront the precarity of Billy's life. Only age (and sobriety) separates him from Old Bill. And although Caitlin sees and values Billy's character and humanity, she doesn't know Old Bill yet. In addition, Caitlin's musings yet again emphasize the distinction between riches and value. The disgust with

which she appraises Old Bill forces her to see how her privileged existence has made her harsh and judgmental. Though a person's character matters much more than how much (or little) money they have, Caitlin reactively judges Old Bill through negative stereotypes about "hobos." Yet this passage also promises that people can grow and overcome their weaknesses and biases when it shows readers how Caitlin confronts her own biases and chooses to force herself to overcome them. At this point in *The Simple Gift*, although she hasn't yet claimed the same amount of autonomy as Billy, her decision to revisit the yard without running away a second time shows her taking control of her behavior, actively choosing to be the person she wants to be and the life she wants to live.

I almost laughed
 when they arrived.
 The two neatest hobos
 I'd ever seen,
 with their hair combed,
 slicked back,
 and their faces rubbed shiny clean.
 Old Bill called me 'Miss'
 and offered me a box of chocolates
 he'd brought
 and he looked around the house
 as though he were visiting the moon.
 Billy saw the wine,
 already open,
 and he poured three glasses
 passed them around
 and as we raised our glasses
 Billy said,
 'To the richest house in Bendarat'
 and we laughed.
 My cooking even smelt good [...]

Related Characters: Caitlin Holmes (speaker), Billy Lockett, Old Bill, Jessie

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

To make up for running away at her first sight of Old Bill, Caitlin forces herself to recognize his humanity by inviting



him to dinner at her house along with Billy. As soon as they arrive the pair confirm the incorrectness of whatever negative assumptions she may have had about “hobos.” They have made themselves presentable, and Old Bill’s hostess gift shows that he understands the rules of polite society—as does Billy’s toast. Earlier, Caitlin regretted allowing her negative stereotypes to cloud her vision of Old Bill. Now, she looks at him with unclouded eyes and sees the man behind the lifestyle. The fact that he brings a box of chocolates—food—and that Caitlin shares her homecooked meal with him leans of the idea of food as relational glue to show how Old Bill and Caitlin form their own friendship.


This passage also illustrates the tension between the idea of what a house should represent—safety, security, and love—and how few people experience their homes in this way. Caitlin finds her parents distant; Billy’s dad was abusive; Old Bill abandoned his house after his daughter and wife died leaving it empty but for him. The house is “rich,” according to Billy’s toast, because of its size and market value. But, until the trio share their meal, it remains poor in terms of what matters: companionship, safety, and freedom.

●● Billy returned an hour later
and came to my carriage.

We sat opposite, talking.
I heard the bottles clink
in his bag
and said,
'Come on, then,
let's have them.'
But when he brought out
the ginger beer
I swore
and laughed
and swore some more,
but really
you've got to admire the kid.
So I drank the stuff
and we sat up late
talking
and I slept
better than I had in a long time
so maybe
just maybe
I'll work on less beer
for a while.
For the kid's sake.

Related Characters: Old Bill (speaker), Billy Lucket, Caitlin Holmes

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 136-137



Explanation and Analysis

The meal Caitlin, Billy, and Old Bill share at Caitlin’s house serves to formalize and deepen the ties of companionship and love between all the members of the trio. This passage explores a moment that happens a little while later, after Caitlin has visited Billy at the freight yard and Billy has walked her home. Billy returns to the freight yard with ginger beers to share with Old Bill. The fact that they’ve switched from sharing beers—which they do occasionally earlier in the book—to soft drinks shows that Old Bill continues on the path toward redemption. The more Caitlin and Billy love and accept him, the more inclined he becomes to improve his life—which Old Bill acknowledges when he realizes he sleeps better after talking to Billy instead of drowning his sorrows in alcohol. But he still has a ways to go: at the moment his resolution to drink less revolves around his feelings for Billy rather than concern for himself. Billy may value Old Bill, but Old Bill hasn’t yet begun to value himself again. Still, the fact that he tries to drink less for Billy’s sake shows how important his friendship with the teenager has become. This passage thus shows how Old Bill and Billy continue to become more like father and son than friends.

Chapter 8: Closing In Quotes

☝☝ I go to the river with Billy
and we swim and wash,
or sometimes
I walk the streets
looking at the houses
and the corner shops
and the parks with trees
and fountains,
and young couples kissing,
and old men reading newspapers,
and ladies walking dogs,
and sometimes
these people nod and say hello
as though I'm one of them
and not an old drunk.
I nod back,
even talk about the weather on occasions,
and I walk back to my carriage
planning
where I'll go tomorrow,
where I'll walk in my town
where I'll go to stop
thinking about the drink.

Related Characters: Old Bill (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 140-141

Explanation and Analysis

Over time, Old Bill spends more and more time with Billy. And the more time he spends with Billy, the more he finds the strength to open his eyes and look at the world around him. This passage describes one of Old Bill's daily walks around town, during which he appreciates and notices the same kinds of things Billy does: relationships (the couples kissing), the beauty of nature (the river, the parks and trees, the weather), and his own freedom to wander where he pleases without people bothering him. Old Bill seems to be learning from Billy, who has a keen eye for observing and appreciating the world. And instead of trying to hide himself from the world around him by isolating himself and drinking, Old Bill takes small steps toward participating in society by saying hello to others and occasionally making small talk. Yet, he still draws a line between himself—"an old drunk"—and everyone else at this point. He hasn't yet found his renewed sense of purpose in the world, although he has found the determination to keep himself from drinking. And, notably, he no longer talks about his sobriety in terms of



Billy. Instead, he seems to want to stay sober so that he can continue to enjoy the world around him on his walks.


☝☝ Jessie and I stood on the verandah,
Jessie holding the bird gently.

She opened her hands
and it sat on her palms
looking at her
then it turned and flew
high into the wattle
where it perched.
Jessie waved
and the bird flew away.

I thought of Jessie
helping that bird
and how, after it left,
Jessie turned to me
and said that
when she grew up
she wanted to be a vet,
she wanted to heal animals
and to help people.

Related Characters: Old Bill (speaker), Billy Lockett, Jessie

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 151



Explanation and Analysis


This passage describes a memory that occurs to Old Bill as he stands on the verandah of his house. Billy has come to the attention of the local police and welfare officers as a potential runaway, and Old Bill wants to help his young friend out. The poem from which this passage comes immediately follows Old Bill's realization that he can help by letting Billy stay in his old house. It's a painful idea since it seems to displace his family. But as this memory shows, it's also a way to honor their legacy. He remembers how his daughter Jessie once rescued an injured parrot and nursed it back to life. The memory causes him pain, but it also reminds him of Jessie's beautiful and caring nature. Being able to remember the good times with his family, not just Jessie's tragic death, marks an important turning point for Old Bill. And, through his memory, Jessie offers her father a reason to live, a purpose in his life. She wanted to grow up to help animals and people. Fate denied her that opportunity,

but Bill can live her legacy by helping the people around him. Allowing himself to relive this happy memory also shows the progress Old Bill has made toward his own redemption and healing. As he befriends Billy and stops drinking, he must confront his past. At first this entails remembering the catastrophic loss of his daughter and wife, then Old Bill begins to talk to Billy about these traumas. Over time, as this passage shows, Old Bill gains the ability to remember happier times instead of just being stuck in the traumas that took his family from him.

☝ I wasn't always a hobo.
I worked in town.
I dressed neatly in suit and tie.
I understood the law.
I earned a lot of money
knowing stupid rules and regulations
and I'd studied for years
to make sure those rules
were enforced
when someone came to me for help.
But all that knowledge
and all that training
couldn't stop a young
beautiful child from
falling out of a tree,
or a wife from driving
a car too drunk to care.
All that knowledge
couldn't stop a man
from drinking to forget
to forget the life
with the suit and tie
in his office in town.
But today
the knowledge
that hasn't been used
in five years
could come up
with a solution
to where a sixteen-year-old boy
could live,
and what his legal rights were,
so all that knowledge
is finally worth something,
finally.

Related Characters: Old Bill (speaker), Billy Lueckett, Jessie, Dad

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 161-162

Explanation and Analysis



Having resolved to help Billy by offering his house as a place for the teenaged runaway to live temporarily, Old Bill continues to reflect on his past. In this passage, he remembers what his life was like before Jessie's accident, when he made a living practicing law. Much earlier in the book, Billy divided the world into rule-makers and rule-breakers before putting himself into a third category of people who ignore the rules entirely and make their own way in life (rule-defiers). This passage shows readers how Old Bill used to be a rule-maker and rule-follower. Not only did he learn the laws, but he did want society expected by having a good job, working hard, and staying late. But in chasing a paycheck, he now realizes that he neglected truly valuable things, like his relationships and the time he could have been spending with his wife and daughter. And, as he painfully learned, no amount of rule following can prevent bad things from happening. In applying his legal expertise to help Billy—a minor—evade detection and avoid being sent back to his abusive father, Old Bill establishes himself as a rule-defier. Technically, he helps Billy break the law. But he also helps Billy to maintain the life, freedom, and safety he fought so hard to attain. By learning to make choices based in the values of friendship and love, Old Bill redeems his formerly empty legal career and knowledge to help his friend.

Chapter 10: Old Bill Quotes

☝ I arrive at Billy's
and he's in the kitchen
scrubbing the floor.
He's already done the bathroom.
I vacuum the lounge
and the main bedroom—
it's only dust
that's gathered lonely in the corners
and on the curtains.
Billy and I work all morning.
We eat lunch under the fir trees
and look at the house.
We don't say much.
We lie on the blanket
and hold each other.
Billy has his arms around me
and his eyes turned
towards the white timber house.

Related Characters: Caitlin Holmes (speaker), Billy Luekett, Old Bill, Dad

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 188-189

Explanation and Analysis

Old Bill gets Billy off the radar of local police and welfare officers (and prevents him being sent back to his abusive dad) by allowing Billy to stay in and take care of his house while the teenager figures out his next steps. Billy shows his appreciation for this incredible gift by vowing to take care of the house in a way that shows his respect for Old Bill, and Caitlin helps him clean out the dust and cobwebs that accumulated during the years Old Bill stayed away.

In *The Simple Gift*, houses represent the possibility of safety, stability, and family; for this reason it's fitting that Caitlin and Billy—whose budding romance becomes one focal point of the novel—work together to make the house habitable. They clean out the cobwebs and dust—metaphorically cleansing the house of the trauma and pain it held for Old Bill—while keeping it intact as a memorial to Old Bill and his family. When they've finished their work they share a picnic outside, reminding readers of the intensity of their connection, since food symbolizes relationships in this novel. Importantly, they sit on a blanket outside to eat in a way that recalls their first date. Just as that picnic months

ago at the Bendarat River inaugurated a new, more intense phase of their relationship as they transitioned from friends to lovers, so too this later picnic suggests to readers that their preparations for housekeeping together mark the beginning of an even deeper phase of intimacy.

☝ Caitlin and I lay
in the huge bed
with the moon
a perfect light
and the trees
long fingers scratching
at the window.
I reached under the bed
and found what I'd hidden
earlier in the night.
I lifted the small case
and I opened the lid
to show Caitlin the
beautiful green emerald ring
I'd bought months earlier
because of the colour of her eyes
because I'd worked all week
in the cannery with my hands stained red
and because
I couldn't spend all that money
on food,
or beer,
or myself.

Related Characters: Billy Luekett (speaker), Caitlin Holmes, Old Bill

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Billy, Caitlin, and Old Bill give each other several presents over the course of *The Simple Gift* including food, chocolates and advice. The exchange of all these tokens depends on the “simple gift” itself: the recognition of each other's humanity. Caitlin's parents fill her room with material things that mean nothing to her because of their failure to love and accept her for who she is instead of who they want or expect her to be. Billy's ring can't compete in terms of monetary value with things like a computer or car. But it has more value than all Caitlin's other things combined because it

symbolizes the mutual, intimate love and respect that Caitlin and Billy share.



Importantly, Billy hangs on to the ring until after he's received the gift of a place to stay from Old Bill. While the house has more inherent value, the gift of the house—where Billy and Caitlin lie in bed together—and the gift of the ring become parallel in this passage because both symbolize the deep and abiding relationships that the book's three main characters share. *The Simple Gift* repeatedly claims that true value lies in love and acceptance, not in material goods, and the ring focuses readers' attention on this claim. Billy bought it with money he earned working at the cannery. Other uses he considered—including buying things he desperately needed—seemed unimportant and silly to him. Only by allowing him to show Caitlin how much she means to him does his money take on real value.


Chapter 11: The Hobo Sky Quotes

☝☝ Last night,
unable to sleep
[...]

I got dressed, closed the door gently,
and walked the streets,
and as the Town Hall clock
toll'd midnight
I stood on the railway platform
looking across at the carriages,
my home for these past months.
I knew Old Bill was asleep
like most of Bendarat.
I made a silent vow
to visit my carriage,
once a week,
to sit and read, alone, on the leather seat,
with the sounds and smells
of the hobo life close by,
to never forget this home
by the railroad tracks.

Related Characters: Billy Luekett (speaker), Old Bill, Dad

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 196


Explanation and Analysis

While Billy appreciates the incredible gift Old Bill gave to him in the form of his house, it takes some time to adjust to living in a quieter and safer place than an abandoned freight train car. In this passage, Billy wanders through the quiet streets of Bendarat at night, reflecting on his good fortune. He knows that while he sleeps in the house, Old Bill remains in the train cars. Partly, readers know, this reflects Old Bill's inability to consider reentering the home he used to share with his now-deceased family members. But it also makes Billy recognize his luck. Billy ran away from home in an effort to live life on his own terms. But his freedom hasn't always been easy or secure. His vow to visit the train car regularly indicates that he doesn't take this freedom for granted. Instead, he values it even more highly knowing what it cost him. This passage also reminds readers that Billy's choice to live outside of society's normal rules and structures—to adopt the “hobo life”—didn't mean that he abandoned morality or gave into savagery. Instead, the hobo life allowed him to escape the violence he suffered at the hands of his abusive dad and to build the kinds of mutual, intimate friendships that should characterize a family.

☝☝ Today he ate three helpings
and drank the thermos
and on his last cup
he told me of his plan
to head north, taking his time.
And he said,
'Don't worry about the house
and its ghosts,
I'm taking them with me,
they need a holiday,
and so do I.'
I didn't know what to say,
so I sat there
looking at the freight train
shunting carriages in the distance
across the tracks
where
months ago
an old man
dropped his beer
and sat down to cry.
I said to Old Bill,
'I love the house,'
and I left it at that.

Related Characters: Billy Luekett (speaker), Old Bill, Jessie

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 202-203

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of *The Simple Gift*, Billy brings breakfast to Old Bill one last time. It's the same meal they've shared countless times over the previous months, the same cereal, milk, and coffee over which they bonded when Billy was a young, inexperienced runaway and Old Bill was still an inebriated, traumatized man. When Billy met Old Bill, Old Bill existed in a state of near paralysis, unable to move beyond the tragic loss of his wife and daughter many years earlier. Without a family, he had no sense of purpose in life, and without a sense of purpose, he wasted his time and money in drinking and trying to forget his pain.

But Billy—and their friendship—made Old Bill feel valued

and restored his sense of humanity. This, in turn, has allowed him to face the pain of his past and to begin to make choices about his life going forward. *The Simple Gift* claims that freedom comes from living life on one's own terms, and Old Bill's decision to leave Bendarat and take the ghosts of his past with him for a little vacation shows readers that he has finally achieved this kind of self-determination. And with this self-determination comes the redemption Old Bill has needed since his tragic series of losses: not only has he found a purpose in taking Billy under his wing like an adoptive son, but he has also found a way to live with his ghosts that doesn't overwhelm him. In the end, Billy doesn't express love for Old Bill himself but for his house—a gift that Billy can never repay. By loving the house, Billy also expresses his appreciation for all that it represents: generosity, freedom, companionship, and safety.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1: CHAMPAGNE BILLY

Champagne. Billy empties his backpack of yesterday's lunch and his school supplies, then he goes to the kitchen and reloads it with beer, champagne, apples, and some **leftovers** from the fridge. He leaves a bottle of lemonade on the table with a note to his dad. It tells his father to drink some lemonade instead of alcohol as he celebrates his son finally leaving. Billy knows his dad will have a fit, but he will be long gone by then.

As the novel begins, Billy's relationship with his abusive dad has driven him to the point of running away. He has no safety or security at home, so he has decided to forge life on his own terms, despite potential difficulties and dangers. Readers get a glimpse of Billy's troubled home life when he replaces his father's alcohol with lemonade, which suggests Billy's dad struggles with alcoholism.



Kiss the dog. Billy sits on the veranda watching the cold rain and petting his dog, Bunkbrain. He feels bad about leaving the animal in their sad town, but he knows he can't hitchhike with a pet. He's not proud to be a 16-year-old runaway, but he's relieved to be leaving.

Billy's dog provides the only sense of love or belonging Billy seems to have at home, but an animal's friendship can't help the teenager navigate his difficult life. Billy claims that he isn't proud to be a runaway, but his actions suggest that he does feel proud of taking control of his life rather than staying and allowing his dad—and the economically depressed town they live in—to direct his future.



Longlands Road. As he walks down the street, Billy throws rocks on the roof of each “deadbeat no-hoper shithole” **house**. His neighbors have unmown lawns, broken-down cars littering their yards, and broken windows. The mailbox that Billy smashed last week still lies crumpled on the ground. Billy imagines the rocks he throws protesting at being left behind in this sad, hopeless place as he himself says goodbye forever.

As Billy walks down the street, readers see that his house isn't the only house where people are struggling. His neighbors also seem impoverished and isolated. Although it's clear that many of them saw signs of trouble in Billy's life—including his own destructive tendencies—no one in the community tried to intervene or help.



Wentworth High School. At 4:30 in the afternoon, after the students and staff have already left for the day, Billy arrives to bid his high school farewell. He walks through the howling wind and pouring rain to look in classroom windows where homework assignments are listed on the board. He uses a stolen tube of red lipstick to write a lewd farewell note to his classmates, teachers, and the principal on the windowpane.

The note on the school window—like the note to his dad and the rocks on the neighbors' houses—allows Billy to tell everyone in his community who could or should have helped him how their failure to do so has let him down. Since his family and community didn't support Billy, he has decided to forge his own path and live life on his own terms.



Westfield Creek. The one place in town Billy likes is Westfield Creek, which he visits next. The creek is cold and clear, and the water attracts sunbathing lizards and many birds. Billy spent more time at the creek—his favorite classroom—than at school. He would bring books, both purchased and shoplifted, and spend hours here, reading and learning about the world. And dreaming.

When Billy visits the creek, readers learn more about his character. Previously, he's been a hurt, angry kid. But now he shows another side of himself, one that feels deeply attuned to the beauty and peace of the natural world. And Billy's reading habit marks him as a bright, intelligent person. These suggest that he has a shot at a good future if he can escape his abusive home life.



Please. Billy wants to go west on the Great Western Highway. But after two hours of standing in the dark and the rain, no one has stopped to give him a ride. He knows he can't go home—his dad will be sober without the alcohol, and Billy would look silly slinking back after his dramatic exit—and the other options for overnight shelter (the verandah, the school) are bad. Praying “please,” he decides to spend another hour trying.

Freight Train. The rain has stopped, but so has the traffic. Across the highway, a freight train sits motionless at the crossing, waiting for something. Bound for the western coalfields, it has 50 empty coal bins and one flat carriage with a speedboat tied to it. Slowly, it dawns on Billy that the train is headed west. He races across the highway and climbs into the speedboat as the whistle blows and the train begins to move.

Cold. It doesn't take long for Billy to learn how windy, cold, and miserable a train ride can be if you're exposed. He opens his bag and puts on all his extra clothing and snuggles as far into the front of the boat as he can for protection from the elements. He and the train driver—who, unlike Billy, is warm in the cabin—are the only two souls awake through the dark night. Billy listens to the lonely train whistle and prays for the morning.

Keep Warm. The freight train has stopped at a crossing, and Billy wakes up to the voice of the train operator, Ernie. Ernie hauls Billy out of the boat, where he's likely to freeze to death overnight, and sends him back to the guard's car, which has a heater, some **sandwiches**, and a coffee maker. The boat belongs to Ernie. There's a lake near his home, and he wants to spend his weekends drinking and fishing. The next city is Bendarat. Ernie will blow the whistle three times as a warning, then stop just outside of town for Billy to jump off the train.

Men. Billy thinks that there are two types of men in the world. Some are kind and generous, like Ernie; they don't boss people around and accept people's differences. These men value the pleasures of life. They have a strong moral compass and aren't afraid to act on their beliefs. And then there are men like Billy's dad.

Billy's determination to run away speaks to the scale of abuse he must have suffered at the hands of his father. It also shows his strength of character. Billy believes that he can make a better life on his own terms—and he's willing to tolerate temporary discomfort to do so.



Billy switches tactics when his initial plan fails to get him out of town, once again demonstrating his resourcefulness and determination to forge life on his own terms. The boat makes an incongruous addition to the empty coal train, and by taking advantage of it, Billy demonstrates his ability to adapt to unexpected circumstances. It also seems to metaphorically suggest how deeply out of place Billy has been in his life up to this point while also giving him a way to escape to a better future.



The difficulty of life as a runaway quickly becomes apparent to Billy when he nearly freezes to death in the boat. In this novel, houses represent the possibility of safety and family. But Billy's abusive father ruined that sense of safety, forcing him to run away. Thus, Billy's exposure on the boat both literally and metaphorically suggests how difficult it can be to move through life unprotected and alone.



Ernie seems to be the first person in Billy's life to show him kindness and compassion. Importantly, he does so by offering Billy shelter and food, which symbolizes the binding power of love, kindness, and friendship in this novel. Like Billy, Ernie has an affinity for nature (he bought the boat to spend more time outdoors) and a commitment to living his life on his own terms.



When Billy contrasts Ernie with his own dad, it's clear what kind of man Billy wants to grow up to be—someone who's kind and generous and directed by a sound moral compass. Although running away allows him a measure of freedom (later he will express this as avoiding the rule makers and the rule followers), Billy's thoughts at this moment clearly indicate that exempting himself from the “rules” of society doesn't mean moral lawlessness.



Sport. Billy remembers kicking a soccer ball in the backyard when he was 10. He had just started playing and was eager to practice, since he already scored one goal. But he kicked the ball too hard, and it broke the bedroom window. His dad heard the windowpane crack and thundered out of the **house**, grabbed the ball, and kicked it over the fence into the bush before slapping Billy across the face. Billy fell down with a bloody nose. Before going back inside, Billy's dad forbade him from playing sports forever. Billy remembers sitting in the yard for hours, scared to go inside, watching through the window while his dad sat and read the paper as if nothing had happened.

Another crossing. In the guard car, Billy eats some **sandwiches** and drinks a cup of hot coffee with sugar. He leaves the bottle of champagne on the table with a note thanking Ernie for his kindness. He's glad to give the bottle to someone who deserves it.

Billy's memory of the soccer ball helps to clarify his comparison between Ernie and Billy's dad. Importantly, Billy's dad occupies the house—the place that's supposed to represent stability, safety, and family—like a malignant force. Billy's fear keeps him outside the house, illustrating the impossibility of finding safety or family where he comes from.



Billy accepts Ernie's kindness and leaves the champagne to reciprocate. In this novel, the main characters (including Billy) are united by their kind and caring natures. Even though Billy, as a runaway, doesn't have much to share, chooses generosity.



CHAPTER 2: BENDARAT

Bendarat. Dawn breaks, foggy and cold. Billy packs his bag, warms his hands over the guard car's heater, and waits for Ernie's signal. Billy is miles from home, miles from school, and in another state. He steps down, waves at the departing train, and walks slowly into town.

Tonight, and the night after. As Billy walks into town, he encounters cars and school busses full of children. The kids yell out the bus windows, calling Billy a bum—but he'd rather be a bum than a school kid. The town looks desperate—there's a "Sale" sign in almost every shop window. And with only fifty dollars to live on, Billy knows he is desperate, too. But he isn't worried yet. The sun is shining, and Bendarat has a beautiful library. Today, Billy will spend the day reading about people who don't need money and who have a place to sleep tonight and the night after.

At the beginning of the novel, Billy's overwhelming desire was to escape his terrible home life and downtrodden hometown. As he arrives in Bendarat, he's ready to begin life on his own terms.



The school busses that Billy passes represent the life he's abandoned with few (if any) regrets. Even the pejorative labels, like "bum," that passersby put on him don't bother Billy. He might not have a home or much money, but he would prefer to be in charge of his own life to living in a house or attending a school where the people who should care for him fail to do so. Billy finds more value in freedom than in material goods.



Lord of the lounge. Billy appreciates the library, which has soft, comfortable chairs and dozens of books to pick from. He chooses one about a bunch of kids stranded on a deserted island. Some try to live “right” while others “go feral.” Billy tries to decide which side he’d be on. But then he realizes that he would go off alone. He doesn’t trust the rule-makers or the rule-breakers.

The librarian. Irene Thompson, the chief librarian, interrupts Billy’s reading to ask if he wants to check out the book. Billy says he wants to be left alone to finish it. The library closes in 10 minutes for lunch, but Irene tells him he’s welcome to come back at 2pm to finish. She likes the book he chose and wants to make sure he can finish it. She’s nicer than the librarian in Billy’s hometown, who hated it when anyone touched the books.

Lunch. Poor and homeless, Billy still isn’t stupid. At lunch, he goes to the grocery store, where he buys a tomato, some rolls, and cheese. He’ll get a few meals out of this haul. He sits in Bendarat Gardens to eat, where he tosses a few crumbs to the pigeons and watches a young couple kissing on a picnic blanket. He wants to applaud their performance, but he doesn’t. After all, he isn’t stupid.

The Motel Bendarat. In the late afternoon, Billy finishes his book and says goodbye to Irene. He walks outside into a fine drizzle. He won’t be able to sleep in the park in this weather, so he considers his options. Churches are too cold and spooky, so he decides on the train station. At the train station, he watches tired businessmen in suits waiting for the bus. Across from the platform, past the Freight Yard, Billy finds old, abandoned freight train cars. He tries the doors until he finds one that opens. It’s warm and dry inside, and there’s a long, comfortable bench that he can sleep on. Carriage 1864, painted red and yellow, will be Billy’s Motel Bendarat.

In the library, Billy reads [Lord of the Flies](#). This book argues that, left to their own devices, most children—and by extension, most people—will turn feral, behaving more like wild beasts than civilized people. Billy’s story directly contradicts this assertion; his life as a runaway is less violent and destructive than his previous, “normal” life. This scene in the library is a key moment in the book, because Billy articulates his idea of freedom. The rule-breakers (like his dad) harmed him directly. But the rule-makers (represented by the teachers at his old school before and represented later in the novel by the police and welfare officers) equally fail to protect him. Billy doesn’t trust either group, and instead, he’ll later decide to find his own way outside of the rules.



On his own, in his new life, Billy seems to find worthwhile people easily. The kindness with which Ernie and Irene Thompson treat him suggest that he’s made the right choice in leaving his old life behind. Comparing her to his old town’s librarian continues Billy’s critique of those rule-makers who should have protected him from abuse and pain. Still, this conversation reminds Billy (and readers) of his precarious situation. He can pass the day in the shelter and comfort of the library, but he has nowhere to go when the library closes.



By using his money carefully and by focusing on how to get what he needs for cheap or for free, Billy shows that he has street smarts as well as intelligence. His desire to applaud the romantically entangled couple suggests an initial bitterness over their intimacy—Billy doesn’t seem to have had any intimate or loving relationships in his life yet.



Earlier, the stopped freight train offered Billy his chance to get out of his dead-end life; now the train cars again offer him the help he needs as he begins his new life. By naming his carriage “Motel Bendarat,” Billy declares his intent that his itinerant life as an unhoused runaway will be temporary. He has his sights on a better life, but he needs the time and the space to figure out how to make it for himself. He has a sense of purpose in his life, even if he isn’t sure where he’s going yet.



Night. Billy eats two of his rolls for dinner, washing them down with the last of the beer he took from his dad's fridge. He sleeps a deep and dreamless sleep, interrupted only occasionally by the sound of a train whistle or the sounds of workers moving cars around the Freight Yard. He misses Bunkbrain's company.

Eating out. On his second day in Bendarat, Billy finishes his rolls and cheese. So, he goes to McDonald's for **dinner**. He buys just a small lemonade, which he takes to the upstairs dining room. He reads the free newspaper while he waits. As other diners eat their fill and leave extra fries or hamburger halves on their tables, Billy helps himself to the free food.

CHAPTER 3: CAITLIN

Caitlin and mopping. Caitlin watches Billy take the **food** left behind by other McDonald's patrons. Her first impulse is to tell him to put the food back, but she stops herself. She reasons that the food was just going to be thrown away otherwise. She's mopping the floor—a job she hates—and she continues watching Billy as he helps himself to part of an abandoned apple pie. Billy notices Caitlin watching, and he stares at her, almost as if daring her to tell the manager. Instead, she smiles and confesses to him that she hates mopping. When Billy finishes eating, he walks up, reads her name off her badge, and wishes her goodnight.

Too rich. Caitlin doesn't need to work at McDonalds. Her family is wealthy. But her mom matches her paychecks and puts all the money in a savings account for college. Caitlin can't wait to go to college, but she has two years left at Bendarat Grammar School—the \$10,000-a-year private high school. Unlike her friends at the public school, she must wear a school uniform.

Billy. Billy immediately notices Caitlin's bouncy, shiny, clean hair, her clear skin, and her expensive watch. He realizes that she's rich, but he also sees intelligence in her eyes. At first, he wanted to hate her because he expected her to call the store Manager on him. But when she smiled and complained about mopping, he felt a sense of kinship with her, born of the fact that they were both doing things they didn't like but had to do.

Ernie's kindness broke the isolation of Billy's first night as a runaway. He doesn't get the same relief on his second night. His pining for his dog reminds readers that, although he's relieved to have escaped his abusive father, Billy still craves love, connection, and family.



Billy's clever plan to take abandoned food at McDonald's reminds readers how little he has in the way of worldly possessions. But his lack of resources doesn't seem to bother him—it's the price he must pay for freedom from abuse and suffering.



This poem switches speakers from Billy to Catlin, giving readers a different perspective on Billy's time at the McDonald's and introducing them to the second of the book's three main characters. Caitlin's initial inclination to turn Billy in for taking abandoned fries suggests that she is one of the "rule-followers" that Billy mistrusts. But in interrogating this impulse and choosing not to report him, she joins Billy in the camp of the rule-breakers. This suggests a similarity between the two, intimating that Billy may not be so alone.



Because her family has wealth, Caitlin experiences a financial and material security that contrasts directly with Billy's severe poverty. Yet, Caitlin's musings here suggest that she and Billy have other similarities; both find their family lives to be unfulfilling (even if Caitlin experiences her parents as distant rather than abusive). And, like runaway Billy, Caitlin can't wait to leave home and create a life on her own terms in college.



This poem returns to Billy's perspective, and readers get to see his initial reaction to Caitlin. He immediately notices signs that hint at her easy and comfortable life. But rather than allowing these to bias him against her, he also considers her behavior, which suggests that she shares some important feelings with him—a desire for freedom, a distrust of authority, and a sense of doing what's necessary to survive.



Breakfast. Billy likes Bendarat. He has a welcoming library in which to read, a McDonald's where he can collect enough **food** for his supper, and a cozy abandoned train car to sleep in. Each morning, he walks to the apple and pear orchards outside town, climbs their fences, and picks fresh fruit for his breakfast. He walks past the Bendarat Grammar School—where he thinks Caitlin must go—on his way, but he's careful to pass before school hours. He doesn't want her to see him walking past in his same old, well-worn clothes.

Billy's picking fruit from the orchards for breakfast parallels his earlier experience with Westfield Creek back in his childhood town: in both cases, the natural world allows him to experience a richness in life. This scene also offers a pointed reminder that he sees himself in his own category outside the rules; although technically he commits theft, he doesn't meaningfully harm anyone (similar to taking leftovers at McDonald's). Finally, Billy's not wanting Caitlin to see him marks the first time he feels self-conscious about his poverty and precarious station in life.



Hunger. Caitlin doesn't really like her job at McDonald's, but she admits that it has gotten more interesting since Billy showed up. After he said goodbye the first night, she went to wipe off his table and she found a note. It asked her if she knew the origin and meaning of her name, "Caitlin." It's an Irish form of Catherine and it means "pure and innocent." Reading the note made her feel pangs of hunger, but not for **food**.

Billy shows Caitlin—and readers—more evidence of his intelligent and affectionate nature by leaving her the note about her name. The note also suggests his interest in her—especially if she lives up to her name. Billy pays attention and sees Caitlin's character in a way that her parents do not; they may provide the material things she needs to survive (like food), but they don't give her the love and acceptance she really craves. It seems that Billy, despite his material poverty, has enormous emotional riches to offer her.



Manners. Billy comes back to the McDonald's on another night. There are more patrons, and the Manager comes to the upstairs dining room, so Caitlin can't chat with him. But when the Manager finally leaves, she mops over to his table to introduce herself as Caitlin Holmes. Billy shakes her hand politely and tells her his name, Billy Lucket.

Billy's behavior continues to surprise Caitlin, subtly suggesting that she harbors stereotypes about people who, like Billy, are poor and unhoused. Nevertheless, something in his character—perhaps the way he acknowledges her humanity and her existence—inescapably draws her to him.



Business. The third time Billy eats at the McDonald's, he hands Caitlin a business card when he says goodnight. She thinks he's much more polite than any other boy she knows. At first, the business card confuses her since it's for an electrical contractor named Peter Robinson. But when she turns it over, she finds Billy's card, which gives his name, his job ("Unemployed Friend") and his address in the abandoned car at the Freight Yard. She smiles at the realization that he's proud of his life, even though he clearly doesn't have a **home**.

The business card continues to humanize Billy to Caitlin by showing her that he has a sense of humor—both in general, and about his current situation as an unhoused runaway teenager. He also uses it to formalize his developing relationship with Caitlin under the heading of friendship; this represents an important step in his (and her) journey to finding acceptance and intimacy by creating a chosen family with each other. Earlier, Billy tried to assure readers—and maybe himself—that he isn't proud. But just as he can see into Caitlin's character, she can see into his. And she recognizes that he is in fact proud of his ability to survive and create a life and a set of meaningful relationships for himself on his own terms.



Caitlin. Caitlin considers herself a normal 17-year-old girl. She thinks about boys—at least generic boys, not any that she knows—and she sometimes talks with them at school. She’s aware when her friends, Kate and Petra, flirt with boys. She’s been on a few dates, but mostly in groups. She’s done “a few things” with boys at parties, “mild stuff.” There’s nothing wrong with her so-called love life, but also nothing real about it.

As *Caitlin considers her relationships with her friends and (thus far) with boys, she shows readers how deeply she longs for intimate, loving relationships with others that she hasn’t yet achieved. She isn’t yet living life or creating relationships on her own terms, so they don’t feel real to her yet.*



CHAPTER 4: THE HOBO HOUR

The hobo hour. Billy awakes to the sound of a bottle crashing. Outside, he finds an old man (Old Bill) with long grey hair staring forlornly at the bottle of beer he’s dropped on the ground. The man doesn’t notice Billy. Billy remembers the cigarettes he stole from his dad—to annoy him, not because Billy smokes. He grabs them from inside and offers them to the “old hobo.” Saying that he should really give up smoking before it kills him, the old man nevertheless takes the carton and lights a cigarette. He and Billy share the “hobo hour” while they watch the sunrise together.

This poem introduces the book’s third main character, Old Bill. In a way, Old Bill seems to reflect a potential future version of Billy—both are unhoused and living on the margins of society. Billy’s interaction with the older man also reminds readers of Billy’s innately generous and caring nature; he looks for a way to assuage Old Bill’s suffering, even with a simple gift like cigarettes. Finally, Billy identifies Old Bill as an “old hobo.” People often use the word pejoratively to describe unhoused people, the mentally ill, and migrant workers, giving it a negative charge. Still, although he is not yet as old, worn, and unkempt as Old Bill, Billy’s current circumstances also qualify him as a “hobo,” a fact he acknowledges when he sits and shares the early morning hours with his new neighbor.



Old Bill. The old man’s name is also Bill, so Billy decides to call him “Old Bill.” The beer Old Bill dropped was supposed to be in honor of his birthday, and Billy thinks he must be younger than he looks, despite his stained, grey beard, long grey hair, and wrinkled face. Old Bill welcomes Billy to the “Bendarat Hilton,” or the Freight Yard, where Old Bill has lived, off and on, since March of 1994.

When Old Bill names the freight yard the “Bendarat Hilton” he recalls Billy calling his train car “Motel Bendarat”—another similarity between the two characters that seems to foreshadow that a relationship will develop between them. And while Billy values the freedom and self-determination that his runaway life affords him, he also sees in Old Bill the toll this kind of life can take. This reminds him that he must eventually find his own purpose in life—his own redemption—to make good on his desire for freedom.



Rich town. That afternoon, Old Bill tells Billy how Bendarat used to be the railroad hub of southwest Australia. Men worked in eight hour shifts around the clock in the Freight Yard, loading western-bound trains. But as the highways improved, more and more goods crossed the country in trucks instead. Now only a few workers remain in the Freight Yard, loading fruit from the local orchards onto the trains. They know Old Bill lives there sometimes, but they don’t bother him about it, since they know what it feels like to have nowhere else to go.

When Billy walked into Bendarat, school children called him “bum,” and Billy himself has identified Old Bill as a “hobo.” Both terms are pejorative, suggesting that living on the margins of society or being unhoused are personal failures. Yet, the history of Bendarat offers Billy (and thus readers) a pointed reminder of how precarious wealth and prosperity can be.



Before my time. Billy sleeps poorly that night, both because Old Bill makes a lot of noise—snoring, coughing, and swearing in his sleep—and because Billy has nightmares about growing old and desperate before his time.

Too early. Early the next morning, Billy makes a bowl of **cereal** and milk and carries it next door to Old Bill's train car. It smells like sweaty socks and alcohol in there as Billy sticks his head in the door. Old Bill rouses from sleep just enough to tell Billy to "piss off." Billy concludes that it's too early for a "drunk" and maybe too early for everyone else, too. He leaves the cereal.

Bendarat River. In the afternoon, Billy explores the Bendarat River. He follows it downstream from a chattering, noisy waterfall to a long lazy bend, where he wades into the cold, clear water, undresses, and washes himself and his clothes. He swims in the deep water while his clothes dry on the tree branches. He returns to the "Bendarat Laundry" every other day to "wash the world away."

Old Bill. Old Bill thinks about meeting Billy. He was surprised to find such a young runaway in the Freight Yard. Billy's generosity and kindness in sharing the cigarettes surprised him, too. That almost made Old Bill cry. After saying goodnight to Billy, Old Bill sat in his train car smoking and trying to sort through his memories of the past five years. But remembering is dangerous: if he does it too much, he'll eventually end up thinking of Jessie and he won't be able to stop. He quickly flicks the cigarette butt onto the tracks and watches the flame die.

Caitlin visiting. Caitlin finishes her shift each night at ten. Normally, she goes straight home, where her dad waits up to make sure she arrives on time. But this night, she tells her parents she'll be studying with her friend Petra, who agrees to cover for Caitlin if her parents call. Caitlin has a mobile phone she can use to check in with her parents if necessary to maintain the ruse—sometimes having rich parents who buy "useless crap" like that can be useful. She changes out of her work clothes and prepares to visit Billy with two coffees and two **apple pies**. Her parents taught her it's rude to visit without bringing gifts.

Billy ran away from home to escape a life of terror and abuse. His new life grants him freedom and autonomy. And his preference for knowledge (by reading books) and relationships over wealth shows that he knows what things truly matter. Still, Old Bill offers him a pointed reminder that life on the fringes of society takes a terrible toll on a person and isn't necessarily sustainable over a lifetime.



Although he's the younger of the two, Billy immediately senses Old Bill's hopelessness and takes the older man under his wing. He shows his kind and generous nature not only in sharing from his limited resources but also in not taking Old Bill's early morning grumpiness personally. This act of sharing breakfast further deepens their friendship.



In his old town, the local creek was Billy's favorite classroom; in Bendarat, the river becomes his bathtub and his laundromat. But bathing and washing in the river isn't just about physical cleanliness; connecting with nature also allows Billy to regain his sense of equilibrium and freedom in his life. His connection with nature enriches his life despite his literal poverty and helps him to stay grounded in his life outside the normal rules of society.



This scene suggests that something tragic happened to Jessie, though it's not yet clear who Jessie is to Old Bill or what happened to her. Regardless, it seems likely that they had a meaningful relationship—and that losing her has made life bleak and meaningless for Old Bill.



Caitlin's mobile phone—in a novel set in the late 1990s—subtly reminds readers of her family's wealth. At this time, it isn't something every teenager would have had. Juxtaposing her family's literal wealth with their emotional poverty—her father doesn't trust her, and her parents don't give her the love and acceptance she craves—contributes to the book's overall argument about the value of the intangible things in life over material possessions. And just like Billy builds his relationship with Old Bill with shared meals, Caitlin brings food to share with Billy.



Billy's cave. In the Freight Yard, Caitlin politely knocks on the door of Carriage 1864. When Billy walks up behind her instead of opening the door, he startles her, and she almost drops the coffees. He invites her inside. The carriage has two long, leather-covered benches. Billy uses one as a bed and one as a shelf for books and other things he's collected. The inside of the carriage is clean and warm, thanks to a kerosene heater Billy found, and it reminds Caitlin of a child's hideaway. She thinks of it as Billy's safe little cave.

Picnic. When Billy heard Caitlin's knocking, he panicked and crawled out the back window of the carriage, hoping to elude the police or Freight Yard security, or whoever else came to bother him. But outside, he realizes that anyone out to bust him wouldn't have knocked. He creeps around behind his visitor and realizes it's Caitlin. When he says hello and startles her, he worries about making a bad impression. But Caitlin accepts his invitation to come in and doesn't show any distaste or discomfort over his living space. She makes herself at home and they share the **apple pies** and coffee, like two little kids on a picnic.

Looking. Billy tells Caitlin about leaving home, his train ride to Bendarat, and how he spends his days in the library reading books and researching the meaning of names and his family history. He's discovered an ancestor who was a Duke, and he marvels at how far his family has fallen in a few generations. He talks a lot because he's nervous while Caitlin listens attentively. She looks at him steadily, and her gaze calms Billy down. He looks back and sees the person behind the fancy gold watch and expensive-looking coat, and he like what he sees.

Happen. Caitlin tells Petra about visiting Billy. Billy's intelligence and depth of reading impress Caitlin. And then Petra asks the question on Caitlin's mind: "What now?" Caitlin looks around her at her grounds of the expensive private school while she considers. As the lunch bell sounds, she tells Petra—and herself—that she'll keep visiting until something happens. And all through her next class, she thinks about the things that could happen and the things she wants to happen with Billy.

Going nowhere. Billy sleeps well after Caitlin's visit, warm and cozy in his safe cave. He knows he will spend the next few months traveling the circuit of the library, McDonald's, the "Bendarat Laundry" at the river, and Carriage 1864. He will be a "badly dressed satellite" with Caitlin as the center of gravity anchoring his orbit.

Even in contrast to her family's large, well-appointed home, Caitlin doesn't find Billy's temporary quarters in the abandoned freight yard off-putting. Rather, she notices how Billy has made the space clean, cozy, and inviting. This yet again reminds readers of the value of freedom and creating one's own destiny (like Billy does) as well as the importance of the immaterial valuables in life, such as friendships and autonomy.



Billy's enduring trauma—and his acknowledgement of the precarity of his current living—sends him into a panic when Caitlin arrives at his door. His freedom won't be complete until he has a more settled existence, although he can't yet see how to get there. Up to this point, he's been both attracted to Caitlin and distrustful of her privilege. Yet, she continues to see and treat him as a worthy human being even after seeing his living situation.



Billy's comfort with Caitlin grows as he realizes that he can share his true thoughts and experiences with her without her judging him. The novel centers around the relationships that grow between Billy, Caitlin, and Old Bill, and this poem beautifully illustrates the foundation of these powerful bonds: acknowledging each other's humanity despite the vast differences in their personal experiences.



When Caitlin talks to her friends about Billy, neither she nor readers can escape the sharp contrast between her life of privilege and his life of poverty. Yet, despite these differences, Caitlin values Billy's character and experience. The book thus suggests that value lies not in wealth but in freedom, honesty, and companionship—things Caitlin hopes she might develop with Billy.



The title of this poem—"Going nowhere"—can sound either defeated or defiant. And Billy's thinking clearly frames his intention to stay put as defiant. He isn't staying in Bendarat for lack of options; he's staying because he thinks he might finally have found a place to build the relationships and life he's longed for.



CHAPTER 5: WORK

Sorry. Old Bill feels bad for swearing at Billy. He wants to help Billy out, so he knocks on the door of Billy's train car and tells him that if he goes to the cannery on Monday mornings during the harvest season, they will hire him on a week-by-week basis. Billy says, "great, let's go" and Old Bill finds himself walking to the cannery for work he doesn't want or need, all because he feels bad about swearing at Billy.

Work. Early on Monday morning, Billy walks to the cannery with Old Bill, where the foreman offers them work for the week. The noise and the smell of the cannery are overpowering, but Billy knows how badly he and Old Bill will need the wages. They work on the tomato line, cutting bruises and rotten bits from fruit that's about to be processed into tomato soup and ketchup. Billy keeps himself focused on the twelve dollars an hour he's making for the gross work.

That bloody kid. Old Bill regrets feeling sorry for Billy every day at 6:30 a.m. when the teen wakes him up for **breakfast** and their early morning walk to the cannery. Old Bill wants to be left alone; he doesn't need the money or companionship Billy forces on him. But he can't bring himself to tell Billy to go away. And he's drinking and smoking less—maybe Billy will turn him into some sort of health freak!

My hands. After a week at the cannery, Billy's hands are stained red from tomatoes, and he can't stomach the sight or taste of ketchup on the burgers and fries he pilfers at McDonald's. The jars of sauce made at the cannery show a farmer holding up shiny, ripe, attractive tomatoes, but Billy knows that mushy, overripe, and rotting fruit goes into the sauce. And that the other cannery workers cough.

Burning. At the end of the week, Billy and Old Bill receive their wages in cash. Billy now has more cash in his pocket than he's ever had in his life. He asks Old Bill what he plans to do with his money, and Old Bill answers that he will drink it and piss it away. Then Old Bill stands up and walks away, all that drinking money burning a hole in his pocket.

Old Bill appreciates and thus reciprocates Billy's generous gift of breakfast with advice. At this point in the book, Old Bill remains so consumed by his own inner demons that he can't see a purpose to his life. But while he can't feel that purpose internally, Billy provides it externally by dragging him along to the cannery for work.



With Billy's freedom comes the responsibility to provide for himself. He completes this disgusting and degrading work without complaint because he knows that it will add to the small amount of money he had when he ran away and will allow him to continue to live his self-directed life.



Old Bill wants to be left alone, but Billy seems to understand that Old Bill needs company and companionship instead of the isolation that feeds his misery. And the small changes Old Bill starts making seem to prove Billy correct. At this point, the gifts of attention and care flow mainly from Billy to Old Bill.



Work at the cannery marks Billy's body in the same way the abuse he suffered at the hands of his dad. And seeing what goes into bottles of ketchup confirms that just because a thing looks nice and shiny doesn't mean that it is nice and shiny, suggesting that it's more important to judge things by their insides than their appearances.



Old Bill's response points yet again to the book's claim that a person can't buy the truly valuable things in life—companionship, freedom, love, and happiness—with cash.



Rich. Billy can't decide what to do with his money—splurge on a nice **meal** at a restaurant, buy new clothes or a better sleeping bag, or get something like a radio to listen to during the lonely nights. He suddenly realizes that the money seems to be making his life harder—with all the decisions it forces on him—than it was when he had nothing. He understands why Old Bill wants to spend his money quickly, to get back to being penniless rich.

Green. Billy goes into a jewelry store, where the kind jeweler treats him with humanity and respect, treating Billy as a serious customer even though he walked in off the street looking poor, young, and smelling like the cannery. This—and the fact that he doesn't want to have to skip town—keeps Billy from shoplifting one of the rings. Instead, he buys one—a sterling silver ring with a green stone to match her eyes—for Caitlin with some of his cash.

Sleep. Sometimes, Billy finds Old Bill collapsed in a drunken stupor on the gravel outside the train car. When this happens, he tries to rouse the older man and helps him inside, where it's warmer. Old Bill usually cusses for being woken up and fussed over by a kid who hasn't got the sense to leave well enough alone.

Need. Billy helps Old Bill to repay the kindness of people, like Ernie and Irene, who have helped him. He remembers a neighbor from his childhood, too, who silently brought him a **dinner** when Billy was hiding from his dad in her chicken coop. She moved away before he could thank her. So now he helps Old Bill for the simple reason that Old Bill needs it, just like Billy once needed it.

The mop and bucket. One night at McDonald's, Caitlin mops her way over to Billy's table and boldly asks him for a date on Saturday. She tells him to pick the place and she will bring a **picnic**. She tries to feel casual about the whole thing, but it feels like a big deal to both of them.

Billy doesn't want to waste his earnings as Old Bill plans to do by drinking them away. But he doesn't want to keep them either; the cash doesn't get him the things he truly wants and needs, like love and acceptance. His reflections on choice paralysis—the idea that the more options one has, the harder it is to choose—confirm that people should look for value in intangible things rather than material possessions.



To avoid wasting the money, Billy instead invests it in a gift for Caitlin—turning his material wealth into a token that will add value to his emotional life by deepening their relationship. Already Caitlin has become incredibly important to Billy. And his decision to buy rather than steal the ring reminds readers that just because he's chosen to live outside society's rules doesn't mean that he's lost his sense of right and wrong.



Old Bill, lost in his misery and pain, continues to rebuff Billy's attempts at caring. But Billy remains undeterred no matter how cranky Old Bill gets. This shows Billy's strength of character and kindness as well. It also reinforces the value of meaningful relationships.



In this poem, Billy reflects on the reasons he's helping Old Bill, even when Old Bill seems to resist him. Others like Ernie and Irene helped Billy when he needed it, even when he was breaking the law by riding on the train. And his memory reveals an important connection between food, relationships, and generosity—when people don't know how else to help, a simple meal can go a long way.



Just as Billy makes the first moves to establish a friendship with Old Bill, Caitlin makes the first moves in establishing the relationship between herself and Billy. This shows how relationships involve mutuality and exchange.



Caitlin. Caitlin thinks about her life. She has so much stuff: a big bedroom with its own bathroom, TV set, and computer; more clothes, makeup, and skincare than she will ever use; and even the promise of a car when she turns 18. Her family has plenty of money and her parents buy her the things they think she needs or wants. But she knows that what she really needs isn't in her room and certainly can't be bought at a store.

Lunchtime. On Friday, Caitlin tells her friends Petra and Kate about her date with Billy. Petra teases her about how romantic it would be to have outdoor sex. And then Kate shocks both Caitlin and Petra by casually admitting that she has already had sex once.

Grateful. Petra and Caitlin stare at Kate in shock. After a moment, Kate tells them the story, while Caitlin looks around the schoolyard to avoid meeting her friend's eyes. Kate says that she had sex about a year ago. She expected it to be easy, clean, and special, but it wasn't. She doesn't even remember which boy she had sex with. And it was too quick, too messy, and uncomfortable. Afterward both she and the boy felt silly. And ever since, she's been too scared to try it again. The lunch bell rings, and Caitlin gratefully walks to her afternoon classes.

No hurry. On Saturday, Caitlin knocks on the door of Carriage 1864. She has a picnic basket filled with good **food**: bread, cheese, roasted chicken, fruit, and beer. Billy has washed his clothes at the laundromat for the occasion. It's a beautiful, clear, sunshiny day, and Billy takes Caitlin to his favorite bend of the Bendarat River. He leaves the ring behind, hidden in a safe spot in his train car. He's in no hurry—it's a beautiful Saturday and they have all the time in the world.

The picnic. Billy and Caitlin slowly and lazily savor everything in the picnic basket. The warm sun, beer, and good **food** lull them both into a pleasant state of languor, and they fall asleep next to each other on the picnic blanket.

Caitlin contrasts the material privilege of her life with the emotional emptiness at the heart of her relationships with her parents. The things she truly wants and needs—love and acceptance—can't be purchased. Her growing friendship with Billy, who has next to nothing in terms of wealth, proves this.



Caitlin's relationship with Billy has thus far been platonic, but her friends immediately assume that it has a sexual component. Their expectations seem to suggest a social pressure for certain kinds of intimacy (sexual) ahead of the emotional intimacy that forges truly meaningful relationships.



Kate's story of unfulfilling and uncomfortable sex places another limit on meaningful relationships. Sex doesn't make a good relationship, her experience demonstrates; instead, intimacy and mutuality make good relationships regardless of whether they're sexual or not.



Despite the expectations of Caitlin's peers, Caitlin and Billy don't rush into a sexual relationship. Without the pressure of others, they can explore and allow their relationship to develop at its own, unhurried pace. Importantly, they do this over a picnic of good food, since food brings people together in this book. And the growing richness of their relationship parallels the food Caitlin brings, which is far more delicious than Billy's usual fare of leftover fries.



Falling asleep together demonstrates the growing depth of Billy's and Caitlin's mutual trust and sense of safety. They don't need to have sex to establish an intimate relationship.



Truth and beauty. Old Bill walks into a bar, gives the bartender twenty dollars and tells her to keep serving him beers until all the money is gone. She places a tall, cold glass of foaming beer on the bar for him, and for a moment he considers its beauty. The bubbles dance up the sides of the glass, and the beer shines with a bright amber glow. He can smell the malt and barley used to craft it. But then he picks up the mug and gulps the beer down as quickly as possible, and all thoughts of truth and beauty flee from him.

Old Bill's fall. As he drinks, Old Bill remembers the tragedy that upended his life. In 1993, his daughter, Jessie, fell out of a tree. She lingered in a coma for nearly two weeks. Old Bill told her family stories that whole time, trying to get her to wake up. When the doctors suggested taking Jessie off life support, it took Old Bill and his wife four days to sign the papers. He signed with one hand while holding Jessie's hand with the other. It took her hours to die. Afterward, Old Bill went home and chopped the tree down in a rage. He wants to know why this happened to him; kids fall out of trees all the time without dying. But Jessie fell and Old Bill fell with her straight into the Freight Yard and the bar. And he feels like he's falling still.

The house. Old Bill continues to remember his life's tragedies. His wife died exactly one year after Jessie. She turned to alcohol in the wake of that tragedy. She was drunk when her car crashed into a roadside tree, and she died. After her funeral, Old Bill locked up the **house** and moved into the train yard. He couldn't stay, but he can't imagine selling his family's home and allowing other people to live there, either. So he visits occasionally to mow the lawn and remember his old life. And then he returns to the train yard and drinks until he forgets.

CHAPTER 6: FRIENDS

Comfort. Before he came to Bendarat, Billy never talked to girls. He didn't have—or want—friends in his old life. His old life involved Westfield Creek, reading books, and avoiding his dad and their unkempt, dirty **house**. In his new life, Billy keeps his home, the train car, neat and clean. He still reads prolifically, giving himself the education his high school never could. And he thinks about Caitlin, a lot. He doesn't know what she sees in him, but he hopes it's the way he sees who she really is.

This poem creates a sharp contrast between Old Bill's rumination on the beauty of the beer as something that should be savored and appreciated and his unaesthetic rush to get drunk as fast as possible. While his personal hardships still dictate his life, this small window of reflection shows the extent to which his relationship with Billy is already changing his perspective.



In this poem, Old Bill finally gives readers some insight into his past. The loss of his family (albeit under very different circumstances) creates another point of connection between his life story and Billy's—both have run away from homes that became too painful to stay within. And Old Bill's memories pointedly remind readers that life itself can limit a person's choices. Sometimes fate or life intervenes in unexpected ways. To create a meaningful life means finding purpose despite pain and tragedy.



In a way, both Old Bill and Billy are runaways who fled homes which had become places of pain and suffering. In order to find redemption, this poem suggests, Old Bill needs to move beyond the pain of Jessie's death and find a way to rehabilitate his house into a site of safety and belonging.



Billy reflects on the difference between his current life and his past. Home—now represented by his tidy, cozy train car—is coming to represent safety. Caitlin's visits and Old Bill's proximity imbue it with the flavor of loving relationships, too. Perhaps most importantly, Billy has seized control of his destiny—his education, his relationships, his life—by leaving his old home.



Old Bill and the ghosts. Over time, a friendship develops between Billy and Old Bill. Old Bill gives Billy tips on living cheap and jumping trains and encourages him to travel. Old Bill won't leave Bendarat, and Billy eventually learns the reason: he needs to stay near his **house** so that when his drinking makes him start to forget Jessie and his wife, he can visit it and remember. When Old Billy tells Billy that he doesn't know what he would live for without his ghosts, Billy thinks that he must be the saddest man in the world.

Old Bill's home life was much better than Billy's. But for him, too, his former home has come to symbolize trauma and suffering rather than intimacy and safety. His tortured relationship with his memories—which he refuses to relinquish despite the pain they cause him—mirrors this broken dynamic. Without his family to live in it, the house lacks a purpose and becomes as driftless as Old Bill's current life. It too needs redemption, somehow—and until that happens, the house (and Old Bill) will remain overwhelmingly, tragically sad.



Lucky. Billy walks Caitlin home after her shifts at McDonald's. Caitlin tells Billy all about her days at school, the drudgery of exams, the things she does with Kate and Petra. No longer does she need to confess her secrets in a diary, now that she can talk to Billy about them. When she's with Billy all her identities—rich girl, schoolgirl, McDonald's employee—dissolve and are replaced with a feeling of being tremendously lucky.

As Caitlin and Billy grow closer, they each begin to experience what a truly mutual, intimate relationship can add to life. Caitlin no longer needs to keep her secrets to herself; because Billy gives her the love and acceptance she needs, she trusts her secrets with him. Yet again, her sense of luckiness points to the value of relationships over wealth.



Dinner. Family **dinners** at Caitlin's house are always the same: her mother cooks a perfect meal and pairs it with one of her father's favorite wines. They talk about work and their dreams for Caitlin's future—her father wants her to study law or medicine, while her mother would like her daughter to become a teacher or businesswoman. To shut them up, Caitlin tells them she wants to become a housewife or a nun. When the conversation runs out, she eats in silence, thinking about Billy instead of schoolwork or careers.

As Caitlin reflects on dinners at home, readers can see the sharp distinction between her empty, cold relationship with her parents and the warmth and intimacy she shares with Billy. Material wealth pales in comparison to the richness of true emotional intimacy. And intimacy arises from acceptance: while Caitlin feels like Billy accepts her for who she is, her parents mostly focus on their dreams for her future.



The weekend off. Caitlin has the upcoming weekend off from work and her parents will be out of town. It takes her a while to convince them that she can be trusted, and she promises that she won't burn the **house** down, drink all the wine, or host a raging party. But she does plan to have Billy over and to enjoy herself in the empty, ugly, expensive house.

Caitlin's plan to have Billy over for the weekend introduces the possibility of filling an emotionally empty house with the intimacy of a truly mutual, loving relationship. In this way, Caitlin attempts to redeem or rehabilitate her house, filling it the sense of trust, safety, and love it lacks.



Hobos like us. Every morning, Billy wakes up Old Bill and they share a **breakfast** of cereal and McDonald's coffee that Billy keeps warm in a thermos overnight. Old Bill tells Billy that he was too busy to sit down and eat breakfast with his family when he worked. Now that they're gone, he notes bitterly, he has all the time in the world. But Billy just feels relieved when Old Bill eats. And sometimes, Old Bill goes with Billy to the Bendarat River to bathe and wash. And when Old Bill dives in, fully clothed, his laughter turns from bitter to sweet. And Billy thinks that there may even be hope for "hobos" like him and Old Bill.

When Billy first met Old Bill, the idea that he could end up as an old, worn out "hobo" like Old Bill scared him. But, after getting to know Old Bill and developing a friendship with him, Billy is no longer afraid of becoming a "hobo." After all, nature supplies a river for washing and relaxing in; the wastefulness of those with resources allows Billy to find enough food to eat; and the time to focus on relationships with others instead of school, work, or amassing things makes life satisfying.



The kid. Old Bill likes Billy, and he can recognize the good changes the kid makes in his life. He's saved some of the cannery money instead of drinking it all away; he wakes up earlier and eats a decent **breakfast**; he occasionally washes in the river. Old Bill thinks that Billy deserves a better life than living in a train car and taking care of an old drunk like himself.

The care and attention Billy lavishes on Old Bill starts to have an effect on Old Bill. Billy's affection reminds Old Bill that his life still matters, even though he lost his original family. Because Billy values Old Bill, Old Bill becomes more able to value himself, and he begins to act as if he has a future.



CHAPTER 7: THE SIMPLE GIFT

The shadows. Friday morning before school, Caitlin knocks quietly on the door of Billy's train car. He doesn't answer and then she hears voices from the next car. Worried that he may have been discovered and gotten into trouble, she creeps around back. In the next car, she sees Billy serving **breakfast** to an old man she doesn't recognize (Old Bill). She watches Billy help Old Bill outside into the sunshine and Old Bill thanking Billy. Then she takes off running.

This poem describes Caitlin's first sight of Old Bill. And while she's comfortable with the idea that Billy lives on the margins of society, something about Old Bill discomferts her. She witnesses a particularly intimate moment between the two as they share breakfast; throughout this book the sharing of meals often represents the closeness of a relationship.



The afternoon off. Caitlin runs all the way to school. She feels foolish for running away and she spends the morning trying to figure out why she had done it. She thinks that maybe seeing Billy with "that old hobo" made her confront the fact of how he lives—as an unhoused person—more than seeing his train car or watching him steal **food** at the McDonald's. She feels ashamed of her horror and worries that maybe she's more of a spoiled rich girl than she wants to believe. So, after school, she walks back down the tracks, determined not to run away again.

At this point in the book, Billy's relationship with the word "hobo" has changed—his pervasive sense of freedom and autonomy as well as his deepening relationship with Old Bill (which allows him to see the man behind the unkempt hair and ratty clothes) make him more comfortable owning the title for himself. Caitlin, in contrast, uses it in a clearly pejorative way. But, thanks in part to her friendship with Billy, she recognizes the ways in which her initial reaction is problematic, and she decides to confront her biases and fears directly.



In the sunshine. When Caitlin arrives at the Freight Yard, she finds Billy sitting in the sun reading a book. He offers her a pillow to sit on and pours her some coffee from his thermos. He's reading *The Grapes of Wrath*, which he tells Caitlin explores "the honor of poverty." As she listens, her shame over her earlier feelings and her determination to sit with Billy in the sunshine grow.

In this poem, the sunshine seems to symbolize enlightenment. Billy reads books in the sun, expanding his own knowledge and understanding. And he teaches Caitlin about the things he reads in these books, including an argument that poverty itself can be noble. This exchange confirms Caitlin's determination to overcome her instinctive reaction of disgust toward Old Bill.



A man. Ashamed of her earlier horror, Caitlin invites both Billy and Old Bill to **dinner** at her house that evening. Billy expresses delight at his friend's inclusion, and he tells Caitlin Old Bill's story. Caitlin thinks about running away and decides that, at just 16, Billy is already a "man" while she is still a "schoolgirl."

Caitlin's determination to overcome her initial response toward Old Bill plays an important part in his redemption story. Now it's not just a fellow "hobo" who recognizes and affirms his humanity but a privileged girl from the town. In her reflections, Caitlin also acknowledges how her privileged childhood has left her underprepared to face the realities of life, unlike Billy.



Cooking, and eating. Caitlin hates cooking—touching raw meat, the tedious process of peeling and cutting vegetables—so she does the prep work for **dinner** as quickly as possible, throwing ingredients for a curry into a pot and leaving it to simmer while she chooses special bottles from her father’s wine cellar. Then, she puts on quiet music and has a bath, forgetting the horror of having to cook and starting to look forward to eating. As much as she hates cooking, she loves eating.

The moon. Billy and Old Bill arrive for dinner, scrubbed and cleaned up so much that Caitlin almost can’t help but laugh at the idea of “the two neatest hobos” she’s ever seen. Old Bill presents Caitlin with a box of chocolates as Billy sees the opened bottles of wine and proposes a toast to “the richest **house** in Bendarat.” Caitlin notices how good **dinner** smells, as Old Bill wanders, as awestruck as if he’d landed on the dark side of the moon, though the massive house.

Stories. The trio sit on the floor near the fireplace to eat their **dinner** and drink a pleasant amount of wine. And they talk. Caitlin and Billy plan future dates; Caitlin shares school gossip and complains about rules and work; Billy talks about skipping school to read books by the creek and Irene Thompson’s kindness. Old Bill sips wine and listens to the teenagers with a quiet smile on his face.

Simple gift. After **dinner**, Old Bill graciously thanks Caitlin for the meal, then he shakes hers and Billy’s hands and bids them goodnight. While he walks home through the soft evening, enjoying the subtle buzz of the fine wine, he thinks about how Billy and Caitlin looked at each other. And he realizes that, for a few hours, the only thing he’d thought about was how pleasant it was to be in the company of others. As he walks home, he relishes thinking of ways to repay this simple, but priceless, gift.

Making love. After Old Bill leaves, Billy and Caitlin have sex. To Billy, it feels as exhilarating as diving headfirst into the cool, clear, and deep waters of the Bendarat River. He’s disappointed when the rush fades away, and he wishes he could stay in the feeling of floating under the water with Caitlin, insulated from everything else in the world, forever.

Because Caitlin hates cooking, her offer to share a homemade meal with Billy and Old Bill takes on an even greater significance as an act of respect—conferring human dignity on Old Bill—and love—demonstrating the regard and affection she has for Billy. And because shared meals in this novel usually represent the emotional intimacy of friendship, it’s likely that this contributes to her enjoyment of eating.



Caitlin again uses the word “hobos” to describe Billy and Old Bill, but already its valence has shifted. No longer does it feel like a pejorative label; indeed, she recognizes the incongruity of their clean presentation with their rough lifestyles. Thus, she offers a pointed reminder that one shouldn’t judge a person by their circumstances or appearances (especially since she doesn’t yet know Old Bill’s tragic back story) but by their character. Billy’s ironic toast to the house highlights yet again how lacking in intimacy this home has been for Caitlin, a situation that begins to change as soon as she invites her guests inside.



The table where Caitlin usually shares meals with her family is too clean and formal for this gathering, reminding readers of the formal and distant relationship she shares with her parents. Instead, she trades the markers of privilege (a nice house and a fancy table setting) for the ease of a casual meal on the floor. While they eat, Billy and Caitlin talk unselfconsciously. By inviting Old Bill to join them, they continue to rebuild his sense of human dignity.



Old Bill’s manners—like Billy’s—belie the idea of the rude, uncivilized “hobo.” Neither man lives fully according to society’s rules, but that doesn’t mean they’ve devolved to an animalistic state. On his walk home, he realizes that, by inviting him to join them, Caitlin and Billy have treated him as more of a human being than he’s felt in a long time. Slowly, their care and affection continues to rebuild the sense of importance and direction he lost with the death of his daughter and wife.



Billy experiences sex with Caitlin as a deeply satisfying; this contrasts with the description that Kate provided earlier. In this way, the book suggests the importance of mutual affection and trust as a bond in romantic relationships.



My other life. Caitlin and Billy fall asleep together in Caitlin's childhood bed. When they wake up, they make love again. Then she looks around the room, surveying the clutter of pillows, makeup, and posters on the wall. Her school uniform hangs from a hook, reminding her of her the old life she'd forgotten for a few hours the night before.

Monday. Early one Monday morning, Billy wakes up to someone other than Caitlin knocking on his door. He's startled and afraid it might be the police, but it's just Old Bill bringing him **breakfast** and coffee. Old Bill gently teases Billy about sleeping in so late—it's 9:00! Billy starts to laugh, and Old Bill joins in.

Tell the world. Monday morning at school, Caitlin wants very badly to tell Kate and Petra about her weekend and having sex with Billy. But she doesn't want it to seem like she's trying to compete with Kate's bad sexual experience. And she's not quite ready to admit how badly she wants it to happen again, or that she found someone she trusts and feels safe with while she was mopping the floors at McDonald's. At least not yet. Not until she's sure of her feelings herself.

Share. Sometimes, Caitlin packs **food** from home into her bag before she goes to work so that she can give it to Billy. At first, he refuses. But when she reminds him that it comes from "the richest **house** in Bendarat," he accepts it for himself and to share with Old Bill.

Billy, dancing. Billy spends five dollars on candles and then works all day on collecting enough things to stand them in. He lights one and drips wax into the bottom of all his vessels to hold the candles steady then places all 24 of them around the inside of his train car. They throw dancing shadows on the wall as he makes his bed and eagerly waits for Caitlin, imagining how she will look in the candlelight.

Heaven. To Caitlin, stepping into the candlelit train car and seeing Billy's proud smile feels like stepping into heaven. She closes the door and goes to him on the bed, where they have sex and lie together for hours.

Caitlin's first experience with sex also contrasts sharply with Kate's earlier disappointing report. But while Billy's reflections focused on their sense of emotional intimacy, sex makes Caitlin feel more acutely how little value her material possessions have compared to meaningful, loving relationships.



Many of the dynamics in the relationships between Billy, Old Bill, and Caitlin shifted as a result of their shared dinner. As Old Bill begins to feel a renewed sense of purpose in his life, he starts to take on a greater caretaking role with Billy, becoming more and more of a father figure. Bringing breakfast to the teenager exemplifies this shift.



In reflecting on her experiences with Billy over the weekend, Caitlin emphasizes the importance of trust and intimacy in their friendship as the key to satisfaction in their first sexual encounters together. Her thoughts reiterate the book's claims that meaningful relationships grow from mutuality, intimacy, and trust. Choosing Billy despite the differences in their lives also shows how Caitlin takes more and more personal responsibility for creating the life she wants to live, regardless of familial or social expectations.



Food continues to be a means of confirming the intimacy of relationships, in this case between Billy and Caitlin. Caitlin shares her family's excess of resources with Billy, demonstrating the value of relationships over possessions. But this also provides an ongoing (if lowkey) reminder that Billy's life remains somewhat precarious.



This poem again proves that money can't buy the truly meaningful things in life like love and respect. Billy puts a very small investment of money (and a larger investment of time) toward a romantic gesture that will show Caitlin how important she has become to him.



Caitlin receives Billy's simple gift of the romantic candlelight in the spirit in which it was offered—it shows how unimportant money and possessions are compared to meaningful relationships.



The clink of the bottles. Old Bill watches Billy kissing Caitlin goodbye on the railroad tracks before walking her home. After an hour, Billy returns, carrying a plastic bag full of clinking bottles that turn out to be non-alcoholic ginger beer, much to Old Bill's consternation. He swears, but he also laughs and admires Billy's choice. He sips the soft drink and thinks that maybe, for Billy's sake, he'll try to drink a little less.

Old Bill's renewed hopefulness derives both from watching the blossoming love between Billy and Caitlin and from the growing intimacy he shares with Billy. Each one—Billy and Old Bill—feels solicitous towards the other, and each one acts protectively towards the other. Billy does this by slowly encouraging Old Bill to stop drinking—encouragement which Old Bill has become willing to receive.



CHAPTER 8: CLOSING IN

Old Bill and this town. Every day, Old Bill now wakes up early and eats a proper **breakfast** before taking long walks. Sometimes he goes to the river with Billy to wash and swim; other times he walks through town looking at the **houses**, shops, parks, and people going about their lives. Sometimes, even, people nod and smile and say hello as if Old Bill is one of them instead of “an old drunk.” And every day, he walks back to his train car planning the next day's walk, and where he will go to keep from thinking about getting drunk.

Even when Old Bill and Billy don't physically share breakfast, this poem implies, the good of that relationship continues to bear fruit for Old Bill. Breakfast with Billy has become the springboard into other mentally and physically healthy habits like drinking less and taking long walks. On these walks, Old Billy shows increasing interest in the houses, which are linked with ideas about safety and family—two things he's lived for too long without.



Nothing's easy. Old Bill complains to Billy that whenever his walks take him past a pub, his hands start shaking with desire to get drunk. Billy reminds him that nothing is easy and suggests that he just stop walking by pubs. Old Bill agrees that nothing is easy.

Billy's reminder about the difficulty of life affirms Old Bill's humanity (life is hard for everyone sometimes) and marks his progress toward redemption—since he keeps going despite the difficulties.



Closing in. One day in town, two police officers stop Billy and ask him a lot of questions. They clearly suspect he's a runaway or a truant from school and they don't buy his story that he's 18 and just staying with a friend in Bendarat while on his way out west. The older police officer gives Billy the card of a local welfare officer and says he'll be waiting for Billy there at 4:00 the following afternoon. If Billy doesn't show up and the officer never sees him again, he'll know that Billy has moved on like he said. But if Billy doesn't show and the officer finds him in town again, he will have more questions, and he will want answers. Billy agrees and flees back to his train car where it feels like the walls are closing in on him.

Since arriving in Bendarat, Billy's life has been peaceful and easy, especially compared to living with his dad. His encounter with the police shatters the illusion that his itinerant, unhoused lifestyle is permanently sustainable, however. The police officer has a force more like Billy's dad than his friends (Ernie, Old Bill, Irene, Caitlin)—he sees Billy as a potential problem to be solved rather than a human being with inherent dignity and the right to determine his own path in life.



Old Bill's long walk. The same day, Old Bill walks past Jessie's old school. Since he saw it last, it has a new coat of paint and a new library. He watches the children playing at recess. One little girl starts to climb a tree in the playground and Old Bill is just about to say something to her when a teacher calls her back down to the ground. His hands start to shake, and he must walk home with care, scrupulously avoiding routes that take him past any pubs.

Early, or late. Early the next morning, Billy carries **breakfast** and coffee to Old Bill only to find his friend awake and shaving. They sit together over breakfast in the sunshine and Billy tells Old Bill about the police and the welfare officer. Billy doesn't know what to do. He thinks that moving on is the only answer, but he doesn't want to leave the first place he's ever felt at home. And he doesn't want to leave Caitlin.

Home. Old Bill promises to help Billy out of his bind. Then he leaves his young friend in the Freight Yard to go on a long walk around the familiar streets and through the suburbs of Bendarat, with their neatly painted and landscaped **houses**.

So obvious. Old Bill walks for hours until he finds himself on Wellington Road across from his **house**—from Jessie's house. He wishes he could have a drink to help him make up his mind, but he knows that Billy doesn't have much time. The solution is so simple, and so obvious—but so painful it makes Old Bill tremble.

To help people. Looking at his house, Old Bill remembers the time when an eight-year-old Jessie rescued an injured parrot. They wrapped it in a soft towel and put it in a box. She nursed the bird for two days, keeping it warm and feeding it sugar syrup, until it recovered enough to fly away. As she watched it flutter up and perch in the trees, she turned to Old Bill and told him that she wanted to be a vet when she grew up so that she could care for other animals and “help people.”

Just as Billy's life in Bendarat begins to destabilize, Old Bill gathers the courage to begin facing his own trauma. The school's facelift reminds Old Bill of the passage of time and suggests to readers that time has the ability to cover over—if not eradicate—the traumas and heartbreaks of the past. Seeing a child in the tree sends Old Bill into a panic, reminding him of how much emotional work remains for his healing—yet his decision to avoid the pubs shows that he's on the right path.



Something has shifted for Old Bill after he confronts Jessie's school—he's no longer sleeping in and neglecting his appearance. But just as his world seems to be approaching some tenuous equilibrium, with the companionship of Billy and Caitlin to bolster his sense of humanity, he and Billy receive a harsh reminder that no matter how much freedom they have, sometimes unaccountable things happen in life.



Notably, while Old Bill walks and tries to work out how to help Billy, he looks at the houses along his route. His attention to the details of yards and buildings hints that the answer lies in a house.



Unsurprisingly, given his attention to the houses on his route and his desire to help Billy, Old Bill winds up staring at his own house. Yet, with his own trauma not fully resolved, Old Bill feels torn between helping Billy—who has become almost a surrogate son—and holding space for the ghost of his daughter Jessie.



Old Bill's memories give readers a glimpse into Jessie's character. She seems to have shared Billy's generous, caring nature. The connection she makes between healing animals and helping people isn't immediately obvious—but it does suggest her concern for the welfare of all living creatures. Thus, through this memory, she encourages Old Bill to find purpose in making good on the legacy she wanted to have in the world.



Peace. Old Bill unlatches the gate and lets himself into the overgrown backyard. A pair of swallows are nesting in the rafters of the verandah. Before retrieving the lawnmower from the shed and addressing the knee-high grass, Old Bill sits and enjoys the sunlight filtering through the tree branches onto the peaceful verandah and watching the swallows swoop in to feed their babies. When he feels ready, he gets to work.

The neighbors. The next-door neighbors don't know Old Bill, and they come over to introduce themselves and chat. He tells them he owns the **house** but lives elsewhere and that a family friend (Billy) will move in soon to take care of it. The house, Old Bill explains, is too big for an old man like him. Finally satisfied by his answers, the neighbors eventually wander off.

War. During History class, Caitlin looks out the window and sees Billy across the road, looking despondent. She longs to run to him, embrace him and go back to the train car with him. She wants to embrace the hippy slogan and make love not war, and she feels like a prisoner of war sitting inside and learning about the Vietnam War while Billy sits in the park needing her.

Not moving. All morning, Billy sits outside of Bendarat Grammar School, wishing for Caitlin to walk out of the gates so they can run away together to a place where no nosy welfare officers ask you uncomfortable questions plastered over with a thin show of friendliness. He waits to hear Old Bill's plan, too, but he guesses that Old Bill will just give Billy whatever money he has left from the cannery and put him on a train to elsewhere like he's a bad cowboy being run out of town by the sheriff.

Old Bill's suit and tie. Before meeting up with Billy again, Old Bill stops at the Salvation Army store and buys a clean shirt, pants, and tie. He stuffs his old clothes into a plastic bag and walks out looking like a businessman.

Near. Old Bill walks quickly—mowing the lawn, buying the new outfit, and getting the electric service reestablished to the **house** took longer than he expected. By the time he rounds a corner and sees Billy, he's exhausted. But, catching sight of the forlorn teenager, a sense of pride—something he hasn't felt in years—reinvigorates Old Bill.

Old Bill's avoidance of the house throughout most of the book suggests that visiting it causes him intense pain. Earlier he told Billy he visits only long enough to remember and then runs away to drink enough to forget. Yet, sitting in the yard, he feels an overwhelming sense of peace. Deciding to allow the house to fulfil its role (providing stability, shelter, and companionship for its residents) redeems the house and brings Old Bill peace.



The fact that the neighbors don't recognize Old Bill suggests how long it's been since he visited the house. This offers a tantalizing possibility that the house—and by extension, Old Bill himself—has the potential to find release from the traumas of the past.



In this poem, Caitlin's history lesson becomes tangled with her ruminations on Billy after she sees him sitting across the street. She's starting to determine the direction of her own life and differentiating herself from her parents. Billy has comparatively more freedom in this moment. But his encounter with the police and welfare officers suggests that there are some limits on all individual freedom.



The last time Billy found his life unlivable, he ran away. He could exempt himself from the normal rules of society—at least in part—because he didn't have love or stability to hold him in place. In contrast, even though he faces danger again in this moment, his love for Caitlin ties him to Bendarat regardless of the consequences.



In part, Old Bill buys a suit and tie to make himself look official enough to convince the welfare office of his plan. But more importantly, this marks an important turning point for him on his path toward redemption. He cares enough for Billy to care for himself again.



In this moment, Old Bill becomes a full father figure for Billy. Despite the teenager's maturity and resourcefulness, he's learning that he can't make it through life entirely on his own. Fortunately, just as he realizes this, Old Bill is ready to support him.



All that knowledge. Once upon a time, Old Bill dressed in suits and ties and worked in the city as a lawyer. He made a lot of money. But all his knowledge and training couldn't stop Jessie from falling out of the tree and dying, couldn't stop his wife from dying, and didn't stop him from drinking to forget his past life. But today he's using his old knowledge to help Billy assert his legal rights and to make sure he has a safe place to stay.

Old and young. Old Bill offers to buy Billy coffee to show his gratitude for all the **breakfasts** Billy has shared. Billy comes along reluctantly—he wants to wait for Caitlin to get out of school so he can tell her about his predicament. In the coffee shop, Old Bill notices the first signs of defeat in Billy's eyes and feels certain that he made the right decision. He tells Billy his plan all at once.

Old Bill's plan. Old Bill's plan is to tell the welfare officer that Billy lives at the **house** on Wellington Road mostly alone. Old Bill is a family friend helping him out as Billy makes his escape from a dangerous alcoholic father and figures out whether he wants to go back to school or find a job. He and Billy will talk nonstop and not let the welfare officer get a word or a question in edgewise. Afterward, they'll go straight to the house so Billy can start his new life.

Billy. Billy holds the keys to the **house** in his hands as he listens to Old Bill reiterate the plan, trying to convince himself and Billy that it will work. Billy feels hopeful that it will work, but he also feels incredibly sad because he knows that Old Bill is giving him more than just a place to stay, and he worries that taking the gift will leave Old Bill with nothing left to hold on to.

Caitlin. Caitlin rushes out of the building after school, but Billy has left the park. She goes to the train car, but he isn't there either. She knows something is wrong. She walks home, making plans to return to the train car after her shift that night with **apple pies** and coffee so she can listen about Billy's problem.

In an earlier poem, Billy read [Lord of the Flies](#) and concluded that the only way to live life is to exempt himself from the rules of society and live according to his own inner compass. Similarly, Old Bill's former life shows that following the rules doesn't keep a person safe from catastrophe. Yet, his descent into wildness and forsaking human connection failed to assuage his pain, too. Only in finding each other and forging their strong friendship can Billy and Old Bill mutually find redemption, belonging, and safety.



Notably, Old Bill's ploy to get Billy away from the school so he can share his plan plays on the sharing of food that initiated and cemented the relationship between the two men over the course of many weeks. Food brings people together, and sharing it—especially giving it to another—conveys an enduring sense of care and compassion.



While Old Bill carefully avoids actually usurping the role of Billy's father—in his cover story, Billy still escaped from an abusive dad—at this point in the novel he has become a surrogate father figure to the teenager. Telling the welfare officer about how he keeps an eye on Billy adds an official aura to the relationship the two have developed.



While Caitlin and Billy offered Old Bill the "simple" gift of companionship and humanization, the house becomes a much more complicated gift. It's the only way that Billy can keep his freedom, but his desire to live his own life doesn't overpower his concern for Old Bill, demonstrating just how deep and mutual that relationship has become.



Caitlin knows that something bad has happened, even if she doesn't know what. Importantly, to address the problem, she reverts to the initial—and most common—symbol of relationships and mutuality in the book: a shared meal.



Liars. Luckily, the police officer doesn't stick around after making sure that Billy shows up for his appointment with the welfare officer. The welfare officer asks a lot of questions, but Old Bill is a great liar. He convinces the officer that Billy is 18, that he lives in a normal **house** with a responsible adult, and that he's getting his life in order. The welfare officer shakes Billy's hand and wishes him luck. But Billy knows he doesn't need it—he's already as lucky as can be. In the bright sunshine outside, Billy asks Old Bill how he got so good at lying, and Old Bill says he used to do it for a living.

Although Billy wants to live his life outside the rules, by remaining in Bendarat and forging relationships with Old Bill, Caitlin, and even Irene Thompson, he remains tethered to the world of the rule-makers. In other words, he values relationships with others more than his absolute freedom. Though poor in worldly possessions, Billy is rich in what matters: love, friendship, and luck. By helping Billy out in this way, Old Bill redeems the house he's left empty for too long. He also reclaims the education and training (as a lawyer) that he abandoned after his personal traumas.



CHAPTER 9: LOCKS AND KEYS

Celebrating. In the street, Billy hugs Old Bill like he's never hugged anyone before. He's sure that Old Bill has saved his life, and he wants to thank him a hundred times. Billy picks up his backpack and follows Old Bill up to the better part of town where the **houses** have "neat gardens" and "orderly trees" and brightly painted fences. At the house on Wellington Road, the grass is freshly mown and swallows swoop around the verandah, celebrating the hatching of their babies.

Billy and Old Bill embrace in the street in a public show of affection that binds them together. Importantly, this happens before Old Bill takes Billy to the house—the emotional intimacy and reciprocity of their friendship precedes and establishes the sense of safety and belonging that the house will formalize. Once there, signs of abundant and joyful life abound, contributing to a sense of peace and resolution for Billy as well as readers.



Swallows. Old Bill and Billy sit on the verandah watching the swallows flit around the yard and enjoying the breeze through the trees. Old Bill tells Billy about how he planted some of the trees himself and how he built the shed and used to keep a gas grill on the verandah for weekend barbecues. Old Bill had a dog called Jerry, who loved to play in the yard. Old Bill lived in the house for 15 years, but he hasn't been back inside the **house** since he left on March 2nd, 1994. When he comes back, he never ventures farther than the verandah, where he sits and cries "like an old drunk." Unwilling to hurt Old Bill by asking him to go inside, Billy tactfully pockets the key and decides to wait until Caitlin is there with him to open the doors.

Old Bill's old life conforms to the expectations and rules of society. Although following these unwritten rules didn't prevent the catastrophe that befell his family, his memories of earlier life provide a nice contrast with Billy's abusive home life and Caitlin's emotionally distant parents. Old Bill's memories promise that a house can be a place of love, happiness, and security—if people who respect and care for each other live there. And once again, Billy demonstrates his sensitivity and maturity by understanding without having to be told how sensitive the moment is—that's why he doesn't follow Old Bill inside.



Tremor. Old Bill's hands often shake from drinking—or from not drinking—so he keeps them in his pockets as much as possible. He has them there while he sits on the verandah with Billy and talks about the **house** and Jerry the dog. But when Billy puts the key into his pocket and offers Old Bill a handshake, Old Bill's hands stop trembling, just for a moment.

Old Bill's trembling hands betray the lingering effects of his personal trauma as well as the alcohol he's used to numb that pain. But he moves one step closer to his redemption when he shakes Billy's hand without the tremor betraying his emotions. Billy's love and friendship are slowly displacing some of Old Bill's pain.



Locks and keys. When he gets to McDonald's, Billy immediately apologizes to Caitlin for how long it's been since he's seen her. Even though she's mopping (which she hates), she breaks into a wide smile. Billy orders a lemonade and sits in the upstairs dining room thinking of everything he has to tell Caitlin. Living in a **house** seems so adult, even if it's only temporary while he figures out what to do next.

Billy and Caitlin meet again at the McDonald's in a moment that seems to return them to the beginning of their relationship. This poem thus hints that they're at another beginning—about to embark on a new phase of their relationship and lives together. And importantly, Billy now thinks about how he wants to construct his life going forwards. His relationships with Caitlin and Old Bill have helped him find a greater sense of purpose than he had when he ran away from home.



Caitlin and the key. The next day after school, Caitlin stands on the corner of Wellington and Jamison waiting for Billy in the rain. He walks up, soaking wet and wildly grinning, takes her hand, and leads her in the opposite direction of his train car. He won't answer her questions, and she can tell he has a big surprise, so she tries to contain her impatience. They walk up to a beautiful white **house** with a tree-filled yard. A parrot eats seed from a bird feeder on the fence. Billy shows Caitlin the key and explains about the welfare officers, Old Bill's family, and Old Bill's plan. He tells her how he couldn't bring himself to go inside yesterday with Old Bill. Caitlin starts to cry, thinking about Old Bill and his relationship with Billy. She unlocks the door and walks through it with Billy.

Readers see Old Bill's house through Caitlin's eyes in this poem. In contrast to the cold, oversized home her parents own, Old Bill's house is just the right size. She notices the signs of life and abundance around it. The parrot points toward the spirit of Jessie, who rescued a parrot then released it back to live its wild life after it recovered. Billy and Caitlin enter the house together, metaphorically reviving it with the strength of their relationship. And although he can't bring himself to go back inside, the fact that both Billy and Caitlin think of him in this moment allows Old Bill to be there in spirit, too.



CHAPTER 10: OLD BILL

Old Bill. The first night Billy and Caitlin spend in the **house**, Old Bill lies in his train car remembering how he originally encouraged Billy to get out of Bendarat to see the country. He thought it was crazy for such a young kid to be living in the Freight Yard "like a bum." But Billy stuck around and took care of Old Bill, bringing him **breakfast**, making him go to the cannery for work, and helping him to stop drinking. He realizes now that he should have been listening to the advice he gave Billy all those months ago.

No sooner has Old Bill turned the house over to Caitlin and Billy than he seems to experience relief from the ghosts he's been keeping there. He now realizes that when he tried to get Billy to leave Bendarat, he was really speaking to himself. By helping Billy, Old Bill helped himself, too. And with some of his trauma processed and his ghosts quieter, he can stop and think about how far he's come—and start to decide how he wants to shape his life going forward.



A project. Old Bill remembers a project Jessie did on the Great Barrier Reef when she was nine. He helped her research and watched her cut out pictures of marine animals for her poster. She told him that she wanted to learn to dive so she could visit the reef and he promised that one day, they would go together. Now, he thinks of the opportunities in Queensland, the state closest to the reef. It's warmer there in the winter, and there will be plenty of work picking fruit in the orchards and farms. And while he's gone, finishing Jessie's project, he knows Billy will be looking after everything he owns in Bendarat.

Old Bill rehearses another memory of Jessie, one that gives him a new sense of direction for at least the near-term future. The abundant life in the Great Barrier Reef fascinated animal-loving Jessie. And the abundance of Queensland offers Old Bill not just tourist opportunities, but also the chance to reexperience the value of work, which will provide a different sort of meaning for him on a daily basis.



Measure. Caitlin and Billy walk through the gracious **house** with its big kitchen and generous rooms, brushing away the cobwebs. They both love the white curtains with blue seashells. These, along with a pile of country-western records, are the only personal touches in the house. The furniture is all still there, but they can't find any photographs or other mementos. In the doorway to the smaller bedroom, they find pencil marks on the wall where Old Bill, his wife, and Jessie measured their heights in January of 1991, 1992, and 1993. Jessie had scrawled a note on the wall about how she grew 13 centimeters in two years, while Old Bill hadn't grown at all. Billy and Caitlin stand in respectful silence, measuring the brevity of Jessie's life.

Cleaning. Caitlin tells her parents part of the truth about where she's going on Saturday morning when she packs rags, a bucket, and a mop. She says she's helping a friend with cleaning and that she'll be gone all day. Then she leaves before they can ask any further questions. At the **house** on Wellington, Billy has already cleaned the bathroom and started scrubbing the kitchen floor. She vacuums the living room and master bedroom. They eat **lunch** in the yard, then they cuddle on the picnic blanket. Caitlin watches Billy looking at the house.

Saturday dinner. Caitlin calls her mother on her mobile phone to say she's having **dinner** with her friend and will be home late. Then she hangs up and turns the phone off. This evening, she and Billy will make dinner and eat together before having sex. Then, they will get dressed again and Billy will walk her home, where she will introduce him to her parents. She's ready. She loves and trusts him, and she feels it's time for her to take her life into her own hands. She puts the phone on the counter and starts to help Billy cook.

The best meal. Caitlin and Billy spend all afternoon making **dinner**—a chicken curry with rice. They keep stopping to put on records and dance around the living room, laughing and clinging to each other. They dance terribly, unsure of who should lead and who should follow. When the food is ready, they pour some beers and sit down at a proper table with a tablecloth, napkins, and proper plates and cutlery. They toast Old Bill. They each have two helpings of dinner, which is the best meal Billy has ever eaten.

Old Bill's house shares features with Caitlin's home and with Billy's train car—it's the best of both worlds. It's large and comfortable (like Caitlin's house), but it's also welcoming, even though all personal touches that might remind anyone of Old Bill's old life or his family have been removed. In cleaning it, they both claim the house as their own space—at least for a time—and show their respect for the house and the people who used to live within its walls. Finding Jessie's growth record is a sobering reminder that the unexpected can happen, and it throws Billy's unexpected luck into even sharper relief.



Caitlin and Billy make the house habitable together. Cleaning out the dust and cobwebs is an important step toward the house's redemption, which will be fulfilled as they share the space over the coming weeks and months, filling it with new, happy memories to live alongside the tragedies. Their picnic lunch outside gives them a vantage point to look at the house as they prepare to make it their own, at least for a time. And it recalls their first date, where sharing a simple meal brought them closer together.



The house doesn't just change Billy's life. It also pushes Caitlin closer to confronting her parents with important truths about her life—specifically her relationship with Billy and her own desires for her future. The house and her relationships with Billy and Old Bill have given her the security, support, and strength to take a more active role in charting her own path.



Earlier in the novel, Billy and Caitlin shared a meal in Caitlin's house. This meal brought them closer together and instigated a new, more intense phase of their relationship. Now they stand on the cusp of another new phase, with Billy safely established in Old Bill's house and working to figure out his next steps. Their special meal marks the occasion and strengthens their bond. It also allows them to position themselves as adults—eating at a set table this time instead of on the floor.



Value. After they've had sex, Caitlin and Billy lie together in the bed looking through the window and the moon behind the tree branches. He reaches under the bed and brings out the emerald ring he bought months earlier when he had all that money from working at the cannery and he couldn't spend it all on beer, or food or himself. He shows Caitlin.

Throughout the book, Billy has both implied and claimed outright that a person can't buy the truly valuable things in life—friendship, safety, freedom—with money. And Caitlin has ruminated on the ways in which people use material things as a poor substitute for intimacy. This poem—with Billy's gift of the ring at its heart—reiterates these ideas.



CHAPTER 11: THE HOBO SKY

Midnight. Unused to the quiet of **house** rather than the noisy Freight Yard, Billy can't sleep. In the middle of the night, he gets up and quietly lets himself out to walk around the hushed town. He walks down to the train station and looks towards the Freight Yard, where he knows Old Bill sleeps in his own train car. Billy promises himself to visit Carriage 1864 at least once a week so that he will never forget the sights and sounds of his "hobo life" or his home near the tracks.

The house provides Billy shelter and safety, but it also marks the beginning of a new phase of his life. Just as he had trouble adjusting to the sounds of the freight yard at night several months ago, now he has trouble adjusting to silence. He takes this as an opportunity to reflect on where he has ended up and to remind himself how much he has to be grateful for. While he looks toward the future, he resolves to keep the lessons of this time close to his heart, especially the value of charting his own path in life and the importance of having strong, supportive relationships with others.



Drinking by the river. Billy and Old Bill meet up at the river to share **lunch**. While they watch birds in the water and on the opposite bank, Old Bill tells Billy about his old life and his office job and all the days he worked overtime and came home late to find his wife and Jessie waiting eagerly for him. He has a trust fund leftover from those days, and it gives him just enough to live off on. Old Bill makes a face over the ginger beer Billy brought him and confesses that it's taking a while to get used to the taste of being sober all day.

With the house occupied, Old Bill's healing continues; he talks more and more about his old life with Billy. And he reiterates one of the book's central claims: the most important and valuable things in life have nothing to do with wealth or money. While Old Bill appreciated and loved his family, he still looks back on his life years earlier as unbalanced because of the importance he placed on money. Now he realizes not only how little money he needs to live on, but also how relationships make life worth living.



Respect. It feels funny to be living in a **house** again, but Billy likes the comfortable bed and the opportunity to cook the "proper **food**" that Caitlin brings over. He especially loves the curtains and the way he can choose to close himself up privately or let in the sunshine. He's not afraid to look out the windows or ashamed for people to see him in this house. Out of respect for Old Bill and his generosity, Billy "treads lightly," keeps the house very clean, and makes sure that nothing breaks.

Early in the book, Billy told readers that he wasn't proud to be a runaway. Yet, as Caitlin recognized, he did take pride in his self-determination and the autonomy he claimed in leaving his abusive dad and living on his own terms. He learned that there wasn't shame in being unhoused (even though he's incredibly grateful to have a house now) and learned to honor and appreciate the shelter that Old Bill shared and the non-McDonald's food that Caitlin shared even more.



Maybe. Billy tells Irene Thompson about the **house**. She's happy he has a safe place to stay but worries about how long he will be able to afford it. Billy says he might go back to the cannery for work. Irene also tells him about a government subsidy program for education, and Billy says that he will think about it. If someone paid him, he would maybe consider going back and finishing school.

Holiday. One morning, Billy wakes up early and packs up a thermos of coffee, some **cereal**, and a carton of milk. He carries these down to the Freight Yard and wakes Old Bill up for breakfast, just like he used to. And just like old times, Old Bill wakes up cussing at Billy. As Old Bill eats his fill, he tells Billy about his plan to go north—with the ghosts from his house—for a while. Billy doesn't know what to say as he looks out over the freight yard where he and Old Bill met so many months ago. Finally, he simply says, "I love the **house**," and leaves it at that.

The hobo sky. After breakfast, Billy cleans out the bowls and repacks his bag. He shakes Old Bill's hand and tells him that the "Bendarat Hilton" is the finest motel he has ever visited. Old Bill laughs and agrees. Billy crosses the tracks and heads toward the library, but he turns back to find Old Bill looking up at the sky. Old Bill stands motionless for a long time, looking like he's praying. Then he collects his bag and begins to walk slowly and deliberately north. Billy stands and watches him until he's out of sight. And then Billy turns his own eyes up to the "hobo sky" he and Old Bill share.

Billy has solved some of his problems, but he still needs to invest in choices that will allow him to live an independent and meaningful life going forward. While he appreciates Irene's help and suggestions, he also makes it clear that he will make the decisions that appeal to him. He finds value in the people in his life more than accomplishments like making money or having a fancy education—neither of which protected Old Bill from tragedy.



Billy seems to intuitively sense the shift in Old Bill when he randomly decides to take his old friend to breakfast. But even though some things change, others stay the same—Old Bill still wakes up cussing. The fact that Old Bill plans to take his ghosts with him shows that the tragic events of his past still mark him. But he's leaving town for the first time in years, showing that he has begun to rediscover his sense of purpose. And, perhaps most importantly, he's only been able to do this since becoming friends with Billy, who encouraged him to stop drinking, showed him love and respect, and will take care of Old Bill's house—and its memories—while Old Bill travels.



Although both Billy and Old Bill referred to the freight yard as a hotel ironically at first—mocking the roughness of the accommodations and trying to put a good spin on their impoverished situations—it seems more like a hotel at the end of the book. Neither Old Bill nor Billy has to stay there; both are free to leave and continue on their journeys towards adulthood (in Billy's case) and redemption (in Old Bill's). And although they're about to be separated by physical space, the bond of friendship they've cultivated won't be easily broken. They still share the sky and the hobo's freedom to forge their own destinies, no matter what griefs and traumas life throws at them.





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