The Virgin Suicides

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEFFREY EUGENIDES

Jeffrey Eugenides was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1960. He was raised in Grosse Pointe, a wealthy suburb of Detroit. When he was a junior in high school, he decided he wanted to be a writer after reading James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* for class. After graduating high school, he attended Brown University, where he studied English. Equipped with a foundational literary education, he went on to attend Stanford University's English and Creative Writing program. He spent the next few years in Brooklyn, where he worked as secretary for the Academy of American Poets. He published his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, in 1993 to wide acclaim, going on to publish short stories in a number of prestigious magazines in the ensuing years. His second novel, *Middlesex*, was published in 2002 and won him the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. His third novel, *The Marriage Plot*, was published in 2011 and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He also published a collection of short stories, *Fresh Complaint*, in 2017. He is on the board of directors for *The Paris Review* and lives in Princeton, New Jersey, where he is on the creative writing faculty at Princeton University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although it's never explicitly stated, it's generally understood that The Virgin Suicides takes place in the 1970s, a time when there were many cultural shifts taking place. What's more, the novel is set in a wealthy suburb outside of Detroit, which was the primary hub of the nation's—and even the world's—automobile industry. At the turn of the 20th century, Henry Ford produced the first Ford Model-T in Detroit. The car was wildly popular because it was the first automobile that was actually affordable—there had been other cars before the Model-T, but they were exorbitantly priced. Ford was able to make the Model-T affordable because he was able to cut costs on production, using conveyor belts to create an assembly line and thus streamline the process. This ultimately established Detroit's booming auto industry, which prospered for decades. By the 1970s, however, foreign car companies had caught up, and this majorly hurt Detroit's auto industry. What's more, many factory workers were leaving Detroit to live in the suburbs, which further diminished the city's economic stability. To add to this, the 1970s was also a time of countercultural revolution, as young people began to challenge the status quo and demand equality. Both the economic and cultural changes are palpable in *The Virgin Suicides*, as the neighborhood boys feel a fundamental shift in their community and ultimately associate the Lisbon suicides with this societal inflection point.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jeffrey Eugenides has identified some of the foremost modernist authors as among his first literary influences, including William Faulkner, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce. Although the overall tone of *The Virgin Suicides* might not seem immediately linked to these modernist writers, the fact that the novel plays with narrative perspective by using a Greek chorus is in keeping with the formal experiments and overall interest in memory and consciousness that appear in novels like Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and Proust's *Swann's Way*. At the same time, *The Virgin Suicides* is also comparable to other literary novels that were published in the 1990s—like, for instance, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, which, much like *The Virgin Suicides*, clearly states in the very first chapter that a primary character will die over the course of the novel. On another note, novels like Miriam Toews's *All My Puny Sorrows* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* deal with the theme of suicide and, as such, are worth considering alongside *The Virgin Suicides*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Virgin Suicides
- **When Published:** 1993
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** A wealthy suburb of Detroit in the 1970s
- **Climax:** After luring the neighborhood boys into their house, the remaining Lisbon sisters all separately take their own lives (except for Mary, who survives only to die by suicide shortly thereafter).
- **Antagonist:** The human tendency to obsess over scandalous events
- **Point of View:** First-Person Plural

EXTRA CREDIT

The Big Screen. The famous director Sofia Coppola adapted *The Virgin Suicides* as a film starring Kirsten Dunst as Lux Lisbon.

Childhood Experience. Eugenides has talked about how *The Virgin Suicides* is, in many ways, about his upbringing in Grosse Point, Michigan and what it was like to grow up there in the 1970s.

PLOT SUMMARY

A group of neighborhood boys from a wealthy suburb of Detroit narrate the story of the five Lisbon sisters and how, within the course of a single year, they all take their own lives. Cecilia Lisbon, the youngest, is the first to die by suicide. Her first attempt takes place when she cuts her wrists and then gets into the bath. Paul Baldino, the son of a wealthy mobster, is the one to find her—he makes his way into the Lisbon house through the neighborhood's storm drains, though the other boys think Paul really uses underground tunnels his father built as a means of escaping the police.

Either way, Paul sneaks into the house in an attempt to upstage Peter Sissen, the only boy who has ever been invited into the house. Mr. Lisbon—a math teacher at the local high school—asked Peter over for dinner after Peter helped him hang a scale model of the universe in his classroom. Peter used this as an opportunity to snoop in the Lisbon sisters' bathroom, finding a used Tampax and proudly telling the other boys about it afterwards. Hearing this, Paul bragged that he would get into the Lisbon house and see the girls showering. When he sneaks into the house and to the bathroom, though, what he finds is Cecilia lying in bloody bathwater and clutching a laminated card with a drawing of the **Virgin Mary** on it. Horrified, he calls the police.

Cecilia survives. What she needs, a psychiatrist tells her parents, is a more active social life. The Lisbons therefore decide to throw a party, and the neighborhood boys are delighted to find invitations in their mailboxes. When they file into the Lisbon house, they're ushered to the basement, where they find the sisters waiting. It's awkward at first, but eventually everyone starts socializing—except Cecilia, who sits quietly off to the side with her bandaged wrist. Before long, she asks her father if she can go upstairs, and though he's disappointed, he says yes. Everyone falls silent as she climbs the stairs, walks on the first floor, and then ascends to the second floor. After a moment of silence there comes the sickening sound of a fence post impaling Cecilia's body. Right away, everyone knows what happened: she jumped from her bedroom window onto the fence below. They rush outside and Mr. Lisbon tries to help Cecilia, but it's clear she's not going to make it.

Surely enough, Cecilia dies. Nobody in the neighborhood knows how to respond. Adults go over to give their condolences, but the Lisbons are distant and strange. When local fathers visit Mr. Lisbon, he distracts them by sitting them in front of a baseball game. Even Father Moody, the town priest, fails to engage Mr. Lisbon—when he tries to talk about what happened, Mr. Lisbon focuses on the game onscreen. Discouraged, Father Moody goes to look for Mrs. Lisbon. As he walks through the halls, he notices the dismal state of the house. Everything is dirty and falling into disrepair. What really strikes Father Moody, though, is when he sees the remaining Lisbon sisters huddled together in a bedroom: they look distraught, disheveled, unclean. Seeing their grief, he's sure—in retrospect—that they didn't have plans to kill themselves.

The boys don't really see the Lisbon sisters for the rest of the summer. That fall, the girls stick together in the hallways, and though some of the boys make an effort to engage with them, they're largely unsuccessful. Lux Lisbon, however, starts sneaking around with certain guys. She has to be careful, though, because her parents won't let their daughters date. This becomes a problem for a boy named Trip Fontaine, who becomes infatuated with Lux. Trip isn't used to pursuing romantic interests, since he's a heartthrob. But it's different with Lux, who hardly pays any attention to him until he follows her to an assembly, sits next to her, and whispers that he's going to ask her father if he can take her out. She tells him there's no chance, but he's undeterred, simply saying that he's first going to come over and watch television with the family.

Trip watches television for an entire evening with the Lisbon family, but Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon sit between him and Lux on the couch. Eventually, Mr. Lisbon tells him it's time to leave, and Lux walks him to the door, looking at him apologetically as he realizes her parents will never let her go out with him. Dejected, he goes to his car and sits there for a moment, and then—out of nowhere—it's as if there's a divine being hovering over him and sucking his face. Lux, he realizes, snuck out of the house and is straddling him. She kisses him with such intensity it's all he can do to keep his composure, reaching for her in a desperate, overwhelmed way until she abruptly leaves.

In the coming weeks, word reaches the boys that Lux has been grounded. Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon become even more strict, and their house looks worse. But Trip is determined, so he goes to Mr. Lisbon's classroom and announces his intentions to take Lux to the homecoming dance. Mr. Lisbon implies that it's really up to his wife—and plus, he says, it wouldn't be fair to his other daughters if he made an exception for Lux. Trip, however, says he will round up a group of guys to take *all* of the Lisbon girls. Mr. Lisbon runs the idea by Mrs. Lisbon, and they agree that it's acceptable, so Trip chooses three other boys.

On the night of the homecoming dance, Trip goes to the Lisbon house with Kevin Head, Joe Hill Conley, and Parkie Denton (whose father lent his Cadillac for the occasion). The sisters are genuinely happy and excited, and they seem to really enjoy the night—especially Lux and Bonnie, who sneak beneath the bleachers with Trip and Joe Hill Conley to drink peach schnapps and kiss with the sweet flavor still on their lips. At the end of the night, though, Trip and Lux slip away, and the others have to return without them. Years later, the neighborhood boys learn that Trip and Lux had sex on the football field. And though Trip genuinely cared for Lux, for some reason he suddenly wanted to be away from her after they had sex, so he left her on the field. She took a cab home.

Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon become even more strict after the

homecoming dance, hardly allowing the girls to leave the house. They even take them out of school. Around this time, Mr. Lisbon resigns as a teacher, though most people understand that he was forced to leave—none of the local parents think he's fit to teach their children, since he can't even "run his own family." Even more scandalous (for the boys, at least), is the fact that Lux starts having sex with strange men on the roof of the Lisbon house. The boys have no idea who these men are, but they spy on Lux's sexual activity from across the street, noticing that Lux is becoming alarmingly skinny. During this period, Lux fakes abdominal pain so she can go to the hospital to get a secret pregnancy test, convincing the doctor not to tell her parents. She learns that she isn't pregnant, but she *does* have HPV. The boys get hold of her gynecological exam, which includes a close-up photograph of her cervix. They consider this picture their "prized possession."

As winter passes, the Lisbon house looks worse and worse, with leaks dripping through roof. By spring, the boys stop focusing quite so much on the sisters—it's baseball seasons, after all, and they haven't seen the girls for so long other than brief glimpses. At one point, the Parks Department shows up to cut down a diseased tree in the Lisbons' front yard, since the majority of the town's **elm trees** have been infected with a fungus and need to be removed. But the Lisbon sisters stop them from cutting it down, since it was Cecilia's favorite tree.

In late spring, the boys become convinced that the sisters are communicating with them in cryptic ways (flashing lights, leaving Virgin Mary cards in strange places). They're right: the sisters *are* communicating with them, as evidenced by the notes they leave in mailboxes: "Remember us?" one reads. Finally, the boys decide to call the girls. At first, Mr. Lisbon picks up, but they stay on the line because they can tell the girls are listening. Finally, after Mr. Lisbon hangs up, they hear one of the sisters say hello in a weak, defeated voice before hanging up. These calls continue, but the boys decide to hold the phone to a stereo instead of talking. They play a song, and then the Lisbon sisters respond with their own selection, and they keep rotating like this for a while, with the boys playing overtly romantic songs and the sisters encouraging them while also remaining somewhat evasive. In the end, though, the sisters play "Make It With You" by Bread, and the boys go crazy with excitement.

Shortly after this exchange, the Lisbons send a note telling the boys to watch for their "signal" the following night. The boys are elated, thinking the sisters want to be saved from their depressing life. After drinking beer in their communal treehouse and waiting for the Lisbon sisters to wave at them through a window, the boys sneak over and enter the Lisbon house through the backdoor. They find Lux waiting, and they're transfixed by her revealing top. They decide with her that they'll drive to Florida, their minds running wild with fantasy. But Lux says they just have to wait for her sisters to finish packing. As she says this, she begins to unbuckle Chase Buell's belt, but then she hears a thump upstairs and says they'll have to wait. She says she's going to wait in the car, which is parked in the garage. Alone again, the boys wait for the other sisters, eventually wandering into the basement to discover that the decorations from Cecilia's party are still up. Then, in a shock, they see that Bonnie has hanged herself from the ceiling. They run from the basement and out of the house.

Later, the boys piece it all together. Lux only unbuckled Chase's belt to stall for time, waiting to hear her sister kick over the trunk she was standing on. Then, she went to the garage and turned on the car, asphyxiating herself in her parents' car. Meanwhile, Mary put her head in the oven. Therese was probably already dead, having swallowed a bunch of pills. Mary ends up surviving her suicide attempt, but she doesn't stay alive for long. That summer, as the boys are coming home from a party (having spent the night drinking and making out with girls), they see paramedics loading Mary's lifeless body onto a stretcher. They later learn that she, like Therese, died by taking pills.

In the aftermath of the Lisbon suicides, the Parks Department cuts down Cecilia's elm tree. The neighborhood now seems harsh and strange, and everyone feels like the entire country is in decline. People begin to associate this decline with the Lisbon sisters, suspecting that the girls somehow sensed that things would get worse and decided they didn't want to live in such a dismal world. The boys, for their part, never stop thinking about the sisters, though they'll never know for sure why the girls decided to die.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Neighborhood Boys – The neighborhood boys are the collective narrators of the novel. Functioning as a Greek chorus, they use the first-person plural pronoun "we," and it's never made clear who, exactly, is speaking. Throughout the novel, though, it becomes evident that the group of boys seems to include Peter Sissen, Joe Hill Conley, Kevin Head, Chase Buell, Tim Winer, Paul Baldino, Joe Larson, and others. Regardless of the group's exact makeup, what's overwhelmingly clear is that the boys are upper-middle-class high schoolers and are obsessed with the Lisbon sisters. Their interest in the girls begins with the stereotypical curiosity and lewd fascination of many adolescent crushes, but it soon turns into something else, as they become absolutely fixated on the sisters. In keeping with this, they narrate the story as adults, illustrating the extent to which they've been unable to move on. They even acknowledge at various points throughout the novel that they're middle-aged and are either married or already divorced, and comments like this create the palpable sense that

they see their adolescence—and their memories of the Lisbon sisters—as somewhat glorious or inexplicably perfect. And yet, there's also the sense that they're still so fixated on the Lisbon story because the sisters' suicides scarred them. After all, the boys are in the Lisbon house when Lux, Bonnie, Therese, and Mary try (and, except for Mary, succeed) to die by suicide. To that end, Paul Baldino originally found Cecilia Lisbon after her first suicide attempt, so the neighborhood boys have effectively been involved in the Lisbon tragedy from the very beginning—a troubling fact that they're still processing decades later.

Cecilia Lisbon – Cecilia is the youngest Lisbon sister. At 13, she's considered odd by her sisters and neighbors alike, largely because of her unique fashion sense. No matter where she goes, she wears a vintage wedding dress that she cut off at the knees—a strange style choice that underscores her status as something of an outsider. However, the neighborhood boys seem just as interested in Cecilia as they do in her older sisters, and the fact that she's the hardest sister to understand only adds a sense of mystery and drama to her eventual suicide. Paul Baldino is the person who finds Cecilia after her first suicide attempt, since he sneaks into the Lisbon house via an underground passageway in the hopes of spying on one of the sisters in the shower. What he finds, though, is Cecilia lying in bloody bathwater after having cut her wrists. When the paramedics arrive, they find a laminated **Virgin Mary card** clutched in her hands—something that surprises Mr. Lisbon, though he (like everyone else) is unable to make sense of the card's significance. Cecilia ultimately survives this suicide attempt, but she doesn't live long. During a party that her parents throw (because the hospital psychiatrist advised them to let her have a more active social life), Cecilia goes upstairs and jumps to her death from the second floor, impaling herself on a fence post below.

Lux Lisbon – Lux is the second-youngest Lisbon sister. At just 14, she's considered the most desirable sister by the neighborhood boys, who keep especially close tabs on her. Lux is also the most adventurous sister, frequently breaking household rules to sneak out with boys. Her parents are opposed to their daughters dating in high school, so she's forced to keep her romantic liaisons secret, though the neighborhood boys know surprisingly a lot about her love life. However, the only person they talk to who has an actual romantic relationship with Lux is Trip Fontaine, who—even decades later—is reluctant to reveal too much. Nonetheless, Trip tells the boys the story of him and Lux sneaking off together after the homecoming dance—a story that ends with them having sex on the football field before Trip abandons her there, leaving her with no option but to take a taxi home. Her parents are furious, and so begins the period in which the Lisbon sisters are hardly allowed out of the house. During this time, Lux sneaks a number of guys (including several full-on adults) into the house and onto the roof, where she has sex with them while, unbeknownst to her, the neighborhood boys watch from afar. By the end of the novel, Lux has lost a concerning amount of weight, which adds to the overall sense that the sisters are unwell. On the night of her and her sisters' group suicide, she distracts the boys by starting to unbuckle Chase Buell's pants, allowing her other sisters time to go through with their suicide attempts. She then goes to the garage and asphyxiates herself in her parents' car.

Bonnie Lisbon – Bonnie is the middle Lisbon sister. She's 15 when Cecilia takes her own life. As the middle child, she is somewhat reserved and doesn't necessarily attract much attention, though this is also possibly because she is—it seems—something of a rule follower. As such, it's surprising when she ends up kissing Joe Hill Conley beneath the bleachers at the homecoming dance. She finds herself in this situation after following Lux and Trip Fontaine around, apparently not knowing what else to do at the dance and not feeling comfortable with the idea of letting her sister out of her sight. Joe Hill Conley follows, too, and after they watch Trip and Lux drink peach schnapps and kiss, they decide to do the same—Bonnie is hesitant at first, but Lux tells her not to be a "goody-goody." At the end of the novel, the neighborhood boys find Bonnie's lifeless body hanging from the ceiling in the basement.

Mary Lisbon – At 16, Mary is the second-oldest Lisbon sister. She's also the last one to die by suicide, though this is only because her first attempt fails. On the whole, Mary is attentive and mindful of her appearance. Early in the novel, Peter Sissen sneaks into the Lisbons' bathroom and finds Mary's makeup, which she keeps hidden from her parents. Along with some lipstick and concealer, Peter finds wax and concludes that Mary must wax her upper lip—a detail that he shares with the other neighborhood boys. When the four remaining Lisbon sisters all attempt suicide at the same time, Mary puts her head in the oven, but she survives. She spends the summer sleeping for long stretches of time and compulsively showering. When the neighborhood boys walk home from one of the first raucous parties of their lives, they see paramedics loading Mary's dead body into an ambulance, later learning that Mary purposefully overdosed on pills.

Therese Lisbon – Seventeen-year-old Therese is the oldest Lisbon sister. She's intelligent, practical, and (before she takes her own life) seems eager to move on from the tragedy of Cecilia's suicide. She tells Kevin Head at the homecoming dance that she and her sisters aren't like Cecilia and that they "just want to live." Later, she sends out for a number of college brochures, suggesting that she's thinking about her future. In the end, though, she dies by suicide with the rest of her sisters, taking a handful of sleeping pills and washing them down with gin.

Mr. Lisbon – Mr. Lisbon is Cecilia, Lux, Bonnie, Mary, and Therese's father. He's a math teacher at the local high school

and is a meek, reserved man. He and Mrs. Lisbon have strict rules about what their daughters are allowed to do, but Mr. Lisbon seems less adamant about upholding them. When the neighborhood boys interview Mr. Lisbon years after his daughters die by suicide, he and Mrs. Lisbon have gotten divorced. He implies to the boys that he only went along with his household's strict rules because he didn't want to undermine his wife. This might be true, since he's the one who convinces Mrs. Lisbon to let Trip Fontaine take Lux to the homecoming dance (along with several other boys, who pair off with the other Lisbon sisters). But when a drunken Lux comes home late that night, both Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon are enraged, and they institute even harsher rules, hardly allowing the sisters to leave the house. On the whole, Mr. Lisbon is emotionally distant, as evidenced by the fact that he avoids talking about his emotions in the aftermath of Cecilia's suicide—whenever his neighbors visit him, he sits them in front of the television and distracts them with a baseball game so he doesn't have to talk about the tragedy. He's similarly avoidant in his private life, as he lets the house slip into disrepair and moves through life as if in a haze. He also resigns from his job as a teacher, though it's clear that the school forces him out because parents don't think he's qualified to teach their children if he can't even "run his own family."

Mrs. Lisbon – Mrs. Lisbon is Cecilia, Lux, Bonnie, Mary, and Therese's mother. She's very strict and is reluctant to give her daughters more freedom after Cecilia's first suicide attempt, even though this is what Dr. Hornicker—the hospital psychiatrist—suggests she and Mr. Lisbon should do. She ultimately goes along with the plan, allowing the girls to have a party in the basement, but this only leads to Cecilia's second (and final) suicide attempt. In turn, the party perhaps solidifies Mrs. Lisbon's conviction that her daughters should be kept under close watch, and she goes back to carefully policing their lives. When Lux disobeys her by staying out late and drinking with Trip Fontaine after the homecoming dance, Mrs. Lisbon forces Lux to burn all of her rock and roll records, revealing her own old-fashioned belief in the corruptive power of pop culture. The neighborhood boys interview Mrs. Lisbon years after she loses her daughters. She and Mr. Lisbon have divorced, and she's hesitant to talk about what went wrong with her family—in fact, she goes out of her way to besmirch people like Dr. Hornicker, who she thinks blame her and Mr. Lisbon for what happened. There was nothing wrong with the way she and her husband raised the girls, she says, insisting that what happened had nothing to do with how they ran their family.

Peter Sissen –Peter Sissen is one of the neighborhood boys who obsess over the Lisbon sisters. Before the suicides, Peter is the only neighborhood boy to ever enter the Lisbon house. This comes about because he helped Mr. Lisbon hang a model solar system in his classroom, earning him an invitation to have dinner at the Lisbon house. At one point during the meal, he excuses himself to go to the bathroom and ends up in the sisters' bathroom, where he does some snooping. He finds Mary's hidden makeup and a used Tampax that he thinks belonged to Lux. Afterwards, he proudly tells the other boys what he found, focusing particularly on the Tampax. By bragging in this way, he motivates Paul Baldino to sneak into the Lisbon house himself.

Paul Baldino –Paul Baldino is one of the neighborhood boys who obsess over the Lisbon sisters. It's known throughout the neighborhood that Paul's father, Sammy "The Shark" Baldino, is a powerful mobster, and the size and splendor of his family's house attests to this. Shortly before the events of the novel, Paul's father has the tree in front of their house cut down. In its place, workers create a cement replica of a stump with an iron grate in it, and though Sammy "The Shark" Baldino claims it's just a grill, everyone suspects that it's actually the entrance to a network of tunnels he built beneath his property—tunnels he can use if he ever needs to escape the police. This, the neighborhood boys think, is how Paul Baldino manages to show up unexpectedly in basements all over their street, though Paul himself claims he just uses the local storm drains. After Peter Sissen regales the boys with stories of what he found in the Lisbon sisters' bathroom, Paul boasts that he will make his way into the Lisbon house and see one of the girls showering. When he does so, however, he finds Cecilia lying in bloody bathwater after having slit her wrists. Paul screams and calls the police.

Trip Fontaine –Trip Fontaine is a high school heartthrob who becomes enamored of Lux. The neighborhood boys are somewhat confounded by Trip, failing to see the appeal he has over high school girls and mothers alike, mostly because he only recently shed his childish looks and transformed into a handsome young man. Because Trip is used to girls approaching him, though, he's unsure of how to impress Lux, and none of his normal moves—like walking by and flipping his hair—seem to work. Finally, though, he informs her during a school assembly that he's going to ask her out. To convince her parents to let her date him, he says, he will first come over and watch television with the family. Then he'll ask her out. Lux goes along with the plan, but it doesn't work—her parents sit between them all night. But when Trip is sitting dejectedly in his car before leaving, Lux suddenly sneaks out of the house and swoops into the car, kissing him ferociously as he reaches into her pants. But then she leaves as abruptly as she appeared. Trip eventually manages to convince Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon to let him take Lux to homecoming, where they sneak away and have sex on the football field. Years later, while getting sober at a rehabilitation clinic, Trip tells the boys that he genuinely cared for Lux. After having sex with her that night on the football field, though, he got up and left her there. She had to take a cab back and was subsequently grounded. After a life full of sex, romance, alcohol, and drugs, Trip still doesn't know why he treated Lux

that way—he still thinks about her as the only woman who ever really captured his heart.

Kevin Head –Kevin Head is one of the neighborhood boys who obsess over the Lisbon sisters. Trip Fontaine chooses him as one of the boys to take the Lisbon girls to the homecoming dance. Kevin ends up pairing off with Therese. While getting some air at the dance, Therese asks him if he and the other boys took them to homecoming because they pity them. Kevin assures her this isn't the case, prompting Therese to talk about how she and her sisters aren't like Cecilia, saying that they "just want to live."

Joe Hill Conley – Joe Hill Conley is one of the neighborhood boys who obsess over the Lisbon sisters. Trip Fontaine chooses him as one of the boys to take the Lisbon girls to the homecoming dance. Joe ends up pairing off with Bonnie, who follows Trip and Lux beneath the bleachers at the dance—which means that Joe also goes beneath the bleachers, where he and Bonnie watch Lux and Trip drink peach schnapps and kiss. Joe and Bonnie do the same, and though Bonnie hesitates at first, she seems to enjoy the experience, judging by the fact that she kisses him again in the car on the way home and asks him to call her soon. Later, when the other boys ask Joe if he talked to Bonnie about Cecilia, he says, "There's a time for talk and a time for silence."

Parkie Denton –Parkie Denton is one of the neighborhood boys who obsess over the Lisbon sisters. Trip Fontaine chooses him as one of the select few boys who will take the Lisbon girls to the homecoming dance, mostly because Parkie says they can take his father's Cadillac. Parkie pairs off with Mary, but he doesn't seem to connect with her like the other boys do with their dates.

Chase Buell –Chase Buell is one of the neighborhood boys who obsess over the Lisbon sisters. When the boys go over to the Lisbon house at the end of the novel with the intention of "saving" the girls, they proudly tell Lux that they can use Chase Buell's car (which is actually his mother's) to drive them somewhere far away. Lux indulges this idea, though she suggests that they should take the Lisbon family's car because it's bigger. She also starts unbuckling Chase's belt and reaching into his pants, much to the utter and complete surprise of not just Chase but all of the other boys. But when Lux hears a thump (the sound of Bonnie hanging herself), she stops fiddling with Chase's pants and says she's going to wait in the garage, where she asphyxiates herself in her parents' car.

Tim Winer –Tim Winer is one of the neighborhood boys who obsess over the Lisbon sisters. The rest of the boys call him "the brain" because he's smart. After Cecilia's suicide, the boys get hold of her diary, and Tim tries to analyze her personality based on her handwriting. He declares that she was a "dreamer" who dealt with "emotional instability."

Father Moody –Father Moody is the local priest. He visits the Lisbons after Cecilia's death in an attempt to get them to open up about the tragedy. Like many of the neighborhood fathers before him, though, he finds himself swept to the television by Mr. Lisbon, who sits him in front of a baseball game and appears unwilling to discuss Cecilia's suicide. Giving up, Father Moody goes looking for Mrs. Lisbon, but he doesn't find her. He's astonished by the messy state of the house as he moves through it. What really stands out to him, though, is the fact that the Lisbon sisters—when he comes across them upstairs—seem deeply distraught. In retrospect, he's convinced that the sisters had no plan to kill themselves, contrary to some theories suggesting that they planned to do so all along.

Dr. Hornicker – Dr. Hornicker is the resident psychiatrist at the local hospital. He meets with Cecilia after her first suicide attempt and determines that she would benefit from independence, freedom, and a more active social life. Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon are reluctant to listen to him, but they relax some of their rules and allow their daughters to have a party, which is ultimately when Cecilia succeeds in taking her own life. After Cecilia's death, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon refuse to meet with Dr. Hornicker, though he has a brief chance to examine Lux when she fakes abdominal pain in order to go to the hospital for a secret pregnancy test. Based on his conversation with her, he postulates that the remaining Lisbon sisters have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Throughout the rest of his career, he often writes about the Lisbon girls.

Mr. Hedlie – Mr. Hedlie is an English teacher at the local high school, but he works odd jobs in the summers. Outside of school, he is—by all accounts—a hippie. Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon hire him to fix up and clean out their house after their daughters (except for Mary) die. The neighborhood boys watch from afar as he dismantles everything that used to belong to the Lisbon sisters.

Sammy "The Shark" Baldino – Sammy "The Shark" Baldino is Paul Baldino's father. Everyone in the neighborhood knows he's a powerful mobster. He is arrested and taken away shortly after the Lisbon daughters' group suicide, and the boys seem to associate this change with the broader feeling that something has fundamentally shifted in their neighborhood.

Dominic Palazzolo – Dominic is an Italian boy living in the same neighborhood as the Lisbons. He impresses the neighborhood boys by talking about how in love he is with a girl named Diana Porter, eventually jumping off a roof because he can't be with her. He falls into the bushes and is completely unharmed, but some people think Cecilia had a crush on him and was inspired by him to try to take her own life.

Uncle Tucker – Uncle Tucker is a middle-aged man who lives in the boys' neighborhood. Because of his drinking problem, he is often the only one awake late at night, so he ends up witnessing several intriguing episodes involving the Lisbon sisters that the boys miss—episodes that he tells the boys about when they interview him later in life.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Linda Perle – Linda Perle is a journalist for the local newspaper who writes articles about the Lisbon girls. The neighborhood boys think her writing about the Lisbon sisters is both overly scandalous and surprisingly inaccurate.

Joe Larson – Joe Larson is one of the neighborhood boys who obsess over the Lisbon sisters. He lives across the street from the Lisbons.

Diana Porter – Diana Porter is the girl Dominic Palazzolo is in love with. Because he can't be with her, Dominic jumps off a low roof. Some people think this is what inspired Cecilia to attempt suicide.

TERMS

Greek Chorus – In ancient Greek theater, the chorus was a group of characters that narrated or commented on the events of the play. Novels narrated by a collective group of characters (using "we" instead of "I") borrow from this ancient theatrical tradition. **The neighborhood boys** in *The Virgin Suicides* function as a Greek chorus.

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.

OBSESSION, GOSSIP, AND SCANDAL

The Virgin Suicides examines the ways in which neighborhood gossip is often fueled by a morbid fascination with scandal. In the year between Cecilia Lisbon's suicide and her sisters' suicides, the neighbors watch the Lisbon family closely. At first, this attention seems kind and caring, as neighborhood parents reach out to Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon to lend support. Soon, though, the community's interest in the Lisbons begins to morph into something else, becoming more voyeuristic than neighborly. Local parents judge the Lisbons for letting their house slip into disrepair, and some people even gossip about how Mr. Lisbon shouldn't be able to teach at the high school because he can't "run his own family." As the surrounding community becomes increasingly critical of the Lisbons, then, the novel subtly suggests that the neighbors are mainly interested in picking apart the Lisbons' grief from afar, ultimately acting as if their tragic circumstances are little more than a sickly entertaining spectacle.

At the same time, though, the novel also considers how easy it can be to get swept up in this voyeuristic mentality. The group of neighborhood boys who narrate the novel perfectly exemplify the human tendency toward nosiness, largely because they're hormonal adolescents who are arguably *already* obsessed with the Lisbon girls before tragedy even strikes. When Peter Sissen receives a rare dinner invite from Mr. Lisbon, for instance, he makes a point of snooping around the girls' bathroom, eventually bragging to the other boys about his discovery of a used Tampax in the trash. That he boasts about this underscores the boys' fixation on the Lisbon girls, indicating that they don't have a problem with invading the sisters' privacy. To that end, the boys continue to obsess over the Lisbon girls for years—*decades*, even—after the girls take their own lives. Whereas the adults in the neighborhood gossip about the Lisbons in a judgmental but ultimately fleeting way, the boys get so swept up in their collective fascination that they can no longer extricate themselves from the echo chamber of their own obsession. In other words, their interest in the Lisbons seems to feed into itself, with each boy's passion intensifying the group's preoccupation with the sisters. Through this, the novel showcases the ways in which gossip, an interest in scandal, and a voyeuristic group mentality can cause people to obsess over the private lives of others.

COMING OF AGE AND NOSTALGIA

Although the plot of *The Virgin Suicides* centers around the Lisbon sisters' suicides, the novel is, in many ways, a celebration of the joys and difficulties of growing up. Because it's narrated by a group of neighborhood friends who are now middle-aged, a strong sense of nostalgia runs throughout the novel—a nostalgia for the excitement and discovery of adolescence. Although the boys obsess over the Lisbon girls, this obsession seems almost pleasurable for them. After all, whenever they talk about the Lisbon girls or watch them from afar, they do so while hanging out as a group, leisurely passing the time and fantasizing about their crushes. Before the remaining four Lisbon sisters die by suicide, then, the boys still seem to live in a relatively happy world—a world in which innocent pleasures are still possible and the harsh realities of life haven't yet come crashing down on them.

But this idyllic life seems to crumble for the boys when the last Lisbon sister dies. Emerging from an all-night party, the boys are excited to have gotten their first taste of what feels to them like adulthood, having spent the night kissing and drinking: "Already we had been married and divorced, in a sense, [...]," they note, seemingly proud of their newfound maturity. But this feeling quickly gives way to their discovery that paramedics are across the street taking Mary Lisbon's lifeless body away. Their first foray into adulthood is therefore marred by the sobering realization that the last Lisbon sister has died, and it is perhaps because of this coincidence that the boys come to retrospectively associate the Lisbons with a better time—a

time to which they'll never be able to return. In other words, their memories of the Lisbon sisters are shot through with a nostalgia not just for a time when the girls were alive, but also for a time when their own youthful innocence still existed. In this way, the novel dramatizes the coming-of-age process, effectively using the Lisbon tragedy to spotlight the jarring transition from simple childhood happiness to the dark, heavy realities of adulthood.

SUBURBAN LIFE, CLASS, AND DECLINE

The Virgin Suicides mines everyday life in upper-middle-class suburbia, intentionally conflating the Lisbon tragedy with a broader sense of decline in the United States. Of course, there's no tangible relationship between the Lisbon sisters' suicides and the larger changes sweeping the nation, but everyone in the neighborhood associates their frustratingly inexplicable deaths with the similarly unsettling feeling that the glory days of American prosperity are coming to an end. Part of this dynamic is due to the fact that the novel takes place in a wealthy suburb of Detroit in the 1970s, so its characters are accustomed to life in a well-off community fueled by Detroit's robust midcentury automotive industry. For this reason, it's a shock to the novel's narrators when the country begins to undergo economic and cultural upheavals—after all, comfort and security are all the boys narrating the novel have ever known. As such, their quiet suburban neighborhood becomes the lens through which they make sense of the volatile national changes taking place in the 1970s, a decade that saw a significant economic decline, continued struggles for racial justice, and the country's messy withdrawal from the Vietnam War.

And yet, while *The Virgin Suicides* is—in many ways—about what it's like to process these momentous cultural shifts as teenagers living in a wealthy society, the novel doesn't address the issues head-on. Instead, it uses the Lisbon suicides as a disruptive event that symbolically shatters the illusion of peace, happiness, and prosperity in suburban American life. Everyone in the neighborhood comes to the same general consensus about the Lisbon girls' suicides: "Something sick at the heart of the country had infected the girls." For some of the boys' parents, this sickness has to do with "godlessness," rock music, and "the loosening of morals." For others, it has to do with "the way the mail wasn't delivered on time, and how potholes never got fixed, or the thievery at City Hall, or the race riots […]." The boys even say that the Lisbon girls effectively "became a symbol of what was wrong with the country." In a way, then, the suicides shake this wealthy community because they force the neighbors to acknowledge that their idyllic vision of the United States is flawed—if such tragedy is possible in upper-middle-class suburbia, then it's possible anywhere. And this, in turn, means that the stereotypical markers of American success (a nice home, a nuclear family, a quiet neighborhood) have failed to protect the characters from sorrow and hardship. Simply put, then, the Lisbon suicides challenge the very idea that living in a sheltered, wealthy community provides any real safety or comfort.

LOSS, MOURNING, AND UNCERTAINTY

The Virgin Suicides illustrates how difficult it can be to process and mourn a tragic loss when the circumstances surrounding that loss are shrouded in uncertainty. Of course, this is partially why the neighborhood boys become so obsessed with the Lisbon girls, wanting desperately to know why they decide to die by suicide. But it's also the case for the Lisbon girls themselves, or at least the four sisters left to deal with the aftermath of their youngest sister Cecilia's suicide. Not only do the sisters have to process Cecilia's death, but they also have to navigate their parents' grief while simultaneously dealing with intense scrutiny from the surrounding community. What's interesting about *The Virgin Suicides*, though, is that the sisters' emotional lives are at the center of the novel while remaining largely unknown—the entire novel, after all, is made up of the neighborhood boys' collective attempt to understand the sisters' emotional lives, but this attempt is only based on theories and conjectures. Of course, certain aspects of the sisters' home life are obvious from the outside, as the family responds to Cecilia's death by ceasing to care for their house and property, suggesting that the Lisbons' grief has overcome their ability to keep up superficial appearances. And yet, the Lisbon girls themselves seem quite happy and almost care-free when Trip Fontaine and several other boys take them to the homecoming dance. In fact, multiple characters remark throughout the novel that it would have been impossible to anticipate that the remaining Lisbon sisters would follow in Cecilia's footsteps. This, in turn, heightens the confounding nature of their eventual suicides, leaving everyone—including their own parents—in a perpetual state of uncertainty. And this uncertainty, the novel implies, is perhaps what makes it so difficult for the neighborhood boys to move on, as they can't stop searching for some sense of closure—a sense of closure they'll never find.

SYMBOLS

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

ELM TREES AND THE LISBON HOUSE

The Virgin Suicides tracks the deterioration of a suburban neighborhood's elm trees as a way of symbolically illustrating an overall sense of decline. The elm trees in the boys' neighborhood are large and impressive, but they become infected by beetles that slowly kill them. The only

way to stop the spread of this beetle, the Parks Department insists, is by cutting down the infected trees—which, in turn, essentially means razing all of the trees in the neighborhood. This has a significant impact on the overall aesthetics of the neighborhood, and the residents develop a nostalgia for the time period in which there were still healthy trees lining the streets—a time period that also happens to coincide with when the Lisbon sisters were still alive. To that end, the boys associate the pre-infection elm trees with the glory days of their neighborhood, back when the Lisbon sisters were still alive and there was nothing all that serious to worry about. But as the trees slowly die and are cut down, this idyllic period comes to an end, ultimately symbolizing a broader shift taking place across the nation, as the idea of the perfect American Dream falters in the face of an economic recession, increasingly urgent calls for equality, and the general decline of American exceptionalism. In this way, the slow death of the elm trees symbolizes not just the deterioration of the Lisbon family but also the crumbling of an entire way of thinking, as the neighborhood boys slowly realize that the perfect world their parents raised them in won't actually protect them from the harsh realities of everyday life.

THE VIRGIN MARY CARDS

Cecilia's laminated Virgin Mary cards, which her sisters later hide around the neighborhood, symbolize the mystery and uncertainty surrounding the Lisbon suicides. The cards themselves are like a puzzle piece that the neighborhood boys never figure out how to fit into the larger picture. Instead of providing insight into Cecilia or her sisters' thinking, the cards only add more confusion, as it's never made clear why Cecilia was holding a Virgin Mary card during her first suicide attempt (nor is it clear why her sisters hide them in odd places shortly before their group suicide). What's more, the Virgin Mary (the mother of Jesus) is, in some ways, a quite mysterious figure, or—at least—she might have appeared so at first. After all, the whole concept of divine conception would have seemed quite astounding and befuddling at first, and though Christian teaching has normalized the idea that God chose to conceive Jesus with Mary through the Holy Spirit, the story is still full of wonder and—to a certain extent—ambiguity, since the Holy Spirit itself is a rather complex theological idea that can be hard to fully grasp. In turn, the mere presence of the Virgin Mary in the novel brings an element of wonder to the tale, imbuing the laminated cards themselves with symbolic relevance, ultimately representing the neighborhood boys' inability to ever know what really drove the Lisbon girls to suicide.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Picador Paper edition of *The Virgin Suicides* published in 2018.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide—it was Mary this time, and sleeping pills, like Therese—the two paramedics arrived at the house knowing exactly where the knife drawer was, and the gas oven, and the beam in the basement form which it was possible to tie a rope. They got out of the EMS truck, as usual moving much too slowly in our opinion, and the fat one said under his breath, "This ain't TV, folks, this is how fast we go." He was carrying the heavy respirator and cardiac unit past the bushes that had grown monstrous and over the erupting lawn, tame and immaculate thirteen months earlier when the trouble began.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Mary Lisbon, Therese Lisbon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

These are the opening lines of *The Virgin Suicides*. In the very first sentence, the novel reveals that all of the Lisbon daughters have died by suicide. Of course, readers don't yet know who the Lisbon sisters are or even how many of them exist, but this doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is that they all die by suicide—a very strange thing that will require quite a bit of explanation. And this, for all intents and purposes, is what the rest of the novel supposedly does: tell the story of the Lisbon sisters and how it came to pass that all of their lives ended in suicide. And yet, the novel will *also* show that it's impossible to fully understand why the Lisbon girls decided to take their own lives. In this way, the implicit promise of the novel's opening paragraph (that is, to explain the tragedy) ultimately falls flat, as the narrators—and, in turn, readers—eventually come to realize that the entire ordeal will forever be cloaked in uncertainty.

Another important aspect of the opening paragraph is that the narrators subtly insert themselves into it, noting that the paramedics are "moving much too slowly in our opinion." Right away, this signals to readers that *The Virgin Suicides* will operate under a unique narrative device, one in which the tale is narrated not by just one person, but by multiple

characters at once. The implications of this Greek chorus aren't yet apparent, but the fact that a group of people is apparently watching the paramedics take away Mary Lisbon and—not only that—commenting judgmentally on the process hints that the surrounding community is full of gossip. There is, in other words, a strong sense that everyone around the Lisbon family is watching them very carefully.

> Chucking her under her chin, he said, "What are you doing here, honey? You're not even old enough to know how bad life gets."

And it was then Cecilia gave orally what was to be her only form of suicide note, and a useless one at that, because she was going to live: "Obviously, Doctor," she said, "you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl."

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys, Cecilia Lisbon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

After Cecilia makes her first attempt at suicide, she finds herself alive in the hospital, where she has to field questions from the doctor. Even though the doctor helped save her life, he doesn't show much compassion when he talks to her about why she tried to end her own life. In fact, he doesn't seem to grasp the gravity of the situation, instead "chucking her under her chin" as if she's just a cute little kid. He also undermines the very idea that anything could be truly wrong in her life, as if only adults can feel sorrow and pain—he is, to put it simply, incredibly patronizing, which is perhaps why Cecilia retorts with an equally glib response, saying that he has clearly "never been a thirteen-year-old girl." This reply is humorous and clever, playing on the stereotypical idea that teenaged girls experience a heightened sense of drama, but the response goes deeper, too; it speaks to the doctor's naïve inability to grasp that Cecilia's generation doesn't necessarily live in the carefree world in which the doctor himself most likely came of age.

The Virgin Suicides is set in the 1970s, so it's reasonable to assume that the doctor might have been a teenager or young man in the 1950s, a decade that was rather prosperous and idyllic for wealthy or middle-class white people in the United States. The 1970s, by contrast, were a bit more complicated because the tides of cultural change had begun to shift, and the supposed glory of the American Dream no longer seemed quite so tangible. In a way, this is what Cecilia is hinting at when she suggests that the doctor has no idea what she's going through. He's stuck in the past, assuming that teenagers exist in an uncomplicated world—an assumption the novel will prove wrong.

> He inventoried deodorants and perfumes and scouring pads for rubbing away dead skin, and we were surprised to learn that there were no douches anywhere because we had thought girls douched every night like brushing their teeth. But our disappointment was forgotten in the next second when Sissen told us of a discovery that went beyond our wildest imaginings. In the trash can was one Tampax, spotted, still fresh from the insides of one of the Lisbon girls. Sissen said that he wanted to bring it to us, that it wasn't gross but a beautiful thing, you had to see it, like a modern painting or something, and then he told us he had counted twelve boxes of Tampax in the cupboard.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Mr. Lisbon, Peter Sissen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7-8

Explanation and Analysis

Before Cecilia's first suicide attempt, Peter Sissen is the only one of the neighborhood boys to enter the Lisbon house. Mr. Lisbon invites him over for dinner to thank Peter for helping him hang a model solar system in his classroom, and though the Lisbon house undoubtedly feels intimidating to enter as an outsider, Peter doesn't waste the opportunity to snoop around. In fact, he boldly invades the Lisbon sisters' privacy by rifling through the things in their bathroom. First and foremost, this passage highlights the neighborhood boys' immaturity, inexperience, and lack of knowledge about women, as illustrated by their absurd and naïve assumption that "girls douched every night like brushing their teeth." Moreover, though, this passage emphasizes the sense of obsessive fascination the neighborhood boys have already developed for the girls—a fascination that apparently knows no bounds, as evidenced by their interest in used menstrual products. Sissen specifically notes that his interest in the used Tampax has to do with the fact that it was "inside one of the Lisbon girls," a phrase that highlights the invasive quality of his and the

other boys' interest, as it's clear that nothing's off limits when it comes to their willingness to scrutinize the Lisbon sisters—not even the insides of their bodies.

Paul Baldino said it was a barbecue, and we believed him. But, as time passed, we noticed that no one ever used it. The papers said the barbecue had cost $50,000 to install, but not one hamburger or hot dog was ever grilled upon it. Soon the rumor began to circulate that the tree trunk was an escape tunnel, that it led to a hideaway along the river where Sammy the Shark kept a speedboat, and that the workers had hung tarps to conceal the digging. Then, a few months after the rumors began, Paul Baldino began emerging in people's basements, through the storm sewers.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Peter Sissen , Paul Baldino , Sammy "The Shark" Baldino

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the neighborhood boys focus on the tree that Paul Baldino's father had cut down in his yard. In its place, Sammy "The Shark" Baldino (who is supposedly connected to the mafia) has a fake stump installed, and inside this stump he puts a metal grate, which—according to Paul—is just a grill. Soon, though, rumors "circulate" that the stump actually leads to an "escape tunnel" for Sammy "The Shark" Baldino, and the novel never actually clarifies whether or not this is the case. Instead, the rumor is left open-ended. And, in this way, it makes its way into the lore of the neighborhood, inviting readers into the legendary tales children tell each other about the other people in their communities.

This speculation about the Baldino family also hints at the gossipy nature of the broader community, as even the newspapers pry into the matter. What's more, the grand theories about escape tunnels and speedboats possibly say something about the way people in this neighborhood think about class, since, despite the fact that the Baldinos are clearly rich, their neighbors seem suspicious about the way they spend their money, as if everything they do is tied to their possible mafia connections. In other words, as wealthy Italian Americans living in a white, upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood, the Baldinos attract suspicion.

Peter Sissen acted as our leader, and even looked slightly bored, saying again and again, "Wait'll you see this." The door opened. Above us, the face of Mrs. Lisbon took form in the dimness. She told us to come in, we bumped against each other getting through the doorway, and as soon as we set foot on the hooked rug in the foyer we saw that Peter Sissen's descriptions of the house had been all wrong. Instead of a heady atmosphere of feminine chaos, we found the house to be a tidy, dry-looking place that smelled faintly of popcorn.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys, Peter Sissen (speaker), Mr. Lisbon, Mrs. Lisbon, Dr. Hornicker

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

After Cecilia's first suicide attempt, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon decide—on the advice of Dr. Hornicker—to let their daughters have a bit more freedom, so they throw a party and invite all of the neighborhood boys to attend. As the boys nervously approach the Lisbon house, Peter Sissen acts like an authority figure, confidently assuming the position of the group's "leader" because he's the only one who has ever entered the house. He clearly enjoys this role, as evidenced by his arrogance when he says, "Wait'll you see this," as if the other boys are about to behold something spectacular—something Peter himself has already seen.

In reality, though, the rest of the boys discover that the Lisbon house is nothing out of the ordinary. Peter has exaggerated the "heady atmosphere of feminine chaos," suggesting that a certain social capital comes with having inside knowledge about the Lisbon family. Peter has exploited and used this social capital to his advantage, ultimately overstating the atmosphere of the house as a way of playing up his insider's knowledge and, in turn, adding to the mythical lore surrounding the Lisbon sisters. When the other boys enter the Lisbon house, though, they get their first hint that the Lisbon sisters aren't quite so extraordinary and unworldly as they've built them up to be (though the boys don't really internalize this point until much, much later in the novel).

> The paneled walls gleamed, and for the first few seconds the Lisbon girls were only a patch of glare like a congregation of angels. Then, however, our eyes got used to the light and informed us of something we had never realized: the Lisbon girls were all different people. Instead of five replicas with the same blond hair and puffy cheeks we saw that they were distinct beings, their personalities beginning to transform their faces and reroute their expressions.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Cecilia Lisbon, Lux Lisbon, Bonnie Lisbon, Mary Lisbon, Therese Lisbon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

As the neighborhood boys file into the basement for the Lisbon family's party, there's a strong feeling that they're entering some kind of inner sanctum. The basement, of course, is just that: an ordinary suburban basement with "paneled walls." And yet, the boys describe these walls as "gleam[ing]," as if they've entered some glorious chamber of heaven. This romanticization extends to the Lisbon girls, too, as the boys initially see them as a "congregation of angels." This, of course, is in keeping with how the boys conceive of the sisters, seeing them as mystical and untouchable. And yet, after looking a bit closer, they're forced to realize that the Lisbon girls are actual *humans*, which means they're all unique in their own ways.

Until now, the boys have only ever seen the Lisbon daughters as an undefined group. Because the girls seem perfect, untouchable, and remote, the boys have come to think of them as a collective entity (much like the Greek chorus of the boys themselves, interestingly enough). But it's harder for them to keep up this ambiguous perspective when they actually come face to face with the sisters, at which point the feel the girls' individual identities begin to emerge.

This, however, doesn't necessarily help the boys *relate* to the Lisbon sisters. In fact, it arguably makes the girls seem even more intimidating, as the boys have no choice but to reckon with the fact that they know almost nothing about these people with whom they're so fascinated.

> Mr. Lisbon kept trying to lift her off, gently, but even in our ignorance we knew it was hopeless and that despite Cecilia's open eyes and the way her mouth kept contracting like that of a fish on a stringer it was just nerves and she had succeeded, on the second try, in hurling herself out of the world.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Cecilia Lisbon, Mr. Lisbon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

When Cecilia Lisbon leaves the party in her basement and jumps to her death, her body lands on a fence running alongside the Lisbon house. Her family members and the neighborhood boys all rush outside to see what has happened, which is when Mr. Lisbon tries to remove his daughter from the fence post upon which she has impaled herself. It's important to keep in mind that this description of Mr. Lisbon trying in vain to lift Cecilia from the fence comes from the neighborhood boys and that—unlike many of their narrative descriptions, which often come to them secondhand—they're able to describe this scene because they actually witnessed it themselves. Needless to say, this is an incredibly traumatic thing to behold, as Cecilia's eyes remain open, and her mouth keeps "contracting like that of a fish on a stringer" even though it's clear she has already died. That the boys watched this gruesome event play out helps contextualize their obsession with the Lisbon tragedy, which they continue to think about even as adults. It often seems quite strange and excessive that the boys are still so hung up as adults on what happened with the Lisbons, but it's worth considering the possibility that witnessing this traumatic event made it extremely difficult for the boys to move on.

Chapter 2 Quotes

> No one else on our street was aware of what had happened. The identical lawns down the block were empty. Someone was barbecuing somewhere. Behind Joe Larson's house we could hear a birdie being batted back and forth, endlessly, by the two greatest badminton players in the world.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Cecilia Lisbon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

After Cecilia jumps to her death, the neighborhood boys eventually have nothing to do but leave the Lisbon house. But they don't go straight home. Rather, they watch from a short distance as the paramedics arrive, and they pinpoint a rather glaring discrepancy between what's going on at the Lisbon house and what's going on in the rest of the neighborhood. "No one else on our street was aware of what had happened," they note, drawing a stark contrast between the dramatic tragedy they've just witnessed and the unbothered suburban calm that otherwise characterizes the street. The details about the smell of barbecue in the air and the sound of people playing badminton nearby further emphasize this discrepancy, ultimately underscoring the strange way that everyday life tends to continue like normal even in the midst of great tragedy. To be fair, this is mostly because nobody actually *knows* what has just happened, but this moment is still symbolic of the way the boys' neighborhood responds to the Lisbons' grief later in the novel—it's as if the neighborhood boys are the only ones truly paying attention.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ […] they said nothing, and our parents said nothing, so that we sensed how ancient they were, how accustomed to trauma, depressions, and wars. We realized that the version of the world they rendered for us was not the world they really believed in, and that for all their caretaking and bitching about crabgrass they didn't give a damn about lawns.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys, Cecilia Lisbon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In the days after Cecilia's suicide, the local fathers decide to take action by removing the fence running alongside the Lisbon house—the fence Cecilia ultimately impaled herself upon. They clearly see this as a service they can do for the Lisbon family, as if getting rid of the fence will help the family move on. What they soon discover, though, is that they aren't quite equipped to remove the fence. All of the fathers are office workers, so they're unaccustomed to real physical labor. They're forced to call upon an outsider with a truck who's capable to uprooting the fence, and once the job is finally done, they watch as this worker peels out on Mr. Bates's lawn. The neighborhood boys—who watch this play out—are shocked: everyone in the neighborhood is usually obsessive about keeping their lawns utterly pristine. And yet, none of the adults say anything about the laborer completely ruining the grass.

In this moment, the boys witness something important: they see that their parents, try as they might, don't actually control the world around them. They can't stop people like this worker from peeling out on their lawns, and they know this. The only reason they have so many rules about their lawns is that they can, to a certain extent, control their own children by telling them not to do anything that might upend the prim and proper aesthetics of the suburban landscape. In the end, though, even the boys' parents know that the order and beauty of suburbia is manufactured—it's not an accurate representation of the broader world, which is full of "trauma, depressions, and wars." The boys' parents might care about appearances within the sheltered context of their small, insulated neighborhood, but when it comes to the chaos and hardship of real life beyond the confines of suburbia, they don't "give a damn about lawns."

❝ We waited to see what would happen with the leaves. For two weeks they had been falling, covering lawns, because in those days we still had trees. Now, in autumn, only a few leaves make swan dives from the tops of remaining elms, and most leaves drop four feet from saplings held up by stakes, runt replacements the city has planted to console us with the vision of what our street will look like in a hundred years. No one is sure what kind of trees these new trees are. The man from the Parks Department said only that they had been selected for their "hardiness against the Dutch elm beetle."

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys, Cecilia Lisbon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Although *The Virgin Suicides* is mostly about the Lisbon sisters and their group suicide, the novel also documents a cultural shift that took place in the fabric of daily American life in the 1970s. This change mainly manifests itself in the

nostalgia the narrators have for the idyllic childhood they spent in a wealthy suburban neighborhood. By the time Cecilia takes her own life, the boys already seem to have detected that things are changing, and though they might not be able to articulate this change as something that is cultural or political, they recognize it in the physical world around them. They're already aware, for instance, that the beautiful elm trees in their neighborhood are dying because of an infection of Dutch elm beetles, and they're worried about treeless days to come—days in which there are no leaves to rake. Of course, this hasn't happened yet: there are still trees to drop leaves after Cecilia dies, but the boys sense that this might not always be the case, and it's this foreboding sense of change that signals a shift from their perfect, beautiful, carefree childhood to the harsh new reality of adulthood and the changing landscape of American suburbs.

❝ Meanwhile, a local television show focused on the subject of teenage suicide, inviting two girls and one boy to explain their reasons for attempting it. We listened to them, but it was clear they'd received too much therapy to know the truth. Their answers sounded rehearsed, relying on concepts of self-esteem and other words clumsy on their tongues.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys, Cecilia Lisbon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In the direct aftermath of Cecilia's suicide, people in the surrounding community are certainly concerned, but none of the news outlets run anything about her death. Months later, however, the media starts paying attention to the issue because it fits into a broader pattern of teenage suicide that is apparently sweeping the nation. The boys watch the news coverage with a certain suspicion, perhaps because they noticed the initial *lack* of coverage after Cecilia's suicide—with this in mind, it's almost as if news outlets didn't care about the tragedy until it fit into a broader, more sensational narrative. In other words, the local media doesn't care about Cecilia as an individual person, but it *does* care about her story insofar as it might contribute to a sensational, attention-grabbing story about teen suicide.

This perspective might also be why the boys are unsure of the teenaged suicide survivors who appear onscreen: the boys feel as if every part of this media coverage is inauthentic, as if everything has been played up to increase viewership. When the boys listen to the teenaged survivors talk about suicide, they think the survivors have "received too much therapy to know the truth," implying that the survivors have almost been coached on how to sound insightful for a vapid, entertainment-hungry television audience. Once again, then, the boys feel like they're the only ones who are genuinely paying attention to what's happening with the Lisbons.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Years later, when we lost our own virginities, we resorted in our panic to pantomiming Lux's gyrations on the roof so long ago; and even now, if we were to be honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that it is always that pale wraith we make love to, always her feet snagged in the gutter, always her single blooming hand steadying itself against the chimney, no matter what our present lovers' feet and hands are doing.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Lux Lisbon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141-142

Explanation and Analysis

After her parents take her and her sisters out of school and stop allowing them outside the house, Lux starts having sex with unknown men on the roof of the house. The boys are astonished to discover this, but they have no qualms about getting out their binoculars and watching. Again, this behavior highlights just how unconcerned they are about invading the Lisbon sisters' privacy, and though it *is* the case that Lux is, to a certain extent, compromising her privacy by doing something so intimate in such a visible place, it's also the case that the boys are still invasive—after all, it's one thing to unexpectedly catch a glimpse of something private and another thing entirely to break out binoculars and study what's going on. And this, of course, is exactly what the boys do: they study Lux's lovemaking. In fact, they pay such close attention to her movements that they end up incorporating the memory of her having sex into their own sex lives as adults. In turn, readers not only see that the boys are unashamed about violating Lux's privacy, but also that the intensity of their obsession with her is so enduring that they've let their mental images of her having sex impact their own romantic lives as adults.

> It was crazy to make love on the roof at any time, but to make love on the roof in winter suggested derangement, desperation, self-destructiveness far in excess of any pleasure snatched beneath the dripping trees. Though some of us saw Lux as a force of nature, impervious to chill, an ice goddess generated by the season itself, the majority knew she was only a girl in danger, or in pursuit, of catching her death of cold.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Lux Lisbon

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Even though the neighborhood boys are all too excited to watch Lux as she has sex with strange men on her roof, they recognize that her behavior is quite out of the ordinary and, arguably, concerning. Of course, there's a certain dissonance at play in this passage, as the boys simultaneously enjoy watching Lux from afar while also judging her for her reckless decisions. Nonetheless, they see her choice to have sex on the roof in the middle of winter as a possible sign of "derangement, desperation," and "self-destructiveness"—and to be fair, it is a rather extreme act to have sex in the freezing cold on top of a hard, cold roof in plain view of anyone who happens to look out the window across the street.

But the boys also romanticize Lux. They're somewhat worried about her and even a bit judgmental, but they see her as almost indestructible, a "force of nature" who's "impervious to chill." These descriptions once again highlight the extent to which the boys have mythologized Lux, putting her on a pedestal and treating her as some sort of superior being. And yet, at the same time, the boys *also* acknowledge that she is "only a girl in danger," and it's this contrast—between the godlike version and the vulnerable version of Lux—that arguably keeps the boys so interested in her, as they want to figure out what's going on in her life and in her head.

> It was from Ms. Angelica Turnette, a hospital clerical worker, that we later received the documents that we hold among our most prized possessions (her nonunion pay hardly made ends meet). The doctor's report, in a series of titillating numbers, presents Lux in a stiff paper gown stepping on the scale (99), opening her. mouth for the thermometer (98.7), and urinating into a plastic cup (WBC 6-8 occ. Clump; mucus heavy; leukocytes 2+). The simple appraisal "mild abrasions" reports the condition of her uterine walls, and in an advancement that has since been discontinued, a photograph was taken of her rosy cervix, which looks like a camera shutter set on an extremely low exposure. (It stares at us now like an inflamed eye, fixing us with its silent accusation.)

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Lux Lisbon

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

When Lux fakes acute stomach pain as a means of visiting the hospital, the boys eventually learn what really happened once she got away from her parents. Suspecting that she might be pregnant, she wanted to talk to the doctor and get a pregnancy test, but she didn't want her parents to find out. The boys, for their part, aren't present for this conversation, but they manage to hear about it through the grapevine, once again demonstrating the extent to which they—and even the entire community—have invaded the Lisbon sisters' privacy.

To that end, the boys later bribe a clerical worker from the hospital and end up obtaining the results of a gynecological exam that Lux's doctor ordered. That they consider this report one of their "most prized possessions" is quite unsettling, as it suggests that even in adulthood they have few qualms about raiding through the most intimate details of Lux's private life. There's even a photograph of Lux's cervix included in the report, meaning that the narrators have an actual picture of her reproductive organs—and, more specifically, a part of her reproductive organs that exists *inside* her body, meaning that the picture itself is a perfect representation of just how far the narrators are willing to go when it comes to invading Lux's privacy (though the suggestion that the cervix stares back at them with a "silent accusation" *does* suggest that they feel a modicum of guilt about their transgression).

> As it circulated in the next few months, this theory convinced many people because it simplified things. Already Cecilia's suicide had assumed in retrospect the stature of a long-prophesied event. Nobody thought it shocking anymore, and accepting it as First Cause removed any need for further explanation. [...] Her suicide, from this perspective, was seen as a kind of disease infecting those close at hand.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Cecilia Lisbon, Lux Lisbon, Dr. Hornicker

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

During Lux's visit to the hospital to obtain a covert pregnancy test, she talks to Dr. Hornicker, the staff psychiatrist. Based partially on this conversation, Dr. Hornicker publishes a paper in which he argues that the Lisbon daughters are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of Cecilia's suicide. The paper also explores data suggesting that teenagers whose siblings have died by suicide are themselves especially prone to depression and suicidal tendencies. Although these theories are, to be fair, most likely rather accurate, what's most interesting about them is their impact on the broader community's thinking when it comes to the Lisbon tragedy. Suddenly, everyone around the boys feels a lot more comfortable with the entire ordeal, as if they've found an unassailable answer for why Cecilia decided to die by suicide and, later, why her sisters decide to do the same. The community comes to see Cecilia's suicide as somehow contagious, as if she "infect[ed] those" close to her. And though the boys themselves seem skeptical of this easy explanation, everyone around them seems to like it because it "simplifie[s]" the matter, making it that much less troubling. The implication, then, is that people naturally seek out explanations and answers in the face of tragic circumstances, even when such tragedies can't, in all likelihood, be explained away with digestible and convenient theories.

> They maintained that a person who couldn't run his own family had no business teaching their children, and the chorus of disapproval had grown steadily louder as the Lisbon house deteriorated. Mr. Lisbon's behavior hadn't helped, his eternal green suit, his avoidance of the faculty lunch room, his piercing tenor cutting through the male singing group like the keening of a bereaved old woman. He was dismissed. And returned to a house where, some nights, lights never went on, not even in the evening, nor did the front door open.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Mr. Lisbon

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

After Cecilia dies by suicide and Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon decide to take the rest of their daughters out of school, Mr. Lisbon is quietly forced to resign from his job as a high school teacher. The main reason for this is that the local parents think "a person who couldn't run his own family had no business teaching their children." This sentiment obviously lacks compassion, but its logic is also inherently flawed—after all, as a teacher, Mr. Lisbon isn't tasked with raising children and supporting a family. Rather, his job is simply to teach his students, which is something he could theoretically do even while his private life is in shambles. Nonetheless, the court of public opinion is unforgiving, and Mr. Lisbon's case isn't helped by the fact that his house has continued to "deteriorate[]." In this community, failing to keep up domestic appearances is a fatal move, as everyone in the neighborhood strives to maintain a façade of suburban prosperity and happiness, perhaps in an effort to keep the sorrows and hardships of the outside world at bay. By letting his house become a physical embodiment of his grief, then, Mr. Lisbon effectively threatens the delicate sense of protection that his neighbors have built between themselves and the real world.

> We still had winter in those days, vast snowdrifts, days of canceled school. At home on snowy mornings, listening to school closings on the radio […], we still knew the vivifying feeling of staying warm inside a shelter like pioneers. Nowadays, because of shifting winds from the factories and the rising temperature of the earth, snow never comes in an onslaught anymore but by a slow accretion in the night, momentary suds. The world, a tired performer, offers us another half-assed season. Back in the days of the Lisbon girls, snow fell every week and we shoveled our driveways into heaps higher than our cars.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the neighborhood boys—now grown men—look back on an idyllic period of their childhood, back when they were used to experiencing huge snowstorms. This description of these bygone snowstorms underscores the sense in the novel that the world the narrators grew up in is no longer available to them. Because of "shifting winds from the factories and the rising temperature of the earth," there simply aren't enormous snowstorms like there used to be, and this vast elemental change coincides with the transition the boys underwent during the Lisbon tragedy. There is a sense of lost innocence, as the boys associate the period in which the Lisbon sisters were still alive with the glory days of their youth. They even say, "Back in the days of the Lisbon girls, snow fell every week and we shoveled our driveways into heaps higher than our cars." The phrase "the days of the Lisbon girls" clearly indicates the connection the boys have made between the Lisbon tragedy and their transition into something like adulthood or, at the very least, the sobering reality of sorrow and hardship. "The days of the Lisbon girls" were, it seems, full of wonder and innocent fun—the kind of childish amazement that comes from building enormous snowbanks on an unexpected day off from school.

However, even if it still snowed in this way, it's unlikely the narrators would be able to recapture this feeling. And though it's certainly the case that the Lisbon tragedy impacted the narrators' transition into adulthood, it's also the case that *everyone* loses this childish wonder in one way or another.

> Thinking back, we decided the girls had been trying to talk to us all along, to elicit our help, but we'd been too infatuated to listen. Our surveillance had been so focused we missed nothing but a simple returned gaze. Who else did they have to turn to? Not their parents. Nor the neighborhood. Inside their house they were prisoners; outside, lepers. And so they hid from the world, waiting for someone—for us—to save them.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Lux Lisbon, Bonnie Lisbon, Mary Lisbon, Therese Lisbon

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

Once the Lisbon sisters start reaching out to the boys and sending them (rather cryptic) messages, the boys hatch grand ideas about how, exactly, the girls see them. Until now, the boys have felt like outsiders when it comes to the Lisbon girls. They've devoted themselves to closely watching the sisters and keeping track of what happens in their lives, but they've mostly done this from afar. Now, though, they decide that the girls have been "trying to talk to [them] all along." Moreover, they convince themselves that the Lisbon sisters need their help, and this notion ultimately plays into a fantasy in which the boys become heroic saviors instead of stalkerish teens. From their new perspective, the Lisbon sisters have nobody other than the boys, and though the boys themselves aren't clear about what, exactly, they'd be saving the girls *from* (or even how they might go about doing that), they nonetheless fancy themselves heroes. And, in this way, they manage to feel that much closer to the Lisbon sisters.

> We climbed up to the tree house the way we always had, stepping in the knothole, then on the nailed board, then on two bent nails, before grasping the frayed rope and pulling ourselves through the trapdoor. We were so much bigger now we could barely squeeze through, and once we were inside, the plywood floor sagged under our weight. The oblong window we'd cut with a handsaw years ago still looked onto the front of the Lisbon house. Next to it were rusty tacks. We didn't remember putting them up, but there they were, dim from time and weather so that all we could make out were the phosphorescent outlines of the girls' bodies, each a different glowing letter of an unknown alphabet.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Cecilia Lisbon, Lux Lisbon, Bonnie Lisbon, Mary Lisbon, Therese Lisbon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 196-197

Explanation and Analysis

Having been told by the Lisbon girls to watch for their signal, the neighborhood boys wait eagerly to see what will happen. To gain a better vantage point, they climb into their old treehouse, allowing them to get a better look at what's going on in the Lisbon house. In doing so, they effectively enter the past, since the treehouse is like a time capsule of their boyhood. The fact that they haven't been inside the treehouse for a long time is a sign that they're growing up—in fact, they don't even remember putting up pictures of the Lisbon girls, suggesting that they haven't been here in quite a while. And yet, that they put up these pictures in the first place is a reminder that the boys have seemingly *always* been infatuated with the Lisbon sisters. The difference, however, is that their previous interest in the girls was mostly innocent: they were just preteen boys with crushes. Now, though, they've become oddly implicated in the Lisbon tragedy, having not only witnessed Cecilia's suicide but also having tracked everything that happened in the aftermath. This, perhaps, adds to the feeling that everything has changed since they last entered the treehouse. Not only does the treehouse itself feel smaller, but the boys' entire conception of the world now feels bigger and more complicated, as they're forced to reconcile their knowledge of and involvement in the Lisbon tragedy with their previous innocence.

> In single file, like paratroopers, we dropped from the tree. It was an easy jump, and only on impact did we realize how close the ground was: no more than ten feet down. Jumping from the grass, we could nearly touch the tree-house floor. Our new height astounded us, and later many said this contributed to our resolve, because for the first time ever we felt like men.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

When the neighborhood boys finally glimpse the Lisbon sisters in their dark house, they decide to jump out of the treehouse and boldly make their way into previously forbidden territory. In doing so, they recognize just how much they've matured in the last year or so, realizing that the treehouse isn't the huge and dangerously elevated structure they once thought it was. Whereas they probably used to think of the treehouse as a towering fortress, they now see it for what it is: a small enclosure perched not very far from the ground. What's more, they see this new perspective for what it is—not a change in the treehouse itself, but a change in *themselves*. They're "astounded" by their "new height," ultimately processing the fact that they've grown up in a relatively short amount of time. This, in turn, feeds into their willingness to cross over the threshold of the Lisbon property, which previously felt forbidden and intimidating. After having watched the Lisbons from afar for so long, the boys now feel a strong sense of maturity that gives them courage to give up their passive surveillance in exchange for active involvement in the Lisbon saga.

> It took a minute to sink in. We gazed up at Bonnie, at her spindly legs in their white confirmation stockings, and the shame that has never gone away took over. The doctors we later consulted attributed our response to shock. But the mood felt more like guilt, like coming to attention at the last moment and too late, as though Bonnie were murmuring the secret not only of her death but of her life itself, of all the girls' lives.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Lux Lisbon, Bonnie Lisbon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209-210

Explanation and Analysis

Having ventured into the Lisbon house, the boys eventually find their way downstairs, where they discover that the remnants of the party from a year ago are still there—the Lisbons haven't cleaned up since the night of Cecilia's suicide. As they take this in, they soon notice Bonnie's lifeless body hanging from the ceiling, but it takes "a minute to sink in." Until this moment, it's unclear whether the boys have suspected that the remaining Lisbon sisters might entertain the idea of suicide. It seems unlikely that this

thought would have even been on the boys' radar, considering that they just came from a conversation with Lux in which they fantasized about all piling into a car with the Lisbon sisters and driving away to Florida. This unrealistic fantasy, it seems, is possibly why they feel guilty now, as they realize that they've been approaching the situation all wrong. The boys have let themselves hatch self-aggrandizing ideas about "saving" the Lisbon girls, which is why they courageously ventured into the Lisbon house in the first place. Now, though, they realize that they misread all of the girls' cues, and they feel guilty for thinking in such self-serving ways without fully recognizing what the Lisbon sisters were going through. They have, in other words, come "to attention at the last moment and too late," and they feel ashamed for not seeing this earlier.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ Like us, they became custodians of the girls' lives, and had they completed the job to our satisfaction, we might never have been forced to wander endlessly down the paths of hypothesis and memory. For less and less did the reporters ask why the girls had killed themselves. Instead, they talked about the girls' hobbies and academic awards.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

After the Lisbon sisters' group suicide, the media swarms, as newspapers and television programs frantically start covering the situation. Meanwhile, the neighborhood boys look on and watch as reporters try to dissect what, exactly, happened and what led the sisters to end their own lives. The boys watch, in other words, as other people do exactly what they've been trying to do: understand the Lisbon sisters.

The reporters become "custodians of the girls' lives," a phrase that implies a sense of ownership or maintenance, as if it's necessary for other people to carefully keep the memory of the Lisbon sisters' alive. And yet, it's not just about memory—it's about the pursuit to comprehend why the sisters did what they did. And this, of course, is an impossible task, which is why the neighborhood boys decide that the reporters are incapable of properly doing the job. The media resorts to easy answers, trying to simplify the situation in a way that makes it more tangible and less abstract. But the boys know that simplifying the matter won't help anyone truly understand it. On the other hand, though, it's impossible to fully grasp every little nuance of the situation, and this is why the boys are "forced to wander endlessly down the paths of hypothesis and memory"—nobody (including them) can make sense of the Lisbon tragedy, but the boys are unsatisfied with this sense of uncertainty and thus can't stop searching for answers.

❝ Mr. Hedlie mentioned that fin-de-siècle Vienna witnessed a similar outbreak of suicides on the part of the young, and put the whole thing down to the misfortune of living in a dying empire. It had to do with the way the mail wasn't delivered on time, and how potholes never got fixed, or the thievery at City Hall, or the race riots, or the 801 fires set around the city on Devil's night. The Lisbon girls became a symbol of what was wrong with the country, the pain it inflicted on even its most innocent citizens, and in order to make things better a parents' group donated a bench in the girls' memory to our school.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Mr. Hedlie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

In the aftermath of the Lisbon sisters' group suicide, everyone around the boys hatches their own theories about why, exactly, the girls decided to end their lives. According to Mr. Hedlie, the local high school English teacher, the tragedy was tied to "living in a dying empire," referencing the decline of the Austrian Empire in the latter half of the 19th century—a period full of turmoil for Austrians, as political and economic factors combined with the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 to ultimately bring the empire to its knees. The comparison Mr. Hedlie makes, of course, is somewhat comical, as he likens a major historical event to the death of several sisters in suburban America. And yet, while it's hard to argue that the Lisbon sisters felt the same sort of pressures as people living in the "dying" Austrian Empire, it's certainly the case that everyone *around* the Lisbon sisters seems to associate their suicides with a broader sense of decline. Suddenly, "the Lisbon girls became a symbol of what was wrong with the country," as if their suicides represent the cultural shifts playing out across the nation.

For some adults in *The Virgin Suicides*, this means associating

the Lisbon suicides with somewhat petty things, like the fact that the mail never comes on time or that potholes never get fixed. This connection might seem silly, but the Lisbon suicides *do* seem to threaten the supposed safety of upper-middle-class suburbia in the same way that a general sense of disorder undermines the fantasy of the suburbs as a perfectly functioning utopia. Similarly, Devil's Night (a pre-Halloween tradition of intense vandalism and arson in Detroit between the 1960s and 1990s) and race riots also ruin the illusion that living in a protected suburb outside a major city insulates wealthy white people from reality. In the same way that the Lisbon suicides force everyone in the neighborhood to recognize that bad things can happen in idyllic settings, these tumultuous events complicate the oversimplified idea of the American Dream.

> We stayed until daybreak. As we came out into the first alcoholic dawn of our lives (a bleachy fade-in, overused through the years now by the one-note director), our lips were swollen from kissing and our mouths throbbing with the taste of girls. Already we had been married and divorced, in a sense, […]. In the distance, at the Lisbon house, the EMS truck sat, flashing its lights. They hadn't bothered to use the sirens.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker), Mary Lisbon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

Although most of the town seems to forget this detail, Mary Lisbon actually survives the group suicide. But she doesn't stay alive for very long after her first attempt. When the boys first discover that she has finally ended her own life, they're filing out of one of the first real parties of their lives. It's dawn, and there's a very real sense of excitement, as the boys clearly feel thrillingly mature for having spent a night drinking alcohol and kissing girls—they have, it seems, come a long way from spying on their crushes with binoculars across the street. Whereas they've mostly behaved like immature little boys throughout the novel, they now seem to have entered a more mature phase of adolescence, even if they're slightly playing this up. In fact, they seem almost jaded and world-weary, as if they've already "been married and divorced"—a phrase that hints at just how proud they are to feel grownup in this moment. Unfortunately for them, though, their emergence into this newfound sense of maturity coincides with the discovery that Mary Lisbon has died by suicide. The boys therefore don't get to dwell for very long in their romanticized conception of adulthood, instead crashing hard into the bleak reality of death. This once again makes it that much harder for them to move on from the Lisbon tragedy.

> More and more, people forgot about the individual reasons why the girls may have killed themselves, the stress disorders and insufficient neurotransmitters, and instead put the deaths down to the girls' foresight in predicting decadence. People saw their clairvoyance in the wiped-out elms, the harsh sunlight, the continuing decline of our auto industry.
>
> […]
>
> In the end, the tortures tearing the Lisbon girls pointed to a simple reasoned refusal to accept the world as it was handed down to them, so full of flaws.

Related Characters: The Neighborhood Boys (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 238-239

Explanation and Analysis

After all of the Lisbon sisters have died by suicide, the boys keep thinking about the tragedy, but they don't come up with any answers as to why the sisters decided to end their lives. In fact, *nobody* can point to "individual reasons why the girls may have killed themselves." Although theories about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder were popular at first, everyone seems to have moved on from the idea that this is what led the girls to their deaths. It's as if "individual reasons" aren't good enough anymore, perhaps because everyone realizes that the tragedy can't be boiled down to just one thing. In the absence of answers, then, people imbue the Lisbons with a prophetic kind of power, deciding that the girls must have recognized something nobody else did—namely, the fact that American society is in decline. This viewpoint plays on the nostalgia that everyone in this community seems to feel for simpler times, back when it was still possible to believe that living in a beautiful, upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood would protect people from hardship and sorrow. The boys (and seemingly everyone around them) now recognize that this isn't the case, and so they conclude that the Lisbon sisters must have

sensed this, deciding not to "accept the world as it was handed down to them, so full of flaws." In turn, the Lisbon tragedy becomes emblematic of the painful realization that wealth and prosperity won't always keep trouble at bay.

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

A Greek chorus of neighborhood boys rehashes the details of Mary Lisbon's suicide. She was, the boys clarify, the last Lisbon sister to take her own life, dying from an overdose of sleeping pills just like her sister, Therese. When the paramedics arrived to put Mary on a stretcher, the boys were already used to seeing them pull up in the ambulance and saunter inside—they knew the two men wouldn't move as quickly or with as much drama as paramedics do in movies. And the paramedics themselves knew exactly where to go in the Lisbon house because they'd been there several times before, as all of the Lisbon sisters had died by suicide within the last 13 months.

The first thing that strikes readers about The Virgin Suicides *is that it's narrated not by a single character but by an entire group of boys. The function of this narrative device isn't immediately clear, but it still establishes a sense of voyeurism that will run throughout the rest of the novel. As the neighborhood boys begin to tell the Lisbon sisters' tragic story, readers feel as if they themselves have been swept up in the drama. Right from the beginning of the novel, then, the narrative invites readers to participate in the neighborhood's morbid fascination with the Lisbon family and its misfortune.*

The boys narrate the Lisbon sisters' tale, explaining that Cecilia—the youngest—is the first daughter to die by suicide. Of all the Lisbon sisters, she stands out the most, since she always wears a vintage wedding dress cut short above the knees. When she slits her wrists in the bathtub in June, the paramedics are so stunned by her troubling, nearly lifeless serenity that they hesitate before lifting her out and putting her on a stretcher. When they finally move her, they find a laminated card depicting the **Virgin Mary** clutched firmly in Cecilia's hands.

Cecilia is the first Lisbon sister to attempt suicide, but the novel has already made it clear that she won't be the last. In fact, it has already been established that all *of the Lisbon sisters will take their own lives. But readers don't yet know why this is the case. To that end, knowing that all of the sisters eventually die by suicide only makes readers more curious about what will happen to the girls throughout the rest of the novel. In a way, readers are in the same position as the neighborhood boys—that is, confused and eager to understand what drives the sisters to suicide.*

The Greek chorus of neighborhood boys interrupts itself to explain that they've tried to put all of the photographs related to the suicides in chronological order. As they peruse the various pictures, they often quote people from the neighborhood, whom they've interviewed about the Lisbon girls in the intervening years—they've even talked to Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon about their daughters. They then pick up their story again, talking about watching Mrs. Lisbon get into the back of the ambulance with Cecilia while Mr. Lisbon follows in the family station wagon, obeying the speed limit all the way to the hospital.

The detail about Mr. Lisbon following the ambulance at a reasonable, law-abiding speed underscores the novel's interest in the idea of convention and normalcy in the face of hardship and crisis. Even though his daughter might die, Mr. Lisbon appears unwilling to break traffic rules, ultimately demonstrating his strict adherence to rules and expectations. To be fair, though, it's possible that these rules and regulations are the only things keeping him grounded in the midst of chaos.

Therese and Bonnie Lisbon are both away when Cecilia cuts her wrists in the bathtub, but Mary and Lux are in the neighborhood. They come running home and enter the bathroom to see their sister's blood curling in the bathwater. They then go outside and hug in the yard while Cecilia is taken away. All the while, the boys watch the two sisters while men from the local Parks Department work nearby on one of the neighborhood's dying **elm trees**, spraying insecticide on the infected limbs. A picture of this elm tree is visible in a picture of the Lisbon house, which is "Exhibit #1." Because of the ruthless fungus brought on by Dutch elm beetles, the tree has long since been cut down.

It's no coincidence that this mention of the neighborhood's diseased elm trees appears alongside details of Cecilia's suicide attempt. Throughout the novel, the boys clearly associate the dying elm trees with the Lisbon sisters and their fading vitality. They also associate the trees with a broader sense of decline that seems to be overtaking their community—a sense of decline tied to Detroit's diminishing automotive industry and the wider cultural shifts taking place across the country during the 1970s (it's worth noting that the novel seems to be set in a wealthy suburb outside of Detroit at some point in the 1970s). The fact that the elm tree outside the Lisbon house is still alive when Cecilia attempts suicide imbues the tree itself with a rather nostalgic feeling, as if the mere existence of elm trees in the neighborhood is a reminder of better days.

At the hospital, the doctors save Cecilia. The doctor who sews up her wounds playfully suggests that she isn't even old enough to know true hardship. "Obviously, Doctor," she replies, "you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl."

Cecilia's comment to the doctor speaks to the idea that many of the characters in the novel ultimately have no idea what the Lisbon sisters might be going through. From the outside, it seems as if they lead easy lives in an affluent community, but Cecilia makes it clear here that there's a lot more going on beneath the surface—and nobody outside of her experience (including the neighborhood boys) fully grasps what, exactly, she's dealing with.

There are five Lisbon sisters: Cecilia is 13, Lux is 14, Bonnie is 15, Mary is 16, and Therese is 17. The boys don't understand how Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon have made such beautiful daughters. Mr. Lisbon is a math teacher at their school and is, by most accounts, quiet and reserved, though none of the boys know him very well outside of the classroom. Boys, after all, aren't allowed in the Lisbon house.

The fact that boys aren't allowed in the Lisbon household is the first sign that the Lisbon sisters live under rather strict parental rules. This, of course, is in keeping with the previous detail about Mr. Lisbon diligently obeying the speed limit during a crisis—a detail that speaks to his orderly way of moving through the world, which perhaps hints at his reserved and rule-oriented parenting style.

The only neighborhood boy who manages to infiltrate the household is Peter Sissen. Because he helped Mr. Lisbon install a scale model of the solar system in his classroom, Mr. Lisbon invites him over for dinner. Throughout the meal, the Lisbon girls—except for Bonnie—kick Peter under the table and shoot him looks. At one point, he excuses himself and goes to use the bathroom upstairs, glancing into the girls' rooms and bringing back stories of seeing their underwear on the floor, their old stuffed animals, and even a bra hanging on a crucifix. He also finds Mary's makeup, which she has hidden in a sock beneath the bathroom sink. Along with lipstick and concealer, there's some wax in the sock, which signals to the neighborhood boys that Mary waxes her upper lip.

Peter Sissen is the first one of the neighborhood boys to be introduced into the novel as an individual. And yet, he largely functions as just one part of a larger whole—namely, one part of the Greek chorus of neighborhood boys. To that end, he essentially treats his time in the Lisbon house as a reconnaissance mission aimed at collecting as much information about the Lisbon sisters as possible, clearly intending to tell the rest of the boys about what he finds. It's evident, then, that the boys' interest in the Lisbon girls is rather invasive, and their fascination with the sisters comes to seem a bit obsessive, even if it comes from a fairly typical kind of adolescent interest in peers they find attractive or enticing.

While in the bathroom, Peter Sissen finds a used Tampax in the trashcan. He wants to fish it out and bring it to the other boys, thinking it's actually quite beautiful. But then Lux knocks on the door, and he guesses by her eagerness to get into the bathroom that she's the one on her period—the Tampax, he reasons, belongs to her. He comes back to his friends with these tales from the Lisbon household.

The invasive quality of the boys' interest in the Lisbon sisters is overwhelmingly apparent in this scene, as Peter Sissen demonstrates his willingness to completely violate Lux's privacy. The fact that Peter views Lux's used Tampax with such reverence indicates just how fascinated he is with the Lisbon sisters' private lives. Seeing the Tampax is, for Peter, a glimpse into one of the most private aspects of Lux's life, and instead of giving him pause, this thrills him.

Hearing Peter Sissen's stories about the Lisbon house, Paul Baldino announces he's going to get into the house himself and see things even more extraordinary than Peter did. Everyone knows Paul's father, Sammy "the Shark" Baldino, is a mob boss. The family lives in a mansion, and Paul is used to seeing tough Italian American men visit his father at all hours. Paul himself is tough and confident, and though the other boys are friends with him, they're also intimidated by his presence.

The Virgin Suicides *is, of course, about the death of the Lisbon sisters, but it's not* solely *about their suicides—it's also about the many small details that make up life in an affluent Detroit suburb. In this moment, the boys describe Paul Baldino and his mobster father, and the details they provide form a picture of the kind of scandalous, larger-than-life gossip that often overtakes teenage boys living in suburbia. This is not to say that Paul Baldino's father* isn't *a mob boss—it's just to say that the interest the boys show in Paul's family somewhat mirrors the fascination they have with the Lisbon girls; in both cases, they're attracted to juicy stories and entertaining anecdotes.*

Rumor has it that Paul's father built an underground network of tunnels beneath their house, making it easier for him to escape the police at a moment's notice. The **tree** in the Baldino family's front yard was cut down and replaced with a cement stump painted to look real. There's a metal grate in the middle of the stump, and though Paul tells his friends it's nothing more than a barbecue pit, they know it must have something to do with Sammy "the Shark" Baldino's escape tunnel.

This detail about the stump in Paul Baldino's yard is rather absurd, and it's not entirely clear whether or not readers are supposed to take it seriously. It's possible that the story about the escape tunnel and the tree stump is a far-fetched tale concocted by the neighborhood boys because they don't know what to make of Paul's Italian American family and their possible ties to the mafia. To a certain extent, there's a classist element at play here, as the boys seem to make wild assumptions about Paul's father being in the mafia simply because he's wealthy and Italian American. And yet, it also seems possible that everything the boys think about the Baldinos is *true. There is, then, a sense of uncertainty surrounding what, exactly, the boys truly know about their neighbors—an uncertainty that later brings itself to bear on their fascination with the Lisbon girls.*

As rumors circulate about Sammy "the Shark" Baldino building an escape tunnel, Paul Baldino starts appearing in his neighbors' basements, crawling up next to their boilers and through their cellars. He claims he's just playing in the storm drains beneath his house, but the neighborhood boys suspect he's using the escape tunnel. And this, of course, is how he comes to find himself in the Lisbon house. Having bragged that he would see the Lisbon sisters taking showers, he makes his way into their basement. Nobody seems to be home, so he goes upstairs and enters the bathroom, where he finds Cecilia lying in bloody bathwater. Horrified, he runs downstairs and calls the police.

What begins as a humorous, absurd story about Paul navigating storm drains (or, according to rumor, his father's escape tunnel) quickly turns into something much more serious, as he is the first one to find Cecilia after her suicide attempt. Nobody doubts that Paul is the one to find her, but it's worth noting that there is *some uncertainty surrounding how, exactly, he came to find her: did he use the storm drains to enter the Lisbon house, or did he use his father's escape tunnel? This uncertainty represents the broader uncertainty that the neighborhood boys eventually encounter as they try to piece together why the Lisbon girls all decide to die by suicide—something they may never understand.*

At the hospital, the doctors give Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon a laminated card of the **Virgin Mary** that Cecilia was holding in the bathtub. One side of the card shows a painting of Mary; the other explains that the Virgin Mary has been "appearing" throughout the city and "bringing her message of peace to a crumbling world." The card urges readers to call *555-MARY*. Reading this, Mr. Lisbon expresses dismay that his daughter actually "believes this crap," even though he and his wife baptized her and had her confirmed in the Catholic church.

It's not readily apparent why Cecilia is holding this laminated card depicting the Virgin Mary, nor is it clear what Mr. Lisbon means when he bemoans the fact that his daughter actually "believes this crap." It's possible that Mr. Lisbon is revealing in this moment that, even though he went through the motions of baptizing his daughter, he doesn't actually believe in the Catholic religion—which would suggest that he only baptized Cecilia to keep up appearances. It's also possible, though, that he does *believe in the Catholic religion but views the laminated card as sacrilegious. Overall, the uncertainty surrounding both what the card means to Cecilia and what Mr. Lisbon makes of it only adds to the mystified, curious feeling that the neighborhood boys experience as they try throughout the novel to piece together what's going on in the Lisbon family.*

Everyone in town is curious about Cecilia's suicide attempt, but the local news doesn't mention it—the story is too dark for the newspaper's taste. The only piece of genuine news in that week's paper is about the worker strike at the local cemetery, where bodies have begun to build up because the gravediggers refuse to work until their demands are met. Any information about Cecilia's suicide attempt, then, comes from hearsay, as everyone in town speculates about what happened. Paul Baldino, for his part, insists to his friends that Cecilia must have cut her wrists while sitting on the toilet seat before moving to the bathtub. "She sprayed the place, man," he says.

The rather crass way Paul talks about Cecilia's suicide attempt underscores the boys' voyeuristic interest in the tragedy. They might be concerned, but they're still just a group of teenaged boys—a group prone to lewd comments and a certain callous overall mentality. In other words, Paul's insensitive comment is a good reminder of the boys' adolescent immaturity, as it becomes quite clear that they aren't accustomed to tactfully discussing such delicate issues.

The boys are at Joe Larson's house—across the street from the Lisbon household—when Cecilia comes home from the hospital. It's raining hard, so they can barely even see the Lisbon station wagon as it pulls up, but even Joe Larson's mom runs to the window to peer out with the boys. Through the rain, they see that Cecilia is still wearing the vintage wedding dress. Apparently, she demanded to have it brought to her in the hospital, and Dr. Hornicker—the resident psychiatrist—thought she should be allowed to have it.

That even Joe Larson's mother runs to the window to peer at Cecilia is an illustration of the broader community's interest in scandal and tragedy. It's not just the boys who want to know what's going on in the Lisbon household. In fact, it's possible that the boys have acquired their taste for gossip and scandal from their parents, ultimately suggesting that this voyeuristic impulse is woven into the very fibers of the community.

In the coming days and weeks, the boys watch the Lisbon house for signs of Cecilia. She often spends her days outside on the front lawn, always accompanied by one of her sisters (as if to keep watch over her). But she doesn't do much—she just lies there in her vintage wedding dress. Meanwhile, the neighbors gossip. Some of the mothers insist that Cecilia must have just wanted to escape her parents' house. "She wanted out of that decorating scheme," one mother jokes. One day, two neighborhood women bring over cake. Later, their accounts of how Mrs. Lisbon received them differ greatly from each another—one of them says Mrs. Lisbon immediately sent the girls upstairs and put the cake in the fridge, but the other insists that Mrs. Lisbon was friendly and had a piece of cake with them.

Once again, it's evident that the entire neighborhood is eager to pry into the Lisbon family's private life. And the novel doesn't necessarily present this fascination as all that wholesome or benevolent, as made clear by the mean joke one mother makes about how Cecilia attempted suicide just to escape her mother's "decorating scheme"—a comment that makes light of a serious issue while also insulting Mrs. Lisbon's eye for interior design. What's more, the novel illustrates just how unreliable gossip can be, considering that the two neighbors who visit Mrs. Lisbon can't even agree on what happened when they went over.

One prominent theory in the neighborhood is that Cecilia's suicide attempt was tied to her crush on Dominic Palazzolo. Dominic is an immigrant living with relatives, and he's desperately in love with a girl named Diana Porter. In accented English, Dominic often tilts his sunglasses toward the sky and mutters, "I love her," speaking with a grave profundity that impresses the other neighborhood boys. But when Diana left for a vacation in Switzerland with her family for the whole summer, Dominic cursed God, climbed onto the roof while everyone was watching, and jumped off.

It's clear that the neighborhood boys are easily impressed by displays of maturity or adulthood, given that they find Dominic's melodramatic declarations of love so profound. From the outside, it seems obvious that Dominic is playing up his feelings as a way of attracting attention and posturing as a complex, mature figure. But the boys don't see it this way, instead looking up to him as someone capable of experiencing great emotion. And this, in turn, once again highlights their own immaturity.

Cecilia—and the neighborhood boys—watched Dominic take his plunge. He survived. In fact, he landed softly in his relatives' carefully manicured bushes, stood up, and walked away unharmed. Some people insist that his bold act of suicidal love inspired Cecilia to take her own life, especially because Dominic moved to New Mexico shortly before Cecilia's suicide attempt.

It's unlikely that Dominic's fake suicide attempt is what inspired Cecilia to try to take her own life. Nonetheless, the fact that people speculate in this way underlines the pervasive desire throughout the community to hatch theories that might explain Cecilia's thinking. In turn, the novel seems to imply that people are more comfortable thinking about tragedy if they think they know what caused it.

According to Dr. Hornicker's initial diagnosis, Cecilia's suicide attempt was "an act of aggression inspired by the repression of adolescent libidinal urges." As such, he urges Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon to let her—and her sisters—have a bit more freedom and independence. From then on, things change at the Lisbon household. The boys find that they can regularly spot Lux sunbathing in the front lawn. Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon even allow the boy who cuts their grass to come inside for a glass of water, though the neighborhood boys never ask him about this because they are intimidated by his "muscles and his poverty."

Even though the boys are eager to learn whatever they can about the Lisbon family, they don't ask the boy who cuts the grass what it's like inside the Lisbon house. This is because they're afraid of his "muscles and his poverty"—a phrase that clarifies the fact that they live in a sheltered, affluent community and are unaccustomed to interacting with people from other backgrounds. This, in turn, helps make sense of why the Lisbon family's drama occupies the boys so much. After all, it's clear that their entire lives are centered around a rather small and insular community, so any kind of scandal seems all the more important.


Years later, Mr. Lisbon tells the neighborhood boys—who are no longer boys—that Mrs. Lisbon disagreed with Dr. Hornicker's advice to give the girls more freedom. But, Mr. Lisbon says, his wife gave up and let them do what they wanted—for a while, at least. By this time, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon have gotten divorced, and he admits that he never really agreed with his wife's strict rules, though he always went along with them.

Although readers don't yet know how the story of the Lisbon sisters will play out, this section suggests that whatever comes to pass will ultimately drive Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon apart. Of course, it has already been made clear that all five of the Lisbon sisters will eventually die by suicide, so it's not all that surprising that Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon might get divorced—after all, tragedy often creates tension in romantic relationships.

Not long after Cecilia returns from the hospital, Mr. Lisbon convinces Mrs. Lisbon to let the girls host a party. Together, the sisters write out invitations to all of the neighborhood boys, astonishing them by actually knowing their names. After anticipating the party for several days, the boys make their way to the Lisbon house as a group. Peter Sissen takes the lead, since he has already been inside. As they wait for the door to open, Peter says, "Wait'll you see this." But when they get inside, the boys see that Peter's descriptions of the house were completely wrong—the house isn't the messy den of "feminine chaos" that Peter described. Instead, it's neat and ordinary.

Peter is clearly proud to have been the only boy until this point to enter the Lisbon household. He therefore acts like he knows the place like the back of his own hand. In reality, though, he has only been there once, and the rest of the boys see that his descriptions of the house weren't even accurate—he has clearly exaggerated in an effort to impress his friends. The fact that the Lisbon house seems rather ordinary is a good indication that the boys have built up a wild image of the so-called "feminine chaos" in which the Lisbon sisters live. Almost anything, it seems fair to say, would pale in comparison to what the boys must have pictured.

The neighborhood boys are shown to the basement rec room, where they find the Lisbon girls waiting for them. The boys are struck by the realization that all of the sisters are unique individuals—they don't look exactly alike, and each one has her own facial expressions and general demeanor. Cecilia, for her part, is still wearing her vintage wedding dress, and there are still bandages on her arms. She sits on a barstool a little to the side, and she stays quiet the whole time.

The boys spend so much time thinking about the Lisbon girls as a group that they fail to consider each sister's individuality until they finally find themselves face to face with them in their basement. The sway that the Lisbon sisters seem to have over the boys' imagination is thus tied to the fact that they're sisters—if there was only one Lisbon daughter, it would be easier for the boys to truly see her for the person she is. Instead, though, the boys are almost overwhelmed by the idea of five intriguing girls, ultimately coming to view them as somehow larger than life. In this moment, it becomes clear that the boys don't really know the Lisbons at all, despite all the time they spend thinking about the girls.

The evening begins awkwardly, with the boys mainly talking to each other and the Lisbon sisters keeping to themselves. Slowly, though, things begin to loosen up, and everyone starts to have a good time—except, that is, for Cecilia, who abruptly gets up in the middle of the party and asks her father if she can go upstairs. Everyone stops to listen. Mr. Lisbon is surprised, pointing out that they threw this party largely for her. But he doesn't stop her, saying that she can go upstairs if that's what she wants.

Cecilia seemingly has no interest in cultivating a social life. Rather, this party seems more like a chore that she has to slog her way through, which is why she eventually asks to leave. Although it's never made clear what, exactly, is bothering Cecilia, it is evident that Dr. Hornicker's assessment (about Cecilia needing more freedom and an active social life) is woefully off the mark.

Everybody listens as Cecilia slowly makes her way upstairs. They stay quiet as she walks on the first floor and then goes up another flight of stairs, at which point they lose the sound of her footsteps. But then there comes the loud, "wet sound" of her body falling from her bedroom window and landing on a spike in the fence running alongside the house.

It's worth noting that the neighborhood boys seemed interested in the Lisbon sisters even before *Cecilia's first suicide attempt. Now, though, they effectively witness the last moments of Cecilia's life, which is a partial explanation for why they fixate on the Lisbon sisters for the rest of the novel—they are, in a way, intertwined with the tragic event.*

Once upstairs, the boys watch as Mr. Lisbon—who made his way out of the house—tries to lift Cecilia off of the fence. Mr. Lisbon doesn't give up, but it's clear to the boys that Cecilia has already left the world, even if her eyes are open and her lips are still moving like the mouth of a hooked fish. These things, they know, are just her nerves firing off their last signs of life—Cecilia herself is already gone.

What the boys witness in this moment is quite traumatic. As the novel progresses and the boys obsess more and more over the Lisbon sisters, it's helpful to keep in mind just how gruesome and unsettling it must have been to witness Cecilia's death. Beholding something so terrible and scarring is likely why the boys find it so hard to move on from what happens with the Lisbon sisters.

CHAPTER 2

The neighborhood boys are confounded by Cecilia's suicide, unable to explain why she would want to die. Her diary—which the police took as part of their investigation—doesn't provide much insight. The only thing she wrote about Dominic Palazzolo reads: "Palazzolo jumped off the roof today over that rich bitch, Porter. How stupid can you be?"

What bothers the neighborhood boys most about Cecilia's suicide is the uncertainty surrounding it, ultimately suggesting that they—and most people—find unexplained tragedies especially troubling.

In the direct aftermath of Cecilia's suicide, the boys file out of the house unsure of what to say. One of them breaks the silence by calling out, "Thank you for the party, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon." Then they all go across the street and watch as the paramedics arrive. Other than the drama at the Lisbon house, the rest of the neighborhood continues like normal—the boys can smell someone barbecuing nearby, and they can hear people playing badminton in an adjoining backyard. As darkness falls, the boys watch as houselights go on and televisions glow through the windows. Then, gradually, the boys themselves go home.

The boys live in a neighborhood committed to keeping up appearances, which is perfectly exemplified by the fact that one of the boys thanks Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon for hosting a party—a dark yet comedic moment in which it's overwhelmingly clear that the people in this community have no idea how to navigate tragedy. And yet, at the same time, it's also the case that life continues like normal even in the face of calamity. Other than the Lisbons and the boys who witnessed Cecilia's suicide, everyone in the neighborhood continues to go through the motions of everyday suburban life, which won't grind to a halt because of a young girl's death (even if the boys later associate the decline of this idyllic suburban life with the Lisbon girls' suicides).

Most of the neighborhood boys' parents attend Cecilia's funeral, which doesn't involve burying her body, since the cemetery workers are still on strike. The local parents leave their sons at home to protect them from "the contamination of tragedy." Since the boys weren't there, they have to rely on others for information about what the funeral was like. One woman swears she overheard Mrs. Lisbon comment on Cecilia's nails after peering into her open casket at the service. "Couldn't they do something about her nails?" Mrs. Lisbon allegedly asked, to which Mr. Lisbon supposedly replied, "They'll grow out. Fingernails keep growing. She can't bite them now, dear."

The boys' parents don't let them go to Cecilia's funeral as a way of protecting them from the tragedy. What they might not realize, though, is that it's too late for that: the boys already witnessed the most gruesome part of Cecilia's death. In a way, then, not letting them attend the funeral actually robs them of the chance to reach a sense of closure about what they saw. This, perhaps, is why they remain so fixated on not just Cecilia's death but also the other Lisbon sisters' suicides.

Eventually, the boys get hold of Cecilia's diary. A boy working as a plumber's assistant finds it in the Lisbon house in the bathroom off of Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon's bedroom. There's a lock on the diary, but it has already been forced open, suggesting that Cecilia's parents have been perusing it in search of answers. Now, the boys make their own examinations, with Tim Winer ("the brain") insisting on analyzing Cecilia's handwriting. He concludes, from looking at the slant of her letters, that she suffered from "emotional instability" and that she was a "dreamer" who was totally "out of touch with reality." Still, the boys continue to take Cecilia's diary up to Chase Buell's attic, where they read passages aloud—passages some of them still know by heart years later.

The boys' obsession with Cecilia (and the Lisbon sisters in general) starts to really take shape in this section, as it goes from a somewhat normal—albeit exaggerated—fascination to something a bit more desperate. This desperation most likely has to do with the fact that they were there when Cecilia killed herself; they feel involved in the tragedy, and now they want to do whatever they can to find out why *Cecilia decided to die by suicide, even if this means invading her personal privacy and stealing her diary from her grieving family.*

CHAPTER 3

Nobody in the neighborhood knows how to express their condolences to the Lisbon family. People send flowers and even make phone calls, but none of their efforts seem to connect with Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon. When some of the other neighborhood fathers try to visit, Mr. Lisbon quickly whisks them inside and installs them in front of a baseball game, distracting them by talking about the game until they forget why they came in the first place. Finally, Father Moody—the local priest—visits, but Mr. Lisbon once again brings him to the television and sits him in front of a baseball game. When Father Moody suggests that they bring Mrs. Lisbon downstairs to talk, Mr. Lisbon claims that his wife isn't accepting visitors because she's not feeling well.

The Lisbons—or, at least, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon—effectively wall themselves off from the community, apparently wanting to keep their mourning strictly private. This is, in many ways, quite normal, since people often have a tendency to hide intense emotion. However, allowing oneself to outwardly grieve and even lean on fellow community members can be deeply cathartic and helpful. But Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon cut themselves off from this kind of support. In doing so, they also deprive their daughters of the same.

Father Moody goes upstairs anyway. As he does so, he surveys the house, which has fallen into disarray. There's dust everywhere, and he even finds a half-eaten sandwich at the top of the stairs. Walking through the upstairs hallway, he passes the girls' bathroom, where their wet underwear is hanging to dry. The smell of jasmine soap wafts out of the steamy bathroom. The neighborhood boys hear all of these details from an altar boy who overhears Father Moody relating them to the choirmaster. They even go to the Jacobsen's soap counter and ask for a sample of jasmine soap, wanting to experience the smell themselves.

The fact that the boys buy the same soap as the Lisbon sisters highlights the extent of their obsession. It's not just that they want to know about what's going on in the Lisbon family—it's that they want to enter into the sisters' lives as much as they can, suggesting that their fascination with the girls is much more involved and intense than the average interest teenagers usually have in each other.

Father Moody keeps walking down the hall in search of Mrs. Lisbon, but he eventually decides to turn around. Right as he's about to descend the stairs, though, he sees all of the Lisbon girls huddled together in a nearby bedroom. They look just as stunned by their sister's death as everyone else is. Father Moody goes into the room to talk to them and is struck by the realization that they haven't bathed in a while. The fact that they seem so grief-stricken leads Father Moody to insist to the neighborhood boys—who interview him years later—that, even though everyone thinks the Lisbon sisters had some sort of suicide pact and that it was all planned from the beginning, he's certain the remaining sisters had no intention of dying by suicide.

Father Moody's observation about the Lisbon sisters is an important detail, since the beginning of the novel makes it seem quite plausible that the sisters planned their suicides all along. In this moment, though, Father Moody is confident that the remaining Lisbon sisters are devastated and even shocked by Cecilia's death—something that would contradict the idea of them planning the entire ordeal.

The boys keep tabs on the Lisbon girls. Rumors circulate about Lux going off with boys she meets on the boardwalk—whom the neighborhood boys don't know—and not returning until late in the night. Meanwhile, the local fathers take it upon themselves to remove the fence running alongside the Lisbon house. The fence isn't even on the Lisbons' property, standing instead on the neighboring lawn that belongs to the Bates family. Mr. Bates agrees to have it removed, and the fathers set to work, assuming that the Lisbons want it gone.

The Lisbons haven't reached out to their community for any sort of support or help. To the contrary, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon seem to actively avoid any sort of conversation with their neighbors about what happened with Cecilia. And yet, the neighboring fathers take it upon themselves to remove the fence that Cecilia fell on, assuming the Lisbons must want it gone. In some ways, this is a kind gesture that shows the local fathers' eagerness to somehow support the Lisbons. In another sense, though, the entire effort to take down the fence simply underscores how desperate everyone in the neighborhood is to somehow fix the situation—something that obviously can't be done. The Lisbons haven't even expressed a desire to take down the fence, but the neighbors still feel compelled to do so, perhaps as a way of feeling useful in a somewhat self-serving way, as if doing something ostensibly helpful will free them of the burden of having to dwell much longer on the tragedy.

Because the fathers are mostly office workers unaccustomed to hard physical labor, they're unable to fully uproot the fenceposts. Finally, they hire a tow truck driver to haul it away. When he finishes, he loads the fence onto his truck and then peels out on Mr. Bates's lawn. The boys are astonished—under any other circumstances, peeling out so extravagantly on somebody's front lawn would incite outrage. But their parents don't do anything, and this suggests to the boys that their parents don't actually believe in the "version of the world" they've spent so much effort imparting to their children—"for all their caretaking and bitching about crabgrass they didn't give a damn about lawns," the boys say.

The boys learn in this moment that some of the values their parents have presented as vitally important are actually, in the grand scheme of things, fairly trivial. The upkeep of yards and lawns, for instance, has always been something the neighborhood parents frame as important, but this is only because they want to maintain appearances and look like respectable suburbanites. In the face of a tragedy like Cecilia's suicide, though, none of the parents even care about somebody ruining their lawns, and their lack of a reaction in this scene is like a tacit acknowledgement that such matters are superficial and petty when it really comes down to it. In turn, this acknowledgement stuns the boys because it devalues the suburban ideals they've been taught to respect.

Dr. Hornicker tries to convince Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon to come talk to him, but they don't go. The boys don't see the Lisbon sisters as a full group until early September, when they appear for school convocation. Then, in the beginning of the school year, the sisters stick together as much as possible, moving through the halls as a unit. When the boys try to talk to them, they mostly get nothing out of the interaction—Mary Lisbon even tells the boy whose locker is next to hers that he doesn't *have* to talk to her, even though he just wanted to introduce himself (she informs him that she knows who he is; "I've only been at this school for like my whole life," she says).

In the aftermath of Cecilia's suicide, there's a fair amount of attention on the rest of the Lisbon family. None of them, however, want to be in the spotlight like this, which is why Mary Lisbon tells the boy next to her that he doesn't have to talk to her—even if she wanted to connect with somebody else, it's unlikely that she would want to do so simply because her family is in the spotlight. In other words, it's obvious that Mary feels the surrounding community's morbid fascination with her family, and she isn't sure if this boy is genuinely interested in talking to her or if he's just doing so because everyone in town is interested in the Lisbons.

Lux starts sneaking around with multiple different boys, though not—it seems—with anyone included in the chorus of neighborhood boys. As such, the neighborhood boys are eager to closely track her activities, finding themselves begrudgingly amazed by the fact that a boy known as "the detention king" is able to make her laugh, even though the other boys have never heard him say anything remotely intelligent or witty. Whenever the neighborhood boys ask the boys who spend time with Lux what they've done with her, they receive evasive but gloating answers like, "You want to know what happened? Smell my fingers, man." Even when the neighborhood boys want to know if Lux talked about Cecilia, they don't get any answers.

There's an interesting dynamic at play in this section, as the neighborhood boys feel simultaneously excluded from Lux's private life and *oddly territorial about her. It's clear that they think the boys Lux spends time with aren't good enough for her. And yet, they themselves have no real relationship with her, instead simply watching from afar and judging the boys she attracts—boys who, to be fair,* do *seem fairly crass and insensitive, though it also seems likely that many of the neighborhood boys would brag in the same ways if they were the ones to have intimate relations with Lux.*

There is one boy, however, who gets to know Lux better than anyone else. His name is Trip Fontaine, and though the neighborhood boys have always seen him as an average, unremarkable kid with "baby fat," he has—in the last year and a half—suddenly become a heartthrob for high school girls and their mothers alike. Trip hardly even has to try when it comes to attracting girls. While on vacation in Acapulco with his father and his father's boyfriend, he attracted the attention of an older woman, and though he doesn't reveal this to the neighborhood boys at the time, he later admits that he had sex for the first time with this woman. Years later, he tells the neighborhood boys this detail when they visit him in rehab, where he's drying out from alcohol and other drugs.

At this point, it becomes clear that the neighborhood boys are—as adults—conducting an exhaustive survey of everyone who knew the Lisbons. That they track down Trip Fontaine in a rehab center is a testament to just how hungry they are for details about the Lisbon girls—so hungry, it seems, that they're still chasing down leads as adults, ultimately highlighting the true extent of their obsession with the matter.

When Trip takes an interest in Lux Lisbon, he doesn't know what to do—girls usually pursue him. But Lux doesn't pay him any attention. His charms, it seems, mean nothing to her. One day, he's walking down the hall after smoking pot in his car, and he suddenly sees the headmaster coming toward him. Wanting to avoid an interaction, he ducks into the nearest classroom and sits down in a random seat. Stoned out of his mind, he stares forward and does nothing as the teacher continues to give a history lesson. At one point, though, the girl in front of him turns around. It's Lux. She's staring at him. And for some reason, time seems to slow down. A ringing starts in Trip's left ear. Years later, he tells the boys he still has vivid flashbacks of Lux's eyes in this moment.

The novel has already presented the Lisbon sisters as somewhat awe-inspiring and untouchable, but this is mostly because the neighborhood boys are so enthralled by them. In this moment, though, Trip's interest in Lux seems to corroborate the magnetic charm of the Lisbon girls (and, of course, Lux in particular). The boys are no longer the only ones obsessed with the Lisbons, as evidenced by Trip's seemingly transcendent moment staring at Lux.

Trip spends the ensuing weeks trying to get Lux's attention, even consulting his father and his father's boyfriend. Finally, he decides to wait for her outside a school assembly, following her in and sitting next to her in the dark auditorium. Leaning over at one point, he whispers that he's going to ask Mr. Lisbon for permission to take her out. "Fat chance," Lux says. But Trip persists, explaining that first he's going to come over to watch television with the family. Then he's going to ask her out. Before he gets up to leave, he says, "You're a stone fox."

Trip's tactics are bold and straightforward, almost as if he takes it for granted that Lux is interested in him. However, he's also aware that Lux isn't the only person he needs to woo; he also needs to win over her parents, which will most likely be the biggest obstacle he faces. This dynamic serves as a reminder that Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon are quite strict—a detail that is worth keeping in mind as the novel progresses.

Trip follows through with his plan. When he arrives at the Lisbon house, it's clear that Lux has prepared her parents for his arrival. But the evening is uneventful. The entire family watches television, with Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon sitting between Trip and Lux on the couch. After an entire evening of watching television, Mrs. Lisbon looks at her husband, who then tells Trip that it's time for him to go. Lux escorts him to the door and looks at him with a sad, defeated smile. Trip understands from this that nothing is going to happen between them.

It's obvious that Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon aren't going to let Lux date Trip, no matter what he does to endear himself to them. It has already been made clear that they were fairly strict before Cecilia's first suicide attempt, and though they relaxed their rules a little bit when Dr. Hornicker advised them to, it didn't do any good—Cecilia still ended up dying by suicide. This, in turn, means that Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon have no real incentive to change their strict parenting style, since their daughter died while they were trying to be more lenient.

Going to his car, Trip sits in disappointment without driving away—until, suddenly, Lux jumps into the car, straddles him, and seems to attack him with her mouth, kissing him with overwhelming passion. He feels as if she is a "creature" with 100 different mouths all sucking out the marrow from his bones. He puts his hand in her pants at one point, but it's as if he has never touched a woman there before—he feels woefully insufficient beneath Lux and her powerful desire. And then, as quickly as it began, the encounter ends, with Lux lifting off of him and announcing that she has to get back inside before her parents notice she's gone.

Trip is normally confident with the girls he likes, since he's the school heartthrob. With Lux, though, it's different. It's clear that she's the one in control, and this is possibly what makes him feel overwhelmed and inadequate beneath her. As for Lux, it's apparent that she has no problem with rebelling against her parents' domineering influence.

The next time Trip tries to make a date with Lux to watch television, she says she's grounded, though nobody knows why. As the months stretch into deep autumn and toward winter, the Lisbon house starts to look increasingly decrepit. The boys watch the leaves fall, and while everyone else on the street makes sure to rake their yards, the Lisbons let the leaves accumulate, frustrating the neighbors when stray leaves blow onto their spotless yards. "These aren't *my* leaves," one neighbor mutters as he rakes them up and throws them away.

At this point in the novel, public opinion begins to slowly turn against the Lisbons for not keeping up appearances. Everyone was eager to show their support shortly after Cecilia's suicide, but now there's a palpable sense that the Lisbon family should have moved on by this point—or, at the very least, that they should still go through the motions of making their yard look presentable. The general idea here is that the other neighbors want the entire street to look prim and proper, which is why they resent having to rake extra leaves because the Lisbons have neglected their own household chores. This callous attitude calls into question the neighbors' initial outpouring of support, making their concern look more performative than compassionate.

Although the media failed to report on Cecilia's suicide when it first happened, a local reporter named Linda Perle starts writing columns about the tragic event and how it relates to the broader trend of adolescent suicide sweeping the country. Other media outlets cover the issue, and a news crew even shows up to film shots of the Lisbon house—shots that don't air until much later, when all of the sisters are dead. The entire topic of suicide becomes a national sensation, and the boys get used to watching segments in which alarmed adults interview teenagers who have survived suicide attempts. But nothing these teenagers say help the boys understand what Cecilia did, as they all seem to have "received too much therapy" to provide any genuine insight into the matter.

Cecilia's suicide was, at first, a highly local event, meaning that its consequences didn't seem to extend beyond the immediate community. Now, though, people begin to consider the tragedy in a broader context, as media attention focuses on increased suicide rates among American teens. In this context, Cecilia's suicide seems to take on new meaning, as local parents stop seeing it as a rare tragedy and start seeing it as a potential threat to their own children. In other words, a sense of panic overtakes the community.

With the increased attention on suicide awareness, the Lisbon girls mostly avoid the public eye. When administrators at the school decide to hold a "Day of Grieving" to engage with students about the topic of suicide, the tacit implication is that the event is intended to retrospectively address Cecilia's death. But nobody actually talks to the Lisbon girls about what happened—in fact, during the meetings held that day throughout the school in separate classrooms (each teacher taking a different approach to the topic), the Lisbon girls sneak out and bring chairs to the bathroom, where they sit and wait out the entire ordeal.

The local community has worked itself into a frenzy over Cecilia's suicide, but the overall concern seems to have very little to do with Cecilia or the other Lisbon daughters. Instead, the "Day of Grieving" is performative and self-congratulatory. It's ultimately a way for the school administrators to feel as if they've addressed the tragedy and done what they need to do in order to make sure other students don't try to die by suicide. And yet, the very people who are actually grieving—the Lisbon sisters—are so put off by the "Day of Grieving" that they actively avoid it, underscoring just how useless and even potentially harmful *the event is.*

After the Day of Grieving, the Lisbon girls start seeing a school counselor on a regular basis. They seem to connect with her—she even smokes with Lux, breaking school rules. The neighborhood boys notice a marked improvement in the way the sisters move through the world, as if they're happier than they were at the beginning of the school year. During this time, Trip Fontaine decides to try again with Lux.

The school counselor is able to make progress with the Lisbon girls because she connects with them on their *level. She's not interested in them because they're at the center of the town's gossip, nor does she work with them in a performative way meant to make her look sensitive and kind. Instead, she meets them on their own terms, and this actually makes a small difference, perhaps because there's nobody else in their lives to do this.*

Trip goes straight to Mr. Lisbon's classroom and announces that he wants to take Lux to the homecoming dance. Mr. Lisbon tells him to sit and then calmly explains that they have family rules against such things. He almost sounds sorry and even insinuates that he would relax the rules if it were up to him. But, he says, it wouldn't be fair to his other daughters if they suddenly changed the rules for Lux. This is when Trip reveals his plan: he tells Mr. Lisbon that he'll assemble a good group of guys to take all of the sisters. Considering the offer, Mr. Lisbon finally agrees to talk it over with his wife.

It's worth noting that, earlier in the novel, the narrators revealed that Mr. Lisbon retrospectively expressed a certain regret for going along with Mrs. Lisbon's strict parental rules. This detail aligns with his overall behavior in this scene, as he seems incapable of agreeing to Trip's proposal without consulting Mrs. Lisbon, perhaps implying that she's the one who has made the rules in their house about dating. At the same time, though, it's also possible that Mr. Lisbon is just being a good partner and doesn't want to make parental decisions without giving his wife a chance to weigh in.

Trip wastes no time selecting the other boys for the homecoming dance. He makes his case that day at football practice, with his teammates desperately vying for a spot in the group date. He ends up picking Parkie Denton (who promises to let them use his father's Cadillac for the date), Kevin Head, and Joe Hill Conley. Fortunately for them, Mrs. Lisbon ends up going along with the idea, as long as the boys bring the Lisbon girls back by 11 and go nowhere else but the dance. Mr. Lisbon, for his part, reminds Trip that he will be chaperoning the dance, making it hard for them to disobey any of these rules.

The outing to the homecoming dance will be the first social event the Lisbon sisters have attended since the party at their house, when Cecilia died by suicide. Regardless of how the evening turns out, then, everyone will surely be keeping a close eye on them; whether it's Mr. Lisbon or the neighborhood boys, somebody will be keeping tabs on them.

The neighborhood boys who weren't picked to accompany the Lisbon girls to the homecoming dance watch from afar as Trip and the others glide up in Parkie Denton's Cadillac. Later, they hear what happened inside. Mrs. Lisbon strictly questioned them, wanting to know who was driving and how long he'd had his license. But then Mr. Lisbon swept in and promised the boys that the "third degree" was over, at which point the girls came downstairs.

Unlike the boys with whom Lux has been spending time, it seems as if the boys Trip selected are actually part of the Greek chorus of neighborhood boys. If this is the case, the boys will have access to a thorough account of what happens at the dance. And yet, only a few of them are able to actually attend with the Lisbon sisters, inevitably leading to all sorts of jealousy, as the excluded boys watch carefully from afar.

The girls are dressed in large dresses that Mrs. Lisbon made for them—dresses that cover as much of their bodies as possible. As the girls and their dates roll up to the dance, Lux announces that she wants to have a cigarette before they go in. Her sisters complain that their father will smell the smoke on their clothes, but she ignores them. Once they finally arrive at the dance, all of the neighborhood boys have trouble paying attention to their own dates, instead trying to keep tabs on the Lisbon sisters. At one point, Trip leads Lux beneath the bleachers, and Bonnie—who has been following her sister seemingly out of a nervous lack of anything better to do—goes with them, which means that her date, Joe Hill Conley, disappears beneath the bleachers, too.

It's unsurprising that the neighborhood boys pay more attention to what the Lisbon sisters are doing than to their own dates—yet another sign of how attuned they are to the Lisbons. Even with boys gawking at them, though, the Lisbon sisters finally get a small taste of freedom and, for that matter, normalcy. They are, in other words, finally living like average teenagers instead of remaining inside their home with their strict parents and the constant reminder of their sister's death.

Under the bleachers, Trip pulls out a fifth of peach schnapps. He offers it to Lux, telling her not to swallow—you have to taste it, he says, through a kiss. He takes a swallow of the schnapps himself and then kisses Lux. Giggling, they pass the schnapps back and forth as they kiss. Taking Trip's lead, Joe Hill Conley suggests that he and Bonnie do the same, and though Bonnie is hesitant at first, she agrees to give it a try when Lux tells her not to be a "goody-goody." Later, the rest of the neighborhood boys grill Joe about his experience beneath the bleachers, wanting to know if he asked Bonnie or Lux about Cecilia. In response, he says, "There's a time for talk and a time for silence," though he also claims to have "tasted mysterious depths" in Bonnie.

The subject matter of The Virgin Suicides *is quite heavy, but in moments like this one, the novel focuses on rather ordinary coming-of-age details—like, for instance, Bonnie having what is possibly her first kiss at a school dance. Unsurprisingly, the other neighborhood boys are desperate to know every detail, grilling Joe Hill Conley about his experience (and, absurdly enough, wondering if Joe asked Bonnie and Lux about their dead sister in a moment of levity and fun). However, Joe quickly lapses into a proud, overly adult tone, clearly cashing in on the social capital that kissing Bonnie Lisbon affords him in this friend group—a group that is, of course, obsessed with the Lisbons.*

Meanwhile, Therese and Kevin Head go outside for some air after dancing with each other. While they're outside, Therese asks if he and the other boys asked out her and her sisters because they feel sorry for them. She doesn't believe him when he says no, calling him a liar and asking if they seem "as crazy as everyone thinks." He assures her that nobody thinks this, but she just goes on to say that Cecilia was strange. But that doesn't mean, Therese continues, that she and her sisters are strange, too. "We just want to live," she says. "If anyone would let us."

All of the attention placed on the Lisbon sisters in the wake of Cecilia's death has apparently made an impression on Therese, who worries that the boys only wanted to take them to the dance out of a sense of pity. Readers know that this isn't the case, since the neighborhood boys are basically infatuated with the Lisbon sisters and have been since even before Cecilia's suicide. Still, Therese's concern—and her suggestion that nobody will "let" them live normal lives—calls attention to just how hard it must be for her and her sisters to go throughout everyday life under so much scrutiny from the surrounding community.

At the end of the dance, the Lisbon girls try to find Lux and Trip, but they can't. Parkie Denton suggests that maybe they went home with Mr. Lisbon, but the sisters know this isn't the case. They worry they'll get in trouble because of Lux, but Mary insists that Lux is the one who will be in trouble, not the rest of them. They eventually decide to go home. When they get there, Joe Hill Conley kisses Bonnie one last time, and she makes him promise to call her. But the girls tell the boys not to walk them to the door.

That Bonnie kisses Joe Hill Conley again and asks him to call her suggests that she has thoroughly enjoyed her night out with him. Although Dr. Hornicker's suggestion to give the Lisbon girls more independence might not have made a difference for Cecilia, the others—and especially Bonnie—seem to respond quite well to a little more freedom (though Lux, for her part, has no problem with pushing the boundaries of her parents' rare leniency).

Lux doesn't come back until late that night, rolling up in a taxi. Uncle Tucker—a neighborhood fixture with a drinking problem who stays up every night getting drunk—sees her return, watching as Mr. Lisbon opens the door and refuses to listen to her excuses. Then, Mrs. Lisbon appears in the doorway with a drink in her hand, solemn choir music blasting from inside.

Whatever progress the Lisbon girls might have made with their parents by being allowed to attend the dance, Lux has most likely squandered. Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon were already strict, but now Lux has given them a reason *to be strict. Of course, this entire episode seems quite dire, but this is perhaps only because of the backdrop of Cecilia's suicide—otherwise, Lux's misbehavior is a fairly common coming-of-age story that, in a different context, might read as light and humorous instead of somehow dark and consequential.*

Years later, in their interview with Trip Fontaine at the rehab center where he's drying out from alcohol, the neighborhood boys learn what happened that night. Trip explains that he and Lux snuck away at the end of the dance and lay down on the football field, where they had sex. In the middle of it all, Lux started crying, saying, "I always screw things up. I always do." Trip doesn't tell the boys much more than this, other than that he didn't put Lux in the cab that took her home. He says it was odd—he really liked Lux, but in that moment, he didn't care how she got home. He left her alone on the football field.

Until this point, Trip has been pursuing Lux without much success. When they have sex, though, he seems to suddenly want to get away from her. It's not necessarily that he loses interest in her, though, as evidenced by the fact that he still thinks about her years later. Rather, it's as if he's overwhelmed by her sudden emotional display, perhaps because he catches a glimpse of everything she's dealing with at home: her sister's death, her strict parents, what it's like to feel watched by the surrounding community. His decision to abandon her, then, is an unkind act of self-preservation, as he realizes that he has waded into a complex and turbulent emotional world—one he's ill-equipped to navigate, though this obviously doesn't justify mistreating Lux in this moment.

CHAPTER 4

After homecoming, the Lisbon house begins to function like a prison. Mrs. Lisbon keeps a close watch on her daughters, whom she and her husband take out of school. Years later, the neighborhood boys interview Mrs. Lisbon herself, who says she made the decision to take the girls out of school because she thought it was best for them—the only people paying attention to them were boys, and not for the right reasons. What they needed, Mrs. Lisbon thought, was to be out of the public eye. She admits that she has no idea why all of her daughters decided to die by suicide. She resents the fact that Dr. Hornicker seemed to think she and Mr. Lisbon were the problem, and she doesn't say much beyond this, abruptly leaving the boys—men, now—in the bus station café where she agreed to meet them.

The Virgin Suicides *presents readers with a number of difficult situations, but it doesn't necessarily resolve these situations or offer up answers for why, exactly, they happened. There's no direct indication that Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon are the reason that the Lisbon sisters all died by suicide, and though characters set forth a number of different theories throughout the novel, there's no single explanation for why the girls decided to die. Nonetheless, it's clear that Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon are quite strict, and though it wouldn't be fair to say that this is the sole reason their daughters died by suicide, it's not unreasonable to consider the possibility that their draconian rules might have in some way exacerbated whatever the girls were dealing with in the aftermath of Cecilia's death.*

During this period, Mrs. Lisbon also forces Lux to burn all of her rock and roll records. Lux is devastated, but Mrs. Lisbon shows no mercy. Meanwhile, the house looks increasingly shabby and dilapidated, to the point that the neighborhood boys' parents start making disapproving comments about its outward appearance. Most surprisingly of all, though, the boys discover that Lux has been sneaking unknown boys and men through her house and onto the roof, where they have sex. Astounded, the neighborhood boys watch Lux having sex atop her own house, taking in the scene from one of the boys' attics.

Mrs. Lisbon's decision to burn Lux's rock and roll records implies that she associates the trouble and tension sweeping through her family with the changing cultural landscape. Like many parents in the 1970s, she sees rock and roll as an antagonistic force capable of corrupting her daughters, so she makes a point of purging her household of such music. On another note, the neighbors start to judge the Lisbons a bit more harshly in this section, as if the family's grief has lasted too long and is now impacting everyone around them—a feeling mostly brought on by the fact that the Lisbons don't aesthetically maintain their house and yard, which is, in the world of this upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood, a cardinal sin.

The partners Lux brings onto the roof are mysterious—nobody knows how she meets them, since she never leaves the house. Even more alarmingly, some of them are full-grown adults and thus risk statutory rape charges by sneaking through the Lisbon household to have sex with teenaged Lux. From afar, the neighborhood boys watch carefully, learning various positions and techniques that have stayed with them for their entire lives. Years later, they often find themselves thinking about Lux out there on the roof, imagining they're having sex with her as they make love to their own partners.

The more her parents try to control her, the more Lux rebels against them. If Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon hadn't taken Lux and her sisters out of school and forbade them from seeing other people, Lux most likely would have kept dating Trip or some other guy at school. Now, though, she goes to extremes by having sex with older men. Meanwhile, the neighborhood boys continue to invade her privacy by carefully watching her have sex, and the fact that they still—as adults—think about watching her is a good illustration of their continued obsession with her.

Around the time Lux starts having sex on the roof, the boys notice how frail she has started to look. She's extremely thin and looks sickly. Then, one day, the paramedics pull up to the Lisbon house for the first time since Cecilia's death. This time, though, it's because there's something wrong with Lux's health—the boys are surprised to see her come out on a stretcher looking "very much alive" but in some sort of abdominal pain. Half an hour later, the boys hear a rumor that Lux's appendix burst.

The boys keep close tabs on the Lisbon household, so Lux's medical event is undoubtedly exciting and monumental, especially since they don't know at first why the paramedics have come. They are, in other words, plunged into uncertainty. The last time the paramedics visited the Lisbon household was when Cecilia died by suicide, so their appearance has an ominous and foreboding quality (especially since readers already know that the other Lisbon sisters will eventually die by suicide, too).

Not much later, though, the boys hear the real story about why Lux went to the hospital. Once she gets out of the waiting room, she mostly stops acting as if she's in pain. She pretended something was wrong, she eventually explains to the doctor, because she hasn't had her period in 42 days and is worried she might be pregnant. The doctor is unsurprised—he could tell from the anxious way she kept touching her stomach that she was worried about pregnancy. But this, she says, was the only way she could get out of the house without coming clean to her parents. She convinces the doctor to give her a pregnancy test without telling Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon.

The mere fact that the boys learn the real reason Lux went to the hospital is a testament to just how thoroughly they have worked their way into her private life. It's as if they have ears and eyes everywhere in town; nothing, it seems, can stop them from finding out what they want to know. And yet, in the end, they'll never *find the true answers they're looking for. They might have access to information like this detail about Lux's hospital visit, but they'll never know why Cecilia decided to die by suicide or, for that matter, why the other sisters eventually do the same.*

The doctor ends up telling Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon that Lux just had really bad indigestion. Privately, he relieves Lux by informing her that she's not pregnant. However, she *does* have HPV (human papilloma virus). The neighborhood boys obtain a copy of Lux's gynecological exam results, which they—to this day—consider one of their "most prized possessions." Included in the results is a close-up picture of Lux's cervix, which "stares" out at the boys "like an inflamed eye, fixing [them] with its silent accusation."

The boys' invasion of Lux's privacy reaches new heights in this section, as they violate her rights by obtaining a picture of her cervix. What's more, the fact that they still *consider this one of their "most prized possessions" is—to put it plainly—super creepy. Of course, it's* never *justifiable for anyone to steal a picture of somebody else's reproductive organs. It's one thing, though, for a group of teenaged boys to treasure this possession, and it's something else entirely for a group of grown men to do it. That the neighborhood boys still think of this picture as their "most prized possession" emphasizes just how intense—and even pathological—their obsession with Lux and the other Lisbon sisters really is; it's as if their own maturity and development has been frozen in adolescence.*

Dr. Hornicker, who briefly had the chance to talk to Lux while she waited for the results of her gynecological exam, sets forth a new theory: the Lisbon girls, he thinks, suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He writes a report outlining why he thinks this is the case, noting that adolescents who lose a sibling to suicide are more likely than the average adolescent to embrace "suicidal behavior" themselves. Everyone in the community quickly takes to this theory, partially because—as the neighborhood boys put it—it "simplifie[s]" the entire matter, making it seem as if Cecilia's suicide has doomed her sisters to unhappiness. This, it seems, gives rise to the general feeling of Cecilia's suicide as a sort of infectious, "airborne virus" that the other sisters have contracted.

Everyone in the neighborhood and broader community latches on to Dr. Hornicker's theory about PTSD and suicide because it helps them make sense of something that is otherwise disturbingly uncertain. People want to know why *somebody like Cecilia would take her own life, and then they want to use this explanation as a way of understanding the challenges the other Lisbon sisters face in the aftermath of her death. What's ironic, though, is that the neighborhood boys seem skeptical of the idea that everyone wants a "simpl[e]" theory to apply to Cecilia's suicide, even though this is exactly the sort of thing the boys themselves have been searching for. Like the rest of the community, the boys want answers to seemingly unanswerable questions. The only difference, perhaps, is that they possibly understand that their search for these answers may never come to an end.*

The Lisbon house reaches new depths of dilapidation, one of the slate tiles of the roof slipping off and leading to a leak in the living room. Other leaks appear over the next few days, the household filling with pails to catch the water. The exterior looks worn down, too, with the gutters drooping under the weight of wet leaves and uncleared gunk. When the mailman comes, he uses the spine of a magazine to open the mailbox instead of touching it with his hand. Mr. Lisbon is the only one to leave the house, driving to school looking dejected and blank. In the halls, he makes jocular displays of good cheer by jokingly hip-checking boys as they walk by, though they pick up on an uncomfortable sense of desperation as he pins them to the wall.

The steady dilapidation of the Lisbon house is representative of the emotional and psychological decay taking place inside. It's also symbolic of the family's inability to go through the motions of maintaining an attractive suburban façade—an inability that ultimately attracts scorn and disapproval from the surrounding community, who not only holds the family's grief against them but also seems afraid of somehow becoming infected with that grief themselves. This is evidenced by the mailman's efforts to avoid actually touching the Lisbons' mailbox with his hand (as if the family's sorrow is so potent and powerful that merely touching their property could be dangerous).

Before long, Mr. Lisbon resigns. The boys hear about it afterward. Though the exact reasons surrounding his departure are never made clear, the prevailing sentiment is that he was encouraged to resign because of a growing feeling among local parents that somebody who can't "run his own family" shouldn't be given the power to teach *other* people's children. Now that he doesn't go to work, it's as if the Lisbon house is void of life—sometimes, the boys notice, the lights never even come on at night.

This is a turning point in the novel, as the Lisbon family enters a darker, more isolated stage of grief. The community has clearly turned against Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon, resenting the idea that they haven't moved on yet from Cecilia's suicide. There's also the fact that everyone in the community has come to see Cecilia's suicide as a sort of "airborne virus," almost seeming to believe that the Lisbon family's troubles might infect everyone around them. This is why the local parents are so judgmental about Mr. Lisbon and his ability to effectively teach their children: they're worried that some damaging aspect of his internal emotional landscape will transfer onto the students.

That winter, Therese orders a number of college brochures. She and her sisters also order travel pamphlets—pamphlets that the neighborhood boys *also* order, liking to peruse them and imagine themselves on vacation alongside the Lisbon sisters. Later, in the spring, the local Parks Department goes around identifying **trees** that will have to be cut down to prevent the spread of the Dutch elm disease. The elm tree outside the Lisbon house is one of these trees. But when the men show up to cut it down (after having already trimmed some of the dead limbs), the Lisbon sisters rush outside and jump between the tree and the approaching chainsaws. This tree, after all, was Cecilia's favorite. "Go away," Mary says. "This is our tree."

Although the Lisbon family has now plunged into isolation and decay, the fact that Therese orders college brochures suggests that she has no plans to end her life. On the contrary, she's planning for the future and, in doing so, demonstrating a certain capacity for emotional healing. To that end, the sisters band together in an arguably healthy way when they stop the Parks Department workers from cutting down Cecilia's favorite elm tree. Though it's unclear whether or not the sisters talk about Cecilia behind closed doors, this is really the first time the boys have witnessed the girls collectively acknowledge their sister's death. At the same time, though, their refusal to let the workers cut down the tree also hints that they're (understandably) having trouble letting go of the time before their lives were upended by Cecilia's suicide.

The workers from the Parks Department try to appeal to Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon, but they have no luck—neither Mr. nor Mrs. Lisbon is willing to tell the girls to step away from **the tree**. Mr. Lisbon tells the workers that he's a proponent of an alternative "therapy" for the infected trees, and he refuses to listen when the workers insist that this approach doesn't work. When the men with chainsaws threaten to call the police, Mrs. Lisbon points out that her daughters are just standing on their own property. Eventually, the men leave. Linda Perle, the local reporter, writes a schmaltzy piece about the whole event, talking about how the Lisbon girls banded together to save their dead sister's favorite tree. Meanwhile, the Parks Department goes on cutting down other infected elms in the neighborhood.

The event surrounding Cecilia's favorite elm tree is the first time that the entire Lisbon family comes together. All of the family members support each other in this moment, as even Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon make points for why the elm tree should be spared. Of course, the entire ordeal is framed as scandalous and gossip-worthy in Linda Perle's article, but it's actually rather wholesome, since the Lisbon family bands together and shows some resilience against external forces that try to force them to adhere to suburban expectations.

As baseball season winds up, the neighborhood boys feel out of touch with the Lisbon sisters. The girls used to come to baseball games with their father, but now they never do anything outside the house. Just when it feels as if the boys might lose contact with the sisters completely, the Lisbon girls reach out to them—or this, at least, is what the boys say. All over the neighborhood, laminated **Virgin Mary cards** start showing up in mysterious places: under a windshield wiper, in a neighbor's rose bushes, in a neighborhood boy's bicycle spokes, and wedged into Tim Winer's study window. When the boys study the card, they see it's just like the one Cecilia had in her hand on her first suicide attempt.

The significance of the laminated Virgin Mary cards isn't self-evident, but this is exactly the point: readers don't know what the card is supposed to mean, and neither do the boys. Instead of discovering some sort of key to the Lisbon girls' internal emotional world, both readers and the neighborhood boys are left to put together disparate insights and pieces of information. The only thing that seems evident in this section, then, is that the Lisbon girls are interested in making contact with the outside world.

By late spring, the boys start to think the Lisbon girls are communicating with them in other ways, too. At night, a Chinese lantern in Lux's room blinks on and off in what they think is Morse code, though they're unable to decipher any sort of message. They also notice the flickering light of candles in Cecilia's room, realizing that the sisters have made a shrine to their dead sister. As the boys try to figure out what the Lisbon girls are trying to tell them, they receive a letter in one of their mailboxes. It's from Lux, and the message is short and simple: "Tell Trip I'm over him. He's a creep."

It's now undeniable that the Lisbon girls want to contact the outside world, considering the fact that Lux sends a letter to the boys. The purpose of their desired contact, though, remains unclear. Furthermore, other than the letter, the signs that the boys supposedly pick up on—a light flashing in Morse code, for instance—are questionable and far-fetched at best. It seems entirely likely that the boys are just reading into everything they see at the Lisbon house, further illustrating the depths of their obsession with the sisters.

Over the next few weeks, the boys receive more letters. All in all, they end up with eight letters with short messages like "Remember us?" and "Down with unsavory boys." In another, the message is: "Watch for our lights." Finally, they receive the most meaningful one: "In this dark, there will be light. Will you help us?" But then the letters stop coming. Unsure of what to do, the boys wait for another sign from the sisters. But the house is quiet and lifeless—even their trash on the curb shows evidence of a family in hibernation or hiding.

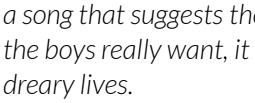
Although it seems quite far-fetched that the Lisbon girls are communicating to the boys through Morse-code flashes of light, the girls' letters do specifically tell the boys to pay attention to their lights. And yet, their messages are still extremely cryptic. It's almost as if they're purposefully playing into the obsession the boys have developed with them and, in turn, are intentionally fueling the boys' far-flung, even romanticized ideas about the sisters.

Finally, the boys think of a simple solution: they call the Lisbon sisters. Mr. Lisbon answers, but the boys don't say anything. Mr. Lisbon seems to think the boys are someone else—someone who has apparently been calling frequently, judging by the fact that Mr. Lisbon says, "I'm waiting. Today I'll listen to all your crap." Then, quite abruptly, Mrs. Lisbon grabs the phone and screams, "Why won't you leave us alone!" before hanging up. But the line doesn't go dead. The boys can tell there's somebody listening. When they say hello, one of the Lisbon girls says "Hi" in a small, weak voice. The boys are astonished by the sound of this voice—it sounds broken and "irreparably altered."

The way Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon conduct themselves is somewhat mystifying, but it's possible that reporters have been pestering them, since the novel has already established that the media has been running wild with segments about adolescent suicides sweeping the nation. Either way, this is just one more layer of uncertainty surrounding the family's life behind closed doors, and the boys—and readers alike—are left to guess what, exactly, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon are talking about.

That first phone conversation doesn't last long, nor does anyone say much. But the boys call again the next day around the same time. Instead of talking, they hold the phone up to speakers and play a song on the stereo system. They choose a song they feel communicates their feelings, then they hang up. The following day, the Lisbon girls are the ones to call. Like the boys, they don't say anything, instead playing a song into the phone. When it's over, the boys play one of their own selections, and this is how the entire phone call goes, with the boys and the girls responding to each other's songs as best they can. Many of the boys' responses are thematic. For example, when the girls play "Alone Again, Naturally," the boys play "You've Got a Friend."

There's something quite wholesome and endearing about the way the boys and the sisters trade songs over the phone. In fact, this feels like a normal thing teenagers might do, not something tied to the pain and ugliness surrounding the Lisbon sisters' experience in the past year. On the whole, the boys are eager to connect with the girls, which is why they play "You've Got a Friend" after the girls play a song that suggests they feel isolated from the outside world. What the boys really want, it seems, is to save the Lisbon sisters from their dreary lives.



The boys mostly play love songs, whereas the Lisbon girls keep their selections "impersonal"—until, that is, they play "Make It with You" by Bread, cutting off the song after the lyrics, "*And if you're wondering what this song is leading to / I want to make it with you.*" The girls hang up the phone, leaving the boys feeling as if the Lisbons have just confessed their love for them. They never thought the girls might actually love them back, and now they feel "dizzy" with emotion and surprise. Lying back, the boys go through all of their previous interactions with the Lisbons, deciding that the girls have been trying to reach out to them the entire time. The girls have been waiting, the boys now believe, to be saved.

It's reasonable to assume that the boys are right about one thing: the Lisbon girls do want to make some sort of connection with them. It's less clear, though, whether or not the sisters have fond or romantic feelings for them. In fact, even considering the implications of the song "Make It with You," it seems a bit excessive to conclude that the Lisbon sisters are in love with the boys—after all, there are (seemingly) more boys than there are Lisbon sisters. Who, in this scenario, would love whom? But these details don't matter right now to the boys, who are too wrapped up in the notion of staging some kind of heroic rescue to stop and think realistically about the situation.

In the coming days, the boys don't hear from the Lisbon sisters. The girls don't answer the phone, nor do they call the boys. Desperate, the boys discuss grand plans to dig a tunnel into the Lisbons' basement, and then they remember that they could use the storm sewers—but when they try to do this, they discover the sewers have been flooded with water.

Even though the circumstances surrounding their contact with the Lisbon girls are quite heavy and serious, the boys' overall energy in this section highlights their immaturity and lack of life experience. In other words, they almost treat this situation like a Hardy Boys mission they've been tasked with solving. There's a slight sense of adventurous camaraderie, to say nothing of the somewhat self-aggrandizing notion that the boys think they can, as a rag-tag group of teenagers, save the Lisbon sisters from grief.

Three nights after the last phone call, the boys use binoculars to watch through the windows as the Lisbon sisters drag a suitcase into Bonnie's room. They start packing the trunk with their belongings, though some of the items—like an iron doorstop—don't make much sense. Nonetheless, Paul Baldino declares that the sisters are going to "make a break for it." They will, he says, be gone by the end of the week. In retrospect, the boys note that Paul was right—the girls *are* gone by the end of the week, but not in the way Paul thinks. The final letter the boys receive from the Lisbon girls arrives that evening. It reads: "Tomorrow. Midnight. Wait for our signal."

Again, the boys are quite wrapped up in the exciting nature of the Lisbon girls' messages. When Paul Baldino announces that the sisters are going to "make a break for it," he accurately captures the dramatic spirit at play among the boys, talking about the situation as if it's directly out of an adventure movie. And to be fair, the Lisbon girls seem to play into this dynamic with their final letter, which tells the boys to watch for their "signal" at midnight the next day.

The next night, the boys prepare for the signal. But they don't know what to look for. The Lisbon house shows no signs of anything out of the ordinary—it's dark and lifeless. Joe Hill Conley climbs a tree to get a better look, but he sees nothing, so the boys make their way to their old treehouse, which is falling into despair but is still usable. When they get inside, they're surprised to find pictures of the Lisbon girls that they apparently put up long ago—they don't remember putting them up. Waiting for midnight, the boys lounge and sip beer, at one point peering into the Lisbon house using a telescope. Every once in a while they catch sight of Lux in her bedroom, but the telescope image is too magnified for them to discern what they're looking at.

This scene reminds readers that the boys have been interested in the Lisbon girls for a long time—long enough that they don't even remember having put up pictures of them in their communal treehouse. Now, though, their interest in the sisters has grown exponentially, most likely because they feel implicated in the tragedy that befell the family when Cecilia died (since they were there to witness it). Fittingly, the boys want to be part of the Lisbon girls' escape from unhappiness, and their desire to involve themselves in their lives in such a way fills them with excitement.

Midnight passes unceremoniously. But then a flashlight goes on in one of the girls' bedrooms. It moves around and turns on and off several times. When it comes back on, the sisters appear in the open window frame. They stare out at the boys. Mary blows a kiss, the window closes, and the flashlight goes off, the girls disappearing in the darkness. The boys automatically jump down from the treehouse, astonished how short the drop feels now that they've grown taller. Feeling emboldened by this newfound sense of maturity, they walk across the Lisbon yard and around the back, where they peer in through yet another window.

The way the Lisbon girls are behaving is noticeably melodramatic, as if they actively want to confuse the boys and draw them closer. The boys, for their part, are all too happy to oblige by hopping out of the treehouse and sauntering toward the Lisbon house—an image that is somewhat symbolic, as they leave behind the childish treehouse and make their way toward the dark, foreboding Lisbon house, stoically preparing themselves to finally come face to face with the complexities of the sisters' hardship instead of observing it from afar.

Once their eyes adjust, the boys realize they're peering beyond a windowsill of dead houseplants and into the living room, where Lux is absently smoking a cigarette in a beanbag chair. The boys recognize the halter top she's wearing because it's rather revealing. "July, two years ago," Joe Hill Conley says, referring to the last time they saw her wear it. Some of the boys wonder if they should knock, but then they simply enter the house, walk over to Lux, and say, "We're here." Lux isn't startled. "About time," she says. "We've been waiting for you guys."

Joe Hill Conley's comment about Lux's revealing halter top is decidedly creepy, but it also serves as yet another reminder that the boys have come to see themselves as the Lisbon sisters' unofficial biographers. They keep track of everything, even the clothes the girls wear—a good illustration of just how obsessed they are with these sisters.

The boys explain that they have the use of Chase Buell's car (or, rather, his mother's). They can load the Lisbon girls in and drive away. It'll be a tight fit, though. But Lux doesn't mind, simply asking, "Which one of you studs is going to sit up front next to me?" When the boys ask where her sisters are, she says they're coming. As she says this, the boys hear a heavy sound downstairs. This makes them skittish, so they inch toward the back door, hoping to hurry Lux and her sisters along. But Lux doesn't do anything, telling them it'll be another five minutes because her sisters are still packing. They had to wait until their parents were asleep, she explains.

*There's some humor at play when the boys note that the car available to them actually belongs to Chase's mother, not to Chase himself. They clearly want to posture as confident men who have come to rescue the Lisbon girls from their sad life, but there's no getting around the fact that the neighborhood boys are just that—*boys, *not men.*

Lux points out that not everyone will fit in Chase Buell's car, so they should probably take the Lisbon car. She asks Chase if he can drive a station wagon, and he says he can (as long as it isn't stick shift). As he says this, Lux walks up to him and starts undoing his belt in front of all the other boys. Nobody says anything. In fact, even though Lux is undoing Chase's belt, all of the boys feel as if she's touching *their* belts. Just as Lux reaches into Chase's pants, though, another sound comes from downstairs. Lux takes her hand away, saying, "We can't do this now." She then declares that she has to get some "fresh air" because the boys have gotten her "all worked up," so she decides to wait in her parents' car.

It's unclear why Lux would suddenly start undoing Chase's pants. It's a bold move—so bold that it's as if she's purposefully indulging the boys' wildest fantasies, playing into their obsession with (and attraction to) her. But then she stops and says she's going to wait in the car, leaving the boys in a stupor that ultimately emphasizes how helpless they are in her presence.

Lux tells the boys to wait for her sisters, who will need help with their luggage. She also asks where they should all go, and Chase Buell says Florida. Lux approves of his decision and then goes into the garage. Left to themselves, the boys fantasize about driving long hours with the Lisbon sisters, imagining themselves stopping at deserted gas stations and becoming accustomed to the feeling of sitting next to the girls. As they daydream, they keep hearing thuds from various places in the house, but then everything goes silent. After a moment, Peter Sissen notices there's a light on in the basement, so the boys tentatively descend the stairs—only to find that everything from the party they attended a year ago is still there: melted ice cream, a scummy bowl of punch, partially deflated balloons.

The fact that the decorations from last year's party—when Cecilia died by suicide—are still in place is quite eerie, as it's a physical manifestation of the Lisbon family's struggle to move on from tragedy. This, it seems, is what the Lisbon sisters want to escape, and understandably so: the remnants of the party are terrible reminders of Cecilia's gruesome death.

The boys feel like they've returned to the party. One of them even starts dancing, pretending to do the box step with one of the Lisbon sisters. His shoes slosh through the inch of water that has flooded the neglected basement, and this intensifies the smell of sewage, which then alerts the boys to another smell—a smell they will never be able to forget. Looking up, they see Bonnie hanging lifeless from a beam in the ceiling. Suddenly, the boys feel a "shame that has never gone away"—a response that doctors later say is related to shock. But the boys think it's really something more like guilt. They've failed, they think, to save the Lisbon sisters. They realize they never really even knew Bonnie. And this, they think, is why the Lisbon girls lured them inside: to show the boys how little they knew them.

The boys were, until this moment, so confident that they were going to whisk the Lisbon sisters away from sorrow and hardship. But now they see that this was nothing but a fantasy. They haven't come to rescue the girls—they've come to witness yet another tragedy. Once again, they've somehow become part of the Lisbon family's grief by being there to observe it firsthand. The "shame" they feel while looking at Bonnie's lifeless body might have something to do with their previous excitement and the way they've viewed the Lisbon girls as some sort of bizarre spectacle to obsess over. In the end, their obsessive surveillance of the girls has led only to more tragedy and death.

The boys think Bonnie died while they were upstairs fantasizing about life on the road. When Mary heard Bonnie kick over the heavy trunk she was standing on, she put her head in the oven. The boys must have walked right by her on their way to the basement. By then, Therese would already have been dead, having swallowed a handful of sleeping pills and chased it with gin. Lux, the boys put together, died after they left the house running and screaming—they forgot to check on her in the garage. She died of asphyxiation, the car purring and the radio playing in the dark garage. She had unbuckled Chase's belt just to stall them, waiting to hear the signal of Bonnie's trunk tipping over in the basement.

The four remaining Lisbon sisters pre-orchestrated this group suicide, and part of this orchestration involved the boys. For one reason or another, the girls wanted the boys to be there, as evidenced by the fact that they told them to look for a "signal." But there's no obvious reason why they wanted the boys to witness their deaths. One possible reason is that the girls were aware of just how much scrutiny the boys (and perhaps the entire community) had already placed on them, so luring them into the house was a way of acknowledging that scrutiny while also rebelling against it—a way of showing the nosey community members that they could pry into their lives all they wanted but might not, in the end, like what they find.

CHAPTER 5

Mary ends up surviving—for now, at least. Later, the boys read the coroner's report, learning that even the seasoned mortician became emotional when opening up the sisters' bodies because they looked so young and healthy. "Seventeen years in this business and I'm a basket case," he wrote in the margins of the report. Eventually, the boys realize—because of a sensational article by Linda Perle pointing out the connection—that the suicides took place on the anniversary of Cecilia's first attempt.

Articles like the one Linda Perle publishes about the anniversary of Cecilia's first suicide attempt is most likely why many people in the community hatch the theory that the sisters planned the whole thing from the very beginning. But several details contradict this hypothesis, like the fact that Therese ordered college brochures or Father Moody's certainty that the four remaining Lisbon girls were distraught after Cecilia's death (suggesting that they hadn't seen it coming). In the end, though, nobody knows why the sisters did what they did—except, of course, Mary, who is the sole remaining Lisbon girl.

Finally, the footage of the Lisbon house that local stations shot earlier in the year airs, since the sisters' deaths have sparked so much interest in the public. But none of the news coverage about the events seems sufficient to the boys, who yearn for answers and sound explanations. The theories that newscasters set forth are weak and unhelpful, leaving the neighborhood boys to keep grasping for their own hypotheses, feeling like they've been condemned to continuously "wander" their own memories.

Again, the boys are tormented by the overwhelming sense of uncertainty surrounding the situation with the Lisbon sisters. While the media sets forth simplistic answers, the boys yearn for a more nuanced understanding of what happened—an understanding they'll likely never reach, which is why they feel sentenced to "wander" their memories of the Lisbon girls for the rest of their lives.

Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon, for their part, drop any pretense of normalcy. Mrs. Lisbon stops going to church, and neither of them answer the door when people go to check on them. They decide to sell the house, understanding they'll probably have to take a loss because of its poor condition—but they don't care. Mr. Lisbon hires the local English teacher, Mr. Hedlie, a hippie who in the summers makes extra money by doing odd jobs. As Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon go with Mary to stay in a motel, the English teacher diligently fixes up the house, cleans it, and—most notably, for the neighborhood boys, at least—throws out many of the Lisbon girls' belongings. He then holds an estate sale of items the Lisbons no longer want, and the entire neighborhood comes to rifle through the wares and wander through the Lisbon household.

The estate sale is, in many ways, a literal representation of what the neighbors have been doing for the entire novel—namely, sorting through the Lisbon family's private life in search of tidbits that might interest them. In this moment, the neighbors trade gossip and speculation for a different kind of insight into the Lisbon family's life, sorting through their belongings as if they're pilfering items from an exhibit in a museum.

The boys watch how the people around them behave in the aftermath of the suicides. Their parents seem better able than they are to simply forget about it and move on, quickly returning to their recreational activities. Still, everyone has their own theory about what happened. For Mr. Hedlie who cleaned out the Lisbon house, this theory has to do with the harsh realities of living in a "dying empire." The tragedy, the boys piece together from Mr. Hedlie's theory, is somehow related to everything in their suburban neighborhood—and the country at large—that doesn't quite function correctly: the mail arriving late, the unfixed potholes, the "thievery at City Hall." Everyone in town seems to feel this way, as if the Lisbon girls represent everything wrong with contemporary American life.

At this point, the Lisbon sisters' suicides take on a much greater significance, as people in the community begin to associate the tragedy with much broader issues. More specifically, the townspeople come to see the suicides as a symbolic manifestation of the sense of decline besieging American life—or, to put it more accurately, the sense of decline that white, upper-middle-class Americans living in protected suburban neighborhoods are beginning to detect. The fact that such a strange and inexplicable tragedy can take place in a wealthy suburb undermines the idea that living the quintessential American dream of prosperity will protect people from hardship. Therefore, the Lisbon suicides pose an existential threat to the very fabric of suburban life, which is why so many of the adults in the boys' neighborhood associate the tragedy with the decline of simpler times—times in which it was possible for them to believe in the mythical prosperity of American suburbia.

A group of parents has a bench made in the Lisbon girls' honor. The bench has a little plaque dedicating it to the Lisbon girls, calling them "daughters of this community" and completely overlooking the fact that Mary is still alive. Mary, for her part, comes home from the hospital after staying there for two weeks. While there, she met with Dr. Hornicker, who assessed her and thought that, given the circumstances, she was doing pretty well by the time she got out of the hospital. She comes home to an empty house and spends most of her time in a sleeping bag on the floor of her room.

The plaque on the bench illustrates the surrounding community's lack of true compassion for the Lisbon family. Everyone, it seems, is more concerned with performative displays of empathy than they are with actually supporting the family. This is why they don't even consider the fact that Mary is still alive. They don't, in reality, care *all that much about the details of the tragedy—they just want to make it looks like they're doing the right thing.*

The neighborhood plunges into deep summer, with parents focusing on the sort of things that normally preoccupy them—like, for instance, debutante parties for their teenaged daughters. One night, the neighborhood boys go to a debutante party with the strange but insensitive theme of "asphyxiation." Attendees wear gasmasks, helmets, and even a deep-sea diving suit. Everyone at the party gets drunk and has a fantastic time. Teenagers horseplay on the host's docks, making full use of the lakefront property. One boy falls in and, after being rescued, jokes about how he shouldn't have been saved: "Good-bye, cruel world!" he shouts. An adult shushes him, worrying the Lisbons will hear.

There's a stark contrast between the somber aftermath of the Lisbon girls' group suicide and the joyous, frivolous spirit of summer in a wealthy suburban neighborhood. Even the boys—who are so wrapped up in the Lisbon drama—seem to forget some of the heaviness of recent weeks, perhaps because this is the example that has been set by adults in the neighborhood. These adults aren't lingering on the tragedy. In fact, it's almost as if they've forgotten about it already, considering that one of the neighbors chooses "asphyxiation" as a party theme—an insensitive theme, given that Bonnie died by hanging herself and Mary (who is still alive and most likely knows about the party) tried to asphyxiate herself in the oven.

The boys and the other partygoers don't leave until dawn. As the sun comes up, the boys stumble across the lawn, having spent the night kissing girls and getting drunk. They feel mature, as if they've somehow already lived their adult lives—they've already, they feel, "been married and divorced, in a sense." Walking down the street, though, they stop before the Lisbon house. The paramedics are there again, carting away the last Lisbon daughter. Mary, the boys learn, died in her sleeping bag after swallowing a large quantity of pills. There's no fanfare this time, though—only the boys are there to watch the ambulance drive away.

When the boys feel that they've already "been married and divorced, in a sense," they embody a certain battle-worn maturity, as if going to a party, drinking, and kissing girls all night has catapulted them into adulthood. They possibly feel this way because the party is the first time they've really cut loose—and focused on other girls—since the Lisbon tragedy, so it marks the first time the boys have had to move past unresolved hardship (a task that is arguably a big part of adulthood). And yet, just when they're on the cusp of pushing forward in life, Mary's suicide pulls them right back to the trauma of having witnessed the sisters' deaths. It's as if the timing of this situation prevents the boys from ever moving on.

After Mary's death, the boys try to move on. It's hard, though—they keep dreaming of the Lisbon girls. They watch Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon return from the cemetery and enter the empty house. The boys think the bereft parents will be leaving soon, since there's nothing left for them to do there. The house, after all, has already been sold to a young couple. But they don't come outside all day. It isn't until midnight that they leave the house for the last time. Only Uncle Tucker sees them drive away.

Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon leave the neighborhood with little fanfare, slinking away in the night. Their unceremonious departure is perhaps intentional—a way of finally escaping the gawking neighbors and all of their morbid gossip.

Soon, the young couple moves into the Lisbon house and drastically changes its appearance. The Parks Department also returns and finally cuts down Cecilia's **elm tree**, along with all of the other elm trees in the neighborhood. Without the trees, the entire neighborhood suddenly feels depressingly boring, as the boys now realize the houses are laid out on an uninspiring grid and that none of them—despite their external stylings—are all that different from each other.

The death of the Lisbon sisters coincides with a harsh reality check. As the superficial aspects of the neighborhood are stripped away, the boys realize that their beloved street isn't the special, magical place they once thought it was. It's just a regular suburban block. This realization is wrapped up in the Lisbon tragedy, as the boys come to realize that life can be quite harsh and that the idyllic American dream they were supposedly living in a wealthy suburb has never, in reality, protected or insulated them from hardship and sorrow.

Around this time, Sammy "The Shark" Baldino is arrested. Without the looming presence of his father, Paul Baldino no longer seems intimidating to the boys. He's just a normal kid. The entire spirit of the neighborhood changes, as if its "demise" has coincided with the death of the Lisbon sisters. People stop talking about *why* the girls took their own lives and instead come to feel that the sisters were somehow prophetic, as if they didn't want to be around for the deterioration of everything that once made the neighborhood—and, for that matter, the country—worth living in. There are no more beautiful **elm trees**, the booming automobile industry is waning, and even snowstorms fail to live up to their former glory. The Lisbon girls, then, decided to die simply because they refused to "accept the world as it was handed down to them, so full of flaws."

There's a very clear connection between the Lisbon suicides and the broader cultural shifts taking place not just in the boys' neighborhood but in the entire country. The Virgin Suicides *is set—roughly—in the 1970s, a time in which countercultural movements and an economic recession changed the fabric of life in wealthy suburban communities that were accustomed to an easy, unexamined sort of prosperity. The boys feel this shift, but they also associate it with the Lisbon suicides, and even the surrounding community seems to imbue the girls with extra significance, as if their deaths are symbolic of the country's trajectory.*

In the many years since the Lisbon girls' death, the neighborhood boys have grown up. But they haven't stopped thinking about the Lisbons. They still have the 97 "artifacts" they collected to commemorate the sisters. The items are gathered in the old treehouse, which still stands in one of the only surviving **trees** in the neighborhood. But even the items themselves are perishing: the fabric of one of Lux's bras going stiff, a pair of Cecilia's canvas sneakers yellowing. These are the only puzzle pieces left to solve the question of why the Lisbon girls killed themselves, but the boys know they'll never be able to piece it all together. The boys now understand that the suicides had nothing to do with them, but they still can't help but linger in the past, feeling forever cut off from the girls they once tracked so closely.

The novel ends with an overall feeling of uncertainty—a feeling that is quite appropriate, since the boys will never know what led the Lisbon sisters to suicide. They can try to find meaning in the girls' deaths, but any conclusions they reach will be their own subjective analyses of the situation, not objective truths about what happened; that kind of objectivity is and will forever be out of reach. And it is this sense of uncertainty that keeps the boys from fully moving on from the traumatic things they witnessed as adolescents, since the ambiguity surrounding the tragedy makes it all the more difficult for them to process what they beheld.

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