The little death, the renewal

by written_constellation124

Summary

It is September 1909 when Quentin, an introvert running from his Mississippi past, and Shreve, a witty, talkative Canadian, meet for the first time. They instantly dislike one another, but what will happen when circumstance (not to mention their mutual pining) pushes them together?

~ you don’t need to read Absalom, Absalom! or The Sound and the Fury to understand this

Notes
Like I said, you don’t need to read Absalom, Absalom! and The Sound and the Fury, but it might make it easier to understand the story.

General TW for mentions of racism, homophobia, sexism, suicidal thoughts, and attempted sexual assault (not Quentin and Shreve).

All characters belong to William Faulkner.
The story begins

Chapter Summary

I added some background info before chapter 1 but you can skip it if you want

Chapter Notes

The first half of the chapter is from Quentin’s POV and the italics are his thoughts

The second half is from Shreve’s POV and the italics are his thoughts

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This story criticizes racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia as a way of connecting Absalom, Absalom! with The Sound and the Fury.

There are some elements of Faulkner’s novels which I intentionally used, including italicizing characters’ thoughts, a complex vocabulary, and sometimes omitting apostrophes commas. However, my sentences are a lot shorter and more manageable, and I’ve added more dialogue, so it shouldn’t be too hard to understand.

Timeline:
Sept 1909
Chapter 1: The story begins

Dec 1909
Chapter 2: A winter proposal

Jan 1910
(Chapter 7 of Absalom, Absalom!)
• Chapter 3: An interrupted story
• Chapter 4: A midnight confrontation
• Chapter 5: A lesson in philosophy

Feb 1910
• Chapter 6: An unprecedented connection

June 2, 1910
(Chapter 2 of The Sound and the Fury)
• Chapter 7: An inundated end

June 3, 1910
• Chapter 8: The first letter

June 1, 1915
• Chapter 9: The second letter

June 3, 1910
• Chapter 10: An unforeseen denouement

June 2, 1915
• Chapter 11: A startling revelation
January 5, 1916
• Chapter 12: An international design
1918
• Chapter 13: A portentous masquerade
• Chapter 14: A discarded veil
• Chapter 15: A sea of upheaval
• Chapter 16: An (almost) consummated marriage
• Chapter 17: A consummated marriage (for real)
• Chapter 18: A written confession
• Chapter 19: A Canadian proposal

Summaries of Absalom, Absalom! and The Sound and the Fury

Hopefully this will be helpful for some information you’ll need to know before reading:

Absalom, Absalom!

You need to know a little bit of what happens in Absalom, Absalom! to understand most of this story. Quentin’s father, his grandfather, and Miss Rosa Coldfield tell him about the life of Thomas Sutpen, which Quentin later retells to his roommate Shreve at Harvard. Thomas Sutpen, who represents the South, had the sole aim of acquiring a “design” consisting of status, wealth, slaves, a plantation, and a white male heir to carry on his legacy. The pursuit of this design founded on racism and classism ends up destroying him.

When Sutpen (“the demon”) finds out that his first wife had black blood, he abandons her and his son Charles Bon to start over a second time. Sutpen marries Ellen Coldfield and has two children, Henry and Judith. Thirty years later, Sutpen’s second son Henry returns home with Charles Bon, whom he met at college. Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve all believe that Henry was in love with Bon because Henry renounced his birthright for him. Charles and Judith (Henry’s and Charles’s sister - yup more incest) get engaged and then the Civil War begins.

Sutpen tried to manipulate Henry into killing Bon because he does not want Charles and Judith to leave him a partially black heir. Henry, even though he gave up everything for Bon, shoots Charles to prevent his sister from marrying someone who is part black (not because they’re siblings and would be committing incest). Sutpen’s white male son (Henry) ends up eliminating himself as an heir by becoming a murderer.

The narrators (Mr Compson, Miss Rosa, Quentin, and Shreve) all contradict one another and demonstrate their own bias and hypocrisy. Most of the story comes from what Quentin and Shreve imagine by putting themselves in the other characters’ shoes. They imagine themselves as Charles and Henry to act out their own homoerotic desires through storytelling.

In the end, Sutpen’s biracial daughter Clytemnestra (Clytie) burns down Sutpen’s mansion (called Sutpen’s Hundred) with herself and Henry inside. Ironically, the only surviving member of the Sutpen family is Charles Bon’s grandson, whose biracial heritage embodies everything that Thomas Sutpen was trying to avoid. This novel presents a criticism of the South, the American Dream, and the idea of the self-made man because the racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and general hypocrisy of the design culminate in its downfall.

The Sound and the Fury

You can wait until later in this story to read The Sound and the Fury if you haven’t already. In order
to understand this story from chapter 7 (An inundated end) onward, it would probably be helpful to know what happens in Chapter 2 of the novel to get a sense of Quentin’s chaotic internal monologue. Here’s a link to a good summary of that part of *The Sound and the Fury*:


Chapter 7 picks up at the end of Chapter 2 of *The Sound and the Fury*, but even if you haven’t read the book it should be pretty easy to figure out what’s going on.

If you haven’t read the book, the chapters I have written before 6 should explain some of the reasons why Quentin decides to kill himself, though the original novel does not describe this final act.

At the end of Chapter 2, Faulkner leaves off with Quentin, immaculately cleaned and dressed, on his way to deliver a letter he wrote for Shreve (presumably his suicide note). Before leaving the dorm, he remembers a conversation he had with his father about Caddy and his false claims of incest.

Neither of the novels explicitly connect the incest, racism, homophobia, and general self-implosion of the South, so I tried to connect them here. I have attempted to clarify some of the aspects which I found confusing. Everything else should become clear (at least, as clear as it gets with Faulkner) as you read ;)

And here’s **Chapter 1**:

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**Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts**

**September 1909**

Although it was a September afternoon in Cambridge, it was not hot, weary, or dead. *Not like Mississippi*, Quentin thought as he took in his new surroundings: the vibrant crimson and auburn of the changing oak trees, the nearly cloudless expanse of cerulean sky, and, most drastically, the crisp autumn breeze rustling the leaves as if its chilly breath was the life force of the environment itself. *No heavy stagnant lifeless air here to stifle my breath, no decaying fumes to suffocate me here. Not like in the South.*

Quentin towed his bags to the square where the other Harvard students were bustling about, some already chattering excitedly to one another while others bid tearful farewells to their families. He did neither.

*Father might have wanted me to come here,* he thought bitterly as he stood in the middle of the crowd, slightly disoriented and lost, *he even sold Benjy’s pasture just to pay for my education. He was so proud, saying, ‘Harvard my Harvard boy’ as if the name of the college itself proved not mine but his success. But he didnt care enough about me to even come to say goodbye. None of them did.*

*They dont care about me at all,* Quentin seethed with unspoken resentment, *Father wont admit that he’s no different than Thomas Sutpen, fulfilling his own design by sending me to Harvard. Consigning me to the same sepulchral fate - arranging a loveless marriage for me so that I will do the same as him. Like him, he expects me to get rich while black people have no choice but to withstand centuries of persecution because of the color of their skin. The South lost the War, but just like me, the former slaves are chained to the land, providing people like Father (and me) with cheap labor in the legalized continuation of slavery.*

He was still standing amidst the buzzing swarms of other college-aged boys, none of whom seemed to notice him at all. Although he could not have been more relieved to be free from Mississippi’s
stifling air, Quentin felt out of place among the outgoing students already making new friends and the boys whose families had bothered to come say goodbye.

Perhaps it is better that my family is not here to send me off, he thought. After all, it was not Father and Mother who raised me; Dilsey and Roskus are responsible for all of the work that Father takes credit for while he drinks away his inheritance. And it isn't just Father - it is the entire South, the whole country even - cultivated not by hard work but with the blood of slaves.

And I am expected to do the same: to continue the shedding of black blood and marry a woman whom I will - can - never love.

However much he wished his own family would confess to their hypocrisy, Quentin had come to Harvard to leave the past behind.

But I won't conform to that design. I won't blindly sell my life to the ashen crypt of immorality just because Father wants me to. That's why I'm here, to learn what life is like outside of the tomblike Southern design.

Here, he would be able to live without the relentlessly judgmental surveillance of his Mother and Father. With a newfound determination, he strode resolutely through the crowd toward the tall brick building wishing he could blend into the sea of other students without attracting any attention. As Quentin approached the arched doorway to the dorms, the hairs on the back of his neck rose as he felt eyes watching him.

All of these people, he thought as he continued walking away from the glare he had sensed, someone was bound to notice me at some point. They sense that I don't belong here. Is it too much to ask for me to just fit in? I came here to start over, not to be constantly reminded that I will never be anything more than an outsider wherever I go.

But the unsettling tingling sensation did not fade as he neared the door; if anything it had grown stronger. He found the source of the unnerving stare to be a group of three college students loitering by the door. Well, two of the boys were lounging nonchalantly against the wall; the other appeared to be unable to escape the overly affectionate smothering of a woman who was evidently his mother, if their identical garrulous blonde curls and voluble violet eyes were anything to go by.

At least Mother wouldn't make a public display of her affection like that, Quentin looked back at the door, turning his gaze to the other two boys. If she ever had any affection for me to begin with - she couldn't even be bothered to get out of bed to say goodbye when I left. It doesn't matter though. I'm here now and they can't stop me.

The other boys were both tall; the shorter of the two was elbowing his friend with what was obviously intended to be a discreet glance in Quentin’s direction. Quentin only looked at him long enough to observe his light brown hair and hazel eyes before his gaze was drawn to the taller boy. Perhaps it was inevitable that his vision settled on this chestnut-haired student, even if his rosy face suggests otherwise) was staring fixedly at Quentin from behind a pair of moonlike spectacles.

So that must be the color of alpine lakes, Quentin thought dreamily when he noticed the other student’s eyes behind the spectacles, clear azure depths beneath the glimmering glassy surface. Glacial streams, unpolluted by the blood of slaves, free from the poisonous miasma of Southern immorality. Crystalline sapphire blue of the mountains, alluring watery canyons which I would dive into if only I could let go of my past, that haunting past which I can't esca-
“Hey you gongoozler!” the taller boy yelled at him, disrupting Quentin’s thoughts, “how many of Daddy’s cronies did you have to get on your knees for to get here?”

Quentin flushed as all of the blood in his body flooded to his cheeks. He felt like every student was watching him - dissecting him with surgical precision - trying to determine whether or not the abrasive comment was true. More ashamed of being the object of such a public derogation than he was surprised by it, Quentin lowered his head and walked into the unfamiliar building.

_Maybe it isn’t any better here than in Jefferson_, he brooded, looking for his assigned dorm and luging his bags behind him. _I was foolish to think it would be. I just wanted to start over. Is that so much to ask for? But even at Harvard I can’t get away from my family and my past._

He sighed as he opened the door to his room, thinking, _there’s still a chance. Maybe my roommate will be better; they can’t all be rude know-it-alls who shout insults at strangers who did nothing to deserve it._

Quentin set down his things on the left side of the vacant room and attempted to remain optimistic as he anxiously awaited the arrival of his roommate, fidgeting nervously in anticipation. When no one came after several minutes, he couldn’t stand waiting around and doing nothing so he began to unpack his belongings.

_At least my roommate - whoever he is - can’t be as awful as that boy_, he thought with as much optimism as he could muster. _Maybe he’ll even have the tact not to ask about the desolate land which I left behind. Even if some of the ridiculously cocky students here try to remind me of where I came from, I will leave it in the past. I will - no - I have to. And surely my roommate will be perceptive enough not to talk about things that he doesn’t - no, never will - understand. And then I will escape the South for good, never to be reminded of—_

Quentin was torn from his rumination as the door burst open abruptly, shaking the room slightly. He looked up to find the rude student from earlier standing in the doorway, cherubic cheeks glowing and his expression lit with excitement. He looked positively thrilled at the prospect of meeting his new roommate, that is, he looked absolutely ecstatic about the idea until he recognized his (Quentin’s) slightly lowered face.

_Please be in the wrong room_, Quentin pleaded silently as the other boy’s flushed enthusiasm faded into something resembling remorse. _Just walk away, and I can forget this ever happened. I won’t even hold what you did earlier against you if you walk away now. There’s hardly anything you could do to make this worse for me than you already have._

“Hi there,” the gregarious boy actually had the nerve to act as if nothing had ever happened, “I’m your new roommate.”

_Oh no_, Quentin glared at him unrelentingly, unwilling to be fooled by the polite chicanery, _I was wrong; I didn’t think you could, but you just made this much worse. For both of us._

The boy walked to the other side of the room assertively and plopped his belongings down on the bed. Quentin looked away in disgust and continued to unpack his clothes. He glared back up when (for some incomprehensible reason) the boy started talking again, awkwardly fumbling over what what was apparently intended to be an apology.

_Do you ever shut up?_ Quentin was almost as appalled by the student’s callousness as he was infuriated by it. _Can you understand that nothing you can say will make this situation any better? You humiliated me in front of hundreds of other students on the first day of school. You’ve already ruined what was supposed to be a new beginning for me, and now you have the audacity to try to_
apologize for it?

He lowered his glare to the floor as he kept unpacking, scarcely believing the other boy’s disrespect and certainly not listening to a word of his worthless apology.

You’re going to have to do a hell of a lot better than that if you want me to forgive you, Quentin thought, unaware that what the student would say next was only going to make it worse.

~•~

And there goes another one, Shreve didnt know what to do with all of these supercilious conceited brats. He leaned against the wall of the brick building as he disdainfully glared down at the sea of students, each boy with too much privilege and too little resilience for his own taste.

How foolish I was, he thought resentfully, thinking that Harvard was where students came for their intellect and hard work. None of them had to work to be at Harvard, not like I did.

Shreve fumed as he looked at the hordes of rich spoiled rascals who didnt deserve to be at a college as reputable as Harvard. Unlike them, he was only here because he had spent countless hours studying Latin and Ancient Greek, memorizing Calculus, and reading literature ranging from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to Homer’s *Odyssey*, all the while working to support his family of six.

*Your family’s dirty money will only get you so far*, he seethed with a scowl as he watched the other freshmen. *Someday you’ll wish you had my work ethic.*

Not that his present company was any better. Spoade, who stood next to him, was all right as far as Shreve could tell. He would even play along, sensing Shreve’s bitterness towards the other students and nudging him teasingly whenever an especially pampered-looking brat passed by. But none of those stuck-up boys could hold a candle to Gerald Bland, his other companion.

*When Bland isn’t bidding an exaggeratedly sappy farewell to his insufferable Oedipal mother, Shreve thought as he looked at the mother and son, he wont stop boasting about his allegedly illustrious conquests of women. Little does the chauvinist bastard know that I couldn’t be less interested in his shitty exploits of females.*

Then Shreve saw a new student whom he hadn’t noticed before. He didnt need Spoade to alert him this time. His attention drifted from the Blands to the new boy, who was standing still - almost paralyzed - in the middle of the masses of students, as if he was impervious to the commotion surrounding him.

*And there is precisely the reason why I will never be interested in Gerald’s preposterous tales about women*, he marveled as he scanned the newcomer’s lush ebony hair and lithe figure. He thought that he could at least distract himself from his rage at Gerald Bland by looking at a different - and admittedly more entrancing - elitist reprobate. The slender boy started to walk, but he still looked out of place, even among his affluent peers. Although the boy appeared to be an outsider just like himself, Shreve got a nagging feeling that this student was too timid to come to terms with his own aristocratic background.

*Or maybe not*, Shreve second-guessed his initial assumption once he noticed the other boy’s dejected expression and the way he hugged his shoulders inward like he was trying to protect himself. *Maybe I was wrong about you. Maybe you’re not one of them. You look desperate, like you were unwillingly pushed into a whirling Charybdis, and you’re trying to hold onto anything that might keep you afloat above the raging current.*
But you’re not helpless, Shreve realized when the boy’s eyes locked with his own. No, you’re not helpless at all. There’s definitely some defiance in those smoldering grey eyes. Maybe you’re as outraged by all of these rich spoiled bastards as I am. You certainly don’t fit in here, with all of that repressed indignance.

Then Spoade was prodding him again while looking pointedly at the shy student and Shreve reconsidered - perhaps his first conclusion had been right.

Or maybe you are just here because of your father’s inheritance, he thought, more puzzled than ever by the strange boy. You certainly don’t look like you’ve ever worked a day in your life. I don’t think you could even lift a textbook without shattering your porcelain frame. You had to find something other than studying that would get you into Harvard . . . I know what you did to get that money. It’s too bad that you’re a prodigal wastrel; those full lips could work wonders if they weren’t so busy already.

Shreve didn’t mean to be vitriolic, and he certainly wasn’t trying to hurt the other boy’s feelings; the words just sort of slipped out of his mouth, “Hey you gongoozler! How many of Daddy’s cronies did you have to get on your knees for to get here?”

Instead of retaliating or even looking shocked, the reserved student just averted his eyes and kept on walking. Although he didn’t say anything to defend himself, he didn’t look impassive; if anything he looked more distressed than he had before, ducking his head to hide the shame of being slandered in front of everyone.

Jesus, Shreve regretted his own words before Spoade could even look at him to admonish him for his outburst, **What have I done now? I haven’t even been here two hours, and I already made my first enemy on campus. And he didn’t do anything - neither to warrant my derogation nor in retaliation to what I said - it’s like he was trying to make me feel guilty. I’ll give him that. If he was trying to make me regret it, he succeeded. If only I could apologize, all I need to do is find-**

“What the hell was that all about?” Spoade asked in surprise, apparently appalled by his friend’s behavior. “That came out of nowhere. It’s not like you, Shreve. What brought that on?”

“I don’t know,” Shreve replied, himself confused by his own unusual display of animosity, “I- I just - I’d better go figure out where he went so I can apologize.”

“Put your bags away first,” Spoade said. “I know what to do; I’m a senior after all. Give him some time to cool off before you go and try to beg for his forgiveness.”

“All right,” Shreve responded. “I’ll trust you on this one. Wish me luck.”

“Luck?” Spoade laughed and smiled wryly, “You brought this upon yourself! You’ll need more than just luck, my friend. I hope that he doesn’t slay you in vengeance, if it’s any comfort.”

“Very reassuring,” Shreve rolled his eyes with sarcasm, “Slaying me in vengeance. I hadn’t even thought of that possibility before.”

“Just getting you prepared for the worst,” Spoade joked. “I’d offer you my sword and shield to defend yourself, but I lost them in a previous battle. Now go ahead - get on with it already.”

“Yes, because you’ve motivated me so much,” Shreve’s voice was dripping with sarcasm, but nonetheless he turned to take his bags to the dorm room.

“Try to avoid getting stabbed in the heart!” Shreve heard Spoade call after him.
It might already be too late for that, he thought but didn’t turn around, having rallied as much courage as he possibly could. At the end of the corridor he found the door of his assigned dorm room, which was slightly open, indicating that its other occupant had already entered.

At least I have meeting a new friend to look forward to, Shreve visibly brightened at the thought. He loved any opportunity to socialize with other people. He pushed the door open, eager to discover who his roommate would be. Instead of seeing a warm welcoming smile directed his way, he was met with a reproachful glare. Blazing eyes seared his skin from where that same strange silent boy knelt on the floor.

Maybe I was right about the getting down on your knees comment . . . Shreve thought. He immediately reminded himself that he was supposed to apologize. No, what am I doing? I cant think of that right now. I need to make him see that I’m not a total asshole.

Somehow, just as before, the clumsy words escaped his lips before he could even think about how they would sound.

“Hi there. I’m your new roommate.”

Shreve instantly realized that his attempt at politeness had been the worst possible thing he could have said. It didn’t help that the boy was glaring at him more than ever while he kept putting his clothes away with curt punctuated motions of barely suppressed rage.

With that Cupid’s bow pout I might just have to keep spiting you, Shreve thought as he walked to the empty bed on the opposite side of the room.

No, ughh, I have to stop this, he scolded himself internally, dropping his bags with a thump. What is it about you that makes me completely lose control over my mouth? I’m not like this, not usually. Sure, sometimes I speak before thinking, but I would never traduce another person in front of an audience. At least, not until today. Not until I did it to you. But I’ll show you that’s not who I really am.

“Look,” Shreve confessed with humility, stumbling over the awkward words, “I’m dreadfully sorry about what I did earlier. I- I had no right to call you out like that, especially with no provoking on your part. You did nothing to deserve that and I can’t tell you how awful I feel. Will you please forgive my impudence? Give me another chance?”

The boy didn’t answer; he continued to stack the folded clothes on top of one another in clipped rhythmic anger. He didn’t even bother to acknowledge Shreve’s apology with so much as an upward glare.

So you’re giving me the cold shoulder, Shreve bristled. I suppose I deserve it after what I said. But you could at least tell me something - even just look at me - instead of ignoring me. Maybe if I explain what I was thinking, maybe you could understand what I meant by it . . .

Unfortunately, despite his honest intentions, Shreve’s next words did not exactly have the desired effect, flowing out of his mouth before he could evaluate how they would affect the other boy.

“I swear, I didn’t mean it the way it sounded,” he effused. “What I said outside, I mean. I’m sorry - I was convinced that you were one of those students who is only at Harvard because he paid his way to get here.”

Unaware of how the boy’s outraged expression had transformed into self-accusation, Shreve continued to explain the reason for his outburst, “For God’s sake, it wasn’t personal. I’ve got nothing
against you; I just can’t stand watching the limited slots at such a prestigious school be filled by students who are only here because of their wealth.”

The boy said nothing, appearing strangely regretful rather than annoyed by what Shreve had said.

*What will it take to get you to even look at me?* Shreve thought in frustration. At this point he was simply trying to get a reaction - any reaction - out of the boy.

“Unlike you all, I worked hard to get here;” he ranted, saying anything that could possibly get his silent roommate to react, “even if it seems like no one else had to demonstrate any dedication or perseverance to get here. In this world, if you’ve got money, you don’t have to worry about knowing anything - I bet you couldn’t tell me a thing about the *Odyssey*. Since you’re obviously not here for your brains, I’ll enlighten you. In trying to discover what happened to his father, Telemachus learns that Agamemnon, returning home after the War, was killed by his wife Cassandra-”

“Clytemnestra,” the boy’s voice was quiet, barely more than a whisper.

“What was that?” Shreve knew he had heard something, but he had been too shocked by the faint sound to pay attention to what the boy had actually said.

“Clytemnestra,” there was definitely a Southern accent in the inflection, “Agamemnon’s wife, she wasn’t Cassandra. Her name was Clytemnestra.”

“Ahh, I was wrong.” Shreve smiled ruefully at his own mistake in underestimating the other student’s intelligence, “Perhaps you deserve to be here after all. More than I do, even. Look, honestly, I’m truly sorry for what I said. I’m Shreve McCannon, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Shreve extended his hand in greeting. The boy looked surprised, hesitant, as if he didn’t expect anyone to show this degree of welcoming. Granted, maybe his suspicion was justified - Shreve hadn’t exactly been kind to him before this. He noticed that his no longer mute roommate wasn’t glaring anymore, although he still appeared extremely doubtful of his (Shreve’s) motives.

“It’s all right,” Shreve said, thrusting his hand out further, “Again, I’m sorry for what I said earlier. I was just being cynical, that’s all.”

The other boy took his hand tentatively, with long slender fingers while his face was still focused despondently on the floor, “Quentin Compson.”

“Well, Quentin,” Shreve said sociably, “You’ll have to tell me where you’re from. I’m Canadian, Edmonton actually, and I can’t tell the difference between all these Southern accents. My friend Gerald is from Kentucky and Spoade’s from North Carolina, but for all I can tell, they might both be from Virginia. So, where do you come from?”

“Well, Quentin,” Shreve said sociably, “You’ll have to tell me where you’re from. I’m Canadian, Edmonton actually, and I can’t tell the difference between all these Southern accents. My friend Gerald is from Kentucky and Spoade’s from North Carolina, but for all I can tell, they might both be from Virginia. So, where do you come from?”

“Um . . . Mississippi,” Quentin looked harrowed, as if the very word held power over him.

“Say,” Shreve replied affably, intending to start a conversation, “Tell about the South. What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all.”

*Evidently that was not the right thing to say to get you to open up,* Shreve thought regretfully. Gerald and Spoade had been all too eager to talk about their respective homes, but it seemed like Quentin was trying desperately to forget where he had come from. *I’ll have to be careful what I say to you if I can’t even ask you about your home without making you clam up. You know what, you don’t even have to tell me, it’s all right - we can just talk about something else.*

Shreve was just about to take back his words when Quentin spoke. He replied enigmatically, in the
same quiet repressed outrage which Shreve did not quite understand.

“If you want to know about the South,” he said softly, “I'll have to tell you a story that started more than a century ago. It all began with a man named Thomas Sutpen . . .”

Chapter End Notes

For more information on A.A!:
https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Faulkner%27s+cryptic+closet%3A+forbidden+desire%2C+disavowal+a0290112224

Hope you enjoyed it :) 
this is kinda just an introduction but more will happen in chapter 2
A winter proposal

Chapter Summary

Spoade helps Shreve come up with a plan to woo Quentin

Chapter Notes

Shreve's POV

* Italics are his thoughts

Trigger Warning for homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 1909

“It was cold in the room now. The heat was almost gone out of the radiators: the cold iron fluting stern signal and admonition for sleeping, the little death, the renewal”

Absalom, Absalom! (220)

The morning dawned in a flush of pink, amber, and gold; each color of the sunrise refracted and glittered in the lattice of ice crystals which coated the window of the Harvard dorm room.

Shreve looked from the window to the other side of the room, which was illuminated by the soft morning light so that he could just barely make out the shape of his roommate facing the wall. After having listened to the saga of events that comprised the life and annihilation of Thomas Sutpen, Shreve felt closer to Quentin, like he at least understood something about the place which his roommate (and now friend) seemed to hate so much.

*You still wont open up to me though,* Shreve thought as he watched the still figure, waiting for a sign that his friend was awake. *I can see how much you want to leave your past behind, but you wont tell me why. Why, here at Harvard, do you cling to the decaying ashes of memory like you have no other choice? Is it retelling the story of Sutpen, reliving the shadows of a defeated Southern past, which haunts you? Your own role in this story? Do you think that, just because you discovered that Charles Bon was Henry’s brother, you have to suffer the same deluded fate?*

Shreve heard the creak of the bed springs from across the room as his roommate began to stir.

“Quentin?” he whispered, his voice carrying to the other side of the chilly room.

“Mmphh,” came the pillow-muffled reply.

“I wanted to ask you something,” Shreve began in a hushed voice, almost conspiratorially.

“Yes?” Quentin turned around to face him, still buried beneath the blankets, with only his bleary but
hopeful eyes to show that he was no longer asleep.

“It’s about the story. You know, the one about the demon,” he explained.

“Oh,” Quentin sighed. He sounded disappointed, like he had expected Shreve to say something else. Shreve continued nonetheless, confused by his friend’s crestfallen tone but not thinking much of it.

“So that dead muggy September evening, you went the twelve miles out to Sutpen’s Hundred with the old Aunt Rosa-”

“Miss Rosa,” Quentin corrected sharply, like he was still upset that Shreve had raised the topic in the first place.

“...and found Clytie and Jim Bond and Henry there? And he (Henry) told you that Charles Bon was his brother and that he had killed his brother - and lover - to protect his father’s design?”

“No,” Quentin said tersely, evidently still irritated.

“You mean to say he didn’t tell you any of that? Then how did you learn that Charles Bon was Henry’s brother?”

“She told me,” Quentin replied cryptically, as if specifying the name was a clarification reserved for after six in the morning.

*Very funny, Quentin,* Shreve thought sarcastically as he smiled at his friend’s coy antics, *You think you’re hilarious, don’t you? Do I have to wait until seven o’clock for you to give me a name? I know you’re withholding information just to punish me for waking you up early on a weekend. Your plan didn’t work though - I still understand what you mean, no matter how vague your response was.*

“Ahh, I see,” Shreve said. Even though he couldn’t really see his roommate’s face, he could picture how Quentin would glower mockingly at the failure of his plan to annoy Shreve, “Clytie told you; she knew all along. Clytemnestra - like her namesake - burning down her father’s mansion, destroying his furious design for good, with her own righteous outrage.”

“Yes,” Quentin said, a little disgruntled that Shreve had figured out whom he had meant so easily.

“Jesus,” Shreve pondered aloud without thinking of his roommate’s reaction, “The South is fine. Like a spectacle really. A theatrical performance, tragically comical, showcasing all of the folly of mankind.”

*Ugh, you stupid imbecile,* he told himself, immediately wishing he could take back his words. *I really shouldn’t have said that.*

He felt his friend tense even from across the space of the room between them and felt like slapping himself for being such an idiot. He could also feel Quentin glaring daggers at him at the mention of the South. He decided that, if he couldn’t take back his words, he needed to do the next best thing and distract his friend.

*I’ll make you forget all about the South,* Shreve thought resolutely as he looked out the window at the snow-blanketed ground. *What could be better to make you forget that humid ashen place than a fresh snowfall?*

“It’s nothing like Mississippi here though. C’mon, it’s beautiful, let’s go outside.”

It seemed that Shreve’s plan had worked; within five minutes, they had both bundled up against the
cold and stepped outside into the swirling winter wind. They trudged through the snow, stopping every few meters for Quentin to gaze up at the icicles and snow-laden branches in childlike fascination.

_Have you never seen snow before?_ Shreve wondered, not annoyed by their slow pace as much as he was intrigued by his roommate’s curiosity. _I suppose it doesn’t snow often - if at all - in Mississippi. I don’t mind waiting for you, even if you insist on stopped mid-track to inspect every single tiny snowflake. It’s rather endearing, really, even if it takes us the better part of an hour to walk five hundred meters._

By the time they had finally reached the bridge above the frozen river (after painstakingly thorough examinations of practically every individual ice crystal), Shreve had completely lost interest in the snow, which he was well accustomed to after spending nineteen winters in Alberta. He was only still entertained by Quentin’s delight in how the mundane college had transformed into a dazzling crystallized realm overnight.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Quentin exclaimed, sliding down the long steep slope of the embankment to look more closely at the river. When he reached the edge of the ice, he glanced back up to the bridge for Shreve to reaffirm his proclamation.

“I’m Canadian, remember?” Shreve replied snarkily but failed to suppress his smile. “Let me tell you, this is nothing compared to winters in Alberta.”

“Can you walk on it?” Quentin ignored his friend’s dismissive response and gestured at the river. 

“Yes, so long as the ice is frozen solid,” Shreve called down, “but be careful!”

Quentin tested the ice with one foot, eyes widening when he saw how it slid uncontrollably on the ice.

“Jesus,” Shreve observed from where he stood, “you don’t have to be _that_ careful. It’s like you’ve never seen ice before.”

With one foot still onshore while the other skidded on the river, Quentin glared upward at Shreve with a look that said, ‘I haven’t, you brilliant prodigy.’

“I know, I know, you _haven’t_ seen ice before,” Shreve rolled his eyes at the look and shouted, “Try not to fall!”

He crossed to the other side of the bridge but not without sparing a downward glance to check on his friend, who now had both feet on the ice and was whirling his arms exaggeratedly, trying not to fall.

_Your naïve enchantment really is captivating_, Shreve thought as Quentin slipped on the ice, barely maintaining his shaky balance with outspread arms. _You’re like a fawn sliding on a lake for the first time - gawky and uncoordinated but somehow entrancingly adorable. All spindly limbs and doe-eyed exhilaration, spellbound by the excitement of a brand new experience._

“Retired from your bachelor days, I see.”

Startled by the interruption, Shreve spun around to find Spoade striding leisurely toward him from the other end of the bridge, apparently untroubled by the brisk cold despite his minimal clothing.

“No,” Shreve said, not understanding what the Harvard senior meant.

_What is that supposed to mean?_ he mulled over the words, ‘Retired from my bachelor days?’ What
in God’s name is he talking about? I haven't done anything to suggest otherwise, so what can he possibly mean by that?

“What?” Shreve asked after Spoade refused to clarify what he had meant.

“I know I told you on the first day of school that I didn't have my sword,” Spoade remarked, “but I never told you to go off and marry the princess.”

“Marry? Princess? What are you talking about?”

“C’mon,” Spoade said as if his meaning were obvious, nodding his head at Quentin 'skating' on the river beneath them, “Everyone can see how that dainty little Mississippi minx has you wrapped around his finger - so tightly that you don't even know it.”

“No he doesn't,” Shreve defended his roommate, thinking, maybe what you're saying is true, but he didn't try to. He didn't have to try. From the moment I saw that passionate sullen glare, he had me head over heels. And right now, when he’s not brooding, I'm even more powerless against his allure. His face lit up not with simmering outrage at the South but glowing with the innocent enchanted joy of a child on Christmas morning. Staring in wonder at every crystalline snowflake as if its diamond perfection contained all of the beauty in the world.

“He doesn't? The pining look you’re giving him right now would suggest the contrary.”

“It’s not like that,” Shreve denied.

“You say that now,” Spoade smiled knowingly, “but be sure to send me a wedding invitation once you two decide on the date.”

“Listen, you don't know what you’re talking about. Of course we’re close friends,” Shreve backfired. “For God’s sake, we’re roommates.”

“And I’m sure that arrangement provides many advantages in your budding romance,” Spoade winked suggestively.

“You know that’s not true,” Shreve stammered futilely, “it’s not - he wouldn't - we’re not-”

“Ahh, I should have known,” Spoade smirked, “waiting for marriage like the proper gentleman you are.”

“Mrs Bland wouldn't agree with you on that assessment,” Shreve muttered, thinking, no one will ever believe I'm good enough for him. Not even as a friend, according to that old incestuous hag. No amount of studying can compensate for the chasm between economic classes, riven at birth. No working class Canadian can even dream of standing eye to eye with the treasured jewel of Mississippi’s hereditary elite.

“Don't listen to that old bitch. She doesn't know what the hell she’s talking about,” Spoade assured him before continuing to joke. “He’s lucky to have you for a fiancée, and he knows it.”

“For the last time,” Shreve glared bitingly at him, “I’m not.”

Then Shreve heard a yelp from the other side of the bridge and instantly bolted to the source of the cry, skidding down the snow-entrenched riverbank. He found Quentin sitting on the ice like he had just fallen over. With considerably more practice and ease than his roommate, Shreve maneuvered across the ice to the middle of the river where his friend sat, looking slightly stunned but not injured by the fall.
Well, you don't seem too damaged, Shreve looked at him in concern, scanning Quentin's body for any sign that he had been hurt by the fall. Quentin looked more amused at his own clumsiness than anything else, but Shreve still bent down to make sure, laying one hand on his roommate's shoulder.

“Are you all right?” Shreve didn't care if his concern would prove Spoade right. Supporting Quentin with one arm wrapped around his torso, he helped his friend stand up. Once they were upright, Shreve let his hand linger on his friend’s slim waist, feeling his ribcage expand and contract through the layers of warm fabric.

“I'm fine,” Quentin blushed (because of the cold, Shreve told himself) and quickly brushed Shreve's hand away. Quentin flinched and stepped away from the touch of his roommate - gangling and unbalanced without Shreve's sturdy support - before he somewhat regained his footing on the slick ice. He looked around at the ice-glazed world, though not with the same enraptured captivation as before. It was more like he was trying to distract himself by looking at the snow. Diverting his mind from how Shreve had touched him, waiting for the blood to slowly leave his flushed cheeks.

Jesus, Shreve thought, transfixed by Quentin's frigid dismissal and staring at his own rejected hand, You won't even let me touch you. All I wanted was to help you up. Does it really bother you so much that you can't even stand it when I touch you?

“I'm right and you know it!” Spoade yelled at them inopportune from where he stood on the bridge, smirking down at the scene below.

No, Shreve thought bitterly. Actually, Spoade, you couldn't have been more wrong. I don't know where the hell you got the impression that Quentin feels the way I do. He doesn't return my feelings - that much is obvious. Why else would he recoil from my touch like it burned him?

“What was Spoade talking to you about up there?” Quentin tilted his head curiously, oblivious to Shreve's unhappiness.

“Oh, umm . . . nothing much,” Shreve responded, struggling to conceal his dejection. “You know how he is. Always spouting off some wild idea with no regard for the facts.”

“Oh,” Quentin sighed inwardly with precisely the same disappointment as when he had first woken up. He wrapped his arms around himself and hugged his own body like he was trying to console himself.

Why do you sound so upset? Shreve was a little hurt by Quentin’s evident dismay. Did Spoade tell you about his little theory too? Is that the reason why you brushed my hand off so quickly? Don't want anyone getting the wrong impression, do you? That's all right, though . . . Well, maybe it's not, but at least it's nothing I didn't already know.

“I'm going back up,” Shreve said, unable to bear Quentin freezing him out any longer, “Do you want to stay down here by yourself? Remember to keep your balance, all right?”

“Yes,” Quentin said coldly, not meeting Shreve's eyes.

Shreve didn't know when his friend's attitude had turned so frosty, but he decided to leave before his own resentment grew even more. He plodded forlornly back up the sheer slope, exasperated at Quentin for his aloof behavior and irritated at Spoade for getting his hopes up in the first place. When he got to the top, Spoade was still smirking at him with an arched eyebrow.

"How'd it go?" Spoade asked heedlessly. "Any new developments I should be aware of? You proved yourself wrong, you know, I told you that-"
"Did you tell Quentin about your ridiculous theory as well?" Shreve interrupted, too angry at the senior's insensitivity to wait for him to finish.

"I might have done," Spoade responded with a roguish grin, "The betrothed has got the right to know about his own upcoming wedding, you know. Though he'd have to be fucking oblivious not to have noticed it before I told him. What's it to you anyway?"

"Are you kidding me right now?" Shreve exploded, then glancing down at the river to make sure Quentin hadn't overheard. "You told him? I'm sure he didn't know before, because he's probably the most oblivious person I know! He would never have found out if you didn't tell him; he's always so lost in thought that I could proposition him right to his face and he would barely notice! You've ruined everything - now he won't even let me touch him to help him up before shying away!"

"Shhh, calm down," Spoade chuckled, "You've got nothing to worry about. I'm pretty sure he didn't believe me anyway."

"'Nothing to worry about'?" Shreve echoed in indignation, "'Nothing to worry about'? He'll never look at me the same way again! Thanks to you, every time he gets undressed, he'll be worried about me ogling him!"

"Enjoy the view, do you? Another perk of the roommate arrangement?" Spoade joked before noticing Shreve's scowl and sobering up, "Look, I'm telling you, you don't need to worry about that. If I'm being honest, I'm convinced that he feels exactly the same way."

Really? Shreve's eyes widened in surprise. This isn't just another one of your far-fetched schemes?

"And what makes you think that?" he asked skeptically.

"Well, to start," Spoade began suspensefully, "he gives you this longing stare whenever you're not looking. You should know - you're always doing the exact same thing."

"All right," Shreve crossed his arms challengingly, "but that doesn't necessarily mean anything. Have you seen him? He looks that way at everything he finds even remotely interesting. Jesus, he's looking at the snow right now as if it holds all of the secrets of the universe."

Shreve flung his arm dramatically to where Quentin was wobbling on the ice, distracted by the falling snowflakes.

"Love-struck, much?" Spoade couldn't help but comment. Shreve glared at him. "I'm just saying, no one pays that much attention to another person unless he's completely besotted."

"Ughh, just listen to me," Shreve insisted. "I'm telling you, he looks at everything with fascination. If you saw him looking at me like that once, it really doesn't mean anything."

"More than just once - I catch him at it all the time," Spoade said. "But maybe you have a point. However, that doesn't explain his reaction when I told him."

"Yes . . . ?" Shreve prodded.

"You see, I didn't say much to him: it's hard to have a conversation with someone who barely speaks ten words to you," the senior snickered at the way Shreve bristled in defense of his roommate. "Maybe that's why you and he make such a perfect couple. You do all the talking and he sits there saying nothing but 'Yes' and 'No' and looking pretty. Anyway, as I said, I didn't tell him much. Certainly not everything I've told you. All I did was call you his husband."
"You called me his husband?" Shreve cut in impatiently. "How is that supposed to help me? He's got to know for sure if that's what you told him!"

"Will you just let me finish?" Spoade asked, a little miffed at being interrupted. "No wonder ‘Quentin the Mute’ is practically the only student who can stand your constant chatter. I bet you can't go two minutes without talking. Let me finish, all right?"

"Fine," the freshman huffed, "Go on."

"Well, when I told him that, he looked horrified-"

"Great," Shreve sneered sarcastically, "'He was horrified' - just exactly what I needed to hear."

"Jesus Christ, can you really not keep your mouth shut for even one minute?"

Shreve gave him a murderous glare, but he kept his mouth closed.

"He looked horrified," Spoade repeated. Shreve started to open his mouth in protest, but Spoade cut him off and continued, "But not horrified in the way you're thinking. It was more like he was afraid that I had found out one of his own secrets."

"So he thinks that you were talking about him?" Shreve asked, still confused about what this story proved.

"Precisely," the older Harvard student affirmed. "He thought that I was talking about the way he thinks of you."

"Well, if that is true," Shreve narrowed his eyes in suspicion, doubtful of his friend's inference, "Then what do you propose I do about it?"

"The polymath valedictorian of the freshman class is asking me for help?" the senior, who was far from being the valedictorian of his own grade, laughed at his friend. "This has to be some kind of testament to the vast scope of my knowledge."

"Ugh, please," Shreve derided, rolling his eyes. "I wouldn't be asking you unless I had no other choice. Also, you created this mess. At the very least, you owe it to me to help me out here."

"I created this mess?" Spoade scoffed with a laugh. "That honor is yours, and yours alone, my friend. But I'll help you, if that's what you really want."

"Well, what do I do?"

Spoade stroked his chin at Shreve's question, pretending to be deep in thought.

"I think you already know what my first suggestion is," he finally said, "but it's clear that you think a wedding would be too extravagant. He probably wouldn't enjoy being the center of attention, anyway. You need something more subtle... a proposal perhaps?"

“Proposal?”

Shreve and Spoade both whipped around to find Quentin looking at them with a perplexed expression on his face, slightly breathless with the exertion of trekking up the hill. Shreve's frustration at Spoade's ludicrous idea transformed into shocked horror.

“Q-Q-Quentin?” Shreve spluttered, flustered by the sudden appearance of the subject of their interrupted discussion. “H-how - how much of that d-did you-”
“Good morning, Quentin,” Spoade smoothly came to Shreve’s rescue, preventing his astonished friend from giving away too much of what they had said. “How are you today?”

“Absolutely wonderful,” Quentin beamed. “I love the snow - I’ve never seen anything like it before!”

“Wow, I think that’s the most I’ve ever heard you speak before. But you’re right - it is breathtaking, isn’t it?” Spoade replied savvily.

“Yes,” Quentin gave Spoade a withdrawn tight-lipped smile, like he had just remembered that he hardly knew the upperclassman. Then he turned his attention to Shreve, unwilling to let the small talk distract him from his roommate’s suspicious behavior, “Hi Shreve. What’s going on? Something about a proposal?”

“Umm . . . yes,” Shreve admitted, awkwardly shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Maybe he didn’t hear what we were talking about after all, he thought as he struggled to come up with an excuse. What can I tell him about the proposal? Damn you Spoade and your crazy plans. What am I supposed to tell Quentin? That one of us is going to propose to some girl? Fat chance he’ll believe that.

“Shreve?” Quentin narrowed his eyes apprehensively. “What were you and Spoade talking about?”

Shreve fumbled for what to say, “W-we were just-”

“-discussing how Shreve here is going to ask a girl from Radcliffe to the Winter Ball in January,” Spoade rescued Shreve once again.

Shreve looked at Spoade in betrayal, thinking, Seriously? That’s the best you could come up with?

Spoade returned the glare with his own reprimanding glance which said, ‘Sorry, bud. You clearly couldn’t come up with anything better. Be grateful I didn’t say that it was a marriage proposal. Or better yet, I could have told him the truth’.

Quentin raised a dubious eyebrow at their suspicious-looking interchange, as if to say, ‘Do you honestly expect me to believe that?’. Fortunately, Shreve had regained control of his mouth by this point.

“Her name’s Elizabeth Marlowe,” Shreve improvised quickly. “She’s kind and smart, and she has this endearingly strange sense of humor. And she’s beautiful. She has . . . these gorgeous grey eyes. But they’re not just grey. They’re like a kaleidoscope that changes color with the weather, sometimes blue and sometimes green and sometimes silver. Like right now, his- her eyes would be shining and reflecting the light on the snow-”

Shreve stopped his prattling when Spoade prodded him with his elbow with a sideways glance which said, ‘Stop rambling. You’re lucky he’s oblivious enough that he hasn’t realized that you’re describing him precisely. You’re practically writing poetry about the color of his eyes’.

"But anyway,” Shreve concluded, “Spoade was just helping me figure out how to ask her to the Ball next month.”

“Oh,” Quentin pursed his lips in apparent disapproval but seemed to believe the lie.

“Well, gentlemen,” Spoade said abruptly with a raise of his hand, “My work here is done. I’ll see you around.”
He walked away in his typical nonchalant saunter, leaving Quentin and Shreve standing on the bridge in an uncomfortable silence.

“Oh, and Shreve,” Spoade turned around to face them again and called back, “good luck with your proposal! Remember what I said!”

Then he left for good, strolling without hurry into the intensifying gusts of snow. Quentin had shifted his body away from Shreve, as if he also wanted to disappear into the blizzard.

"Let's go back inside," Shreve suggested. "If this snow gets much heavier, we won't be able to find our way back."

Quentin didn't dignify that with a response, but he followed, a step behind Shreve, as they made their way back to the dorm. Neither of them spoke, letting the freezing blasts of snow and wind envelop all of the words that they could have possibly spoken.

Great, Shreve thought, digging his hands in the pockets of his overcoat. Now I've really done it. This is ironic. I don't have a plan and, what's worse, Quentin's infuriated at me for some reason. So, all in all, everything turned out the opposite of how I wanted it to.

When they reached the building, he held the door open for his friend, who stepped inside without even acknowledging the kind gesture with a standoffish glare. They trudged up the staircase like it was piled high with snow (which it was not), and by the time they reached their door Quentin was walking - sulking, more accurately - a few paces ahead of his roommate. He opened the door and grudgingly held it open for Shreve, avoiding eye contact and brooding at the floor as he did so.

You really are upset, Shreve thought as he walked to his side of the room. Then he stopped short.

You're upset, a triumphant smile spread across his face at the realization. You're upset because you think I want to ask some girl from Radcliffe to the Winter Ball. Spoade was right about you all along! You do return my affection after all! Now all I need is a plan to make sure I'm right.

Quentin sat down on his bed across the room despondently. He looked almost as downhearted as when he had been forced to remember his life in the South when he told his roommate about Thomas Sutpen. Then Shreve had a second realization.

Maybe I was right when I said that the South is like a performance, he thought. I mean, for God's sake, the stories you've told me would only happen in dramas. Henry Sutpen fell in love with his half-brother, Charles Bon, and then murdered him when he found out that he was part black. The only problem is that they're all dead, and what's a good play without actors? It might sound crazy, crazier than anything Spoade could think of even, but maybe this is the solution to my plan.

Shreve grinned as he looked at his roommate, whose downcast face showed that he was totally unaware the plan being concocted at this very moment.

It's like killing two birds with one stone, he felt confident in his elaborate idea. If you and I pretend that we are Charles and Henry, we can retell the story. You can finally be relieved of the burden of the South once you realize that you don't have to do what Henry did. You'll finally see that you can break free from the future your father has laid out for you and leave your past behind. Abandon it in Mississippi, where it belongs. And I, well, I will be able to determine whether or not you really feel like I do. If not, then I can say it was all just part of the storytelling. And if you do, which I hope is the case, then I have a proposal in mind which may turn out to be useful after all.
Chapter End Notes

Direct Quotes:
“Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all” (Absalom, Absalom! 140)
An interrupted story

Chapter Summary

Quentin has had enough
Shreve notices
Quentin's POV, italics are his thoughts
Might be helpful to look at Chapter 1 for info on Absalom, Absalom!

Chapter Notes

Morality/conscience are often used by Quentin ironically. What he is describing as “morality” is immoral, highlighting how the South delusionally justified its racist foundations using “ethics”.

Trigger Warning for mentions of depression, racism, sexism, and homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Or maybe he [Henry] knew that the South would be whipped and then there wouldn’t be anything left that mattered that much, worth getting that heated over, worth protesting against or suffering for or dying for or even living for”

~ Quentin Compson

Absalom, Absalom! (217)

January 1910

In the snow-breathed darkness of their Harvard sitting room, Quentin and Shreve sat opposite one another. They exhaled simultaneously into the pure invigorating night, and their vaporizing breaths merged to become one.

Between them, the letter from Quentin’s Father levitated above the table; each sloping curve of the handwriting dragged him back to the hot dead air of Mississippi, the sweltering wistaria-scented dust nothing like the intoxicating New England cold. Unbeknownst to his roommate, Shreve studied Quentin in rapt fascination while he pouted, watching how he worried his plump bottom lip as if it would make the haunting letter disintegrate like ashes into the cold New England air.

Completely oblivious to how his roommate was studying him in captivation, Quentin glared at the letter, trying to prevent the implacable ghosts of the South from breaching the icy peaceful walls of the dorm. He was drawn in once more to the indelible legend - the story of the self-destruction of Thomas Sutpen - which seemed to mock him in its unequivocal suffusion into all facets of time. He was unable to breathe, drowning beneath the waves of shadowy memories forced on him by his Father and Grandfather, struggling for air as the spectral past flooded his mind.
Sutpen (the demon, as Shreve insists on calling him) was faced with the inevitable implosion of his unscrupulous design when Charles Bon, his own son - the boy at the door he himself had been fifty years ago - showed up at the door of the mansion: that shell of a house, which was forged from two hundred years of spilling black blood. Two hundred years in which an entire people were persecuted by the chains of slavery. And this oppression was supported, upheld by the written and unwritten codes of the South and even deemed moral. The morality which was used to justify this racist exploitation blinded Sutpen. He could not see the fine figure of a man in his first son; all he saw was the color of his skin.

Quentin glowered in indignant fury at this injustice, totally unaware of how Shreve was watching him closely.

To Sutpen, Bon was only a threat whose nonwhite heritage would reduce everything he had built - constructed on a foundation of bleeding soil - to a pile of smoking embers. But despite all of the demon’s efforts, his design burnt to the ground, leaving only ashes. Yes, the South was defeated, whipping even, but it still holds power over those of us that live on. Its survivors (myself included) are now coerced into adhering to the design. Slavery might be illegal now, but the former slaves are no more free than they were. None of us, regardless of whether we are black or white, can break free of our condemnation to the design. Father knew it and I know it, yet still I am unable to escape the South. I am faced with no choice but to accept a doomed lifeless survival which might just as well be called death.

“. . . you wouldn’t have known what anybody was talking about if you hadn’t seen Clytie at Sutpen’s Hundred that night? Is that right?” Shreve asked.

“Yes,” Quentin said, responding with a single simple reply, thinking, I know more than Father about the South, I always did, but I am powerless to escape the future he created for me. “Grandfather was the only friend he had.”

“The only friend the demon had?”

_Demon not as Miss Rosa called him,_ Quentin thought, not answering Shreve’s question, _Sutpen was not preordained to doom as Father fatalistically put it; they were both wrong about that. No, he was corrupted by his design, that delusion which moralized violent exploitation as a means of acquiring wealth. The design - the demonic purblind code of the South - which corrupts childlike innocence into stubborn immorality. And its evil laws still dictate my life._

Quentin began to tremble faintly, outraged by the villainy of the past which reflected a future he could not escape.

_The demon himself might be dead, but his design lives on. Clytie might have burnt down his rotting house, but the ashes remain: suffusing into the smoke and contaminating the very air I breathe. Even here, in the North, with Shreve, I cannot escape it._

Quentin was roused from his thoughts as the heat left the Harvard sitting room, taking with it the fumes of the dust-concealed ruins of Mississippi. The cold iron New England air distilled, but did not completely dispel, the wistaria-reeking effluvium which had attenuated northward with the letter.

This lingering ashen presence of the South reminded Quentin of how he would inevitably be forced to accept his place in the design. _I will never have the chance for love. No, all I will have is weeping rain mixed with my own tears, foretelling my incontrovertible forlorn future. I am doomed to a loveless marriage by the importunate delusions of the dead country where I was born._

“All right,” Shreve intruded into Quentin’s thoughts once more.
Over the letter - the only remaining physical manifestation of the South in its indomitable heat and frustration - Quentin looked up at his roommate, who was hugging himself in a futile attempt to ward off the impenetrable chill, his no longer naked rosy arms now shrouded in the bathrobe. Shreve’s moonlike spectacles created a cherubic erudite visage; the twin glass circles reflected the seraphic light streaming in through the ice-gleaming window, taunting Quentin’s gaze away from the letter before him.

It’s too bad that he put on his bathrobe, Quentin momentarily forgot about his despondency, instead dreamily picturing his shirtless roommate. When I look at him, I can forget about the South. Rather than suffocating on the overwhelming presence of the cinders of the Confederacy, I become absorbed in admiring his broad blushing chest and rugged musculature. When I see his thick bare arms, I hope - just for a moment - that they could be strong enough to whisk me away from my troubled past and distressing future. Maybe - if only for a second - I even believe in love. But I know that he will never feel the same. And even if he did, he would never be able to defeat all of the ghosts of the South, no matter how powerful and robust he appears. Nothing can defeat it, not even Shr-


The meaning behind Shreve’s suggestive assertion was lost to Quentin, who attributed the innuendo in the comment to his friend’s satirical and sometimes insensitive disposition.

Spoade called Shreve my husband, he remembered. Spoade must have seen the way I look at him, enchanted by his sapphire eyes and flushed chest while my own blood rushes to the surface. I try to hide it. I cant help it though, especially not when he touches me. Wrapping a strong arm around my waist, his large calloused hands surprisingly gentle. I try to hide the way he affects me but apparently not well enough to go unnoticed.

And how I wish I could believe what Spoade told me. When he first said it, I felt a glimmer of hope. That Shreve might feel as I do. That he might love me as I love him. Quentin shook his head slightly to bring himself back to reality, brushing away the daydream. Reminded that his hope was only a fantasy, he frowned bitterly. But Spoade doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He doesn’t know that Shreve can scarcely look me in the eye without turning away. He (Shreve) can’t hide how he is repulsed by my desire for men rather than women. I bet he doesn’t think about Elizabeth Marlowe with the same disgust. Elizabeth Marlowe. I was foolish enough to think that they might have been talking about proposing to me. Every time Shreve touched me or whispered in my ear, I thought that maybe there was still hope. But then he would go on to talk about Thomas Sutpen - or worse - Elizabeth Marlowe.

Elizabeth Marlowe. He said how she was intelligent and kind and funny, and he went on and on about her ‘gorgeous grey eyes’. Beautiful and generous and smart and a little eccentric: the perfect girl for him. Maybe he can be happy with her. He can have a future filled with love and promise. But that doesn’t mean that I can be happy. And I won’t be, if I do what is expected of me.

All I want is an alternative to an arranged marriage watered by my own tears, he thought in desperation. Maybe it is sinful to look at another man the way that I look at him, but it is love nonetheless. I wonder if Father knew about my desire, if that was his reason for telling me of Henry’s love for Bon. A longing for the male flesh which can only be fulfilled in transformation through playing the parts. In our storytelling, our re-enactment of the past, he becomes Charles and I am Henry, acting out the hidden depths of my love with words.

It was Shreve’s idea. He came up to me one day, saying, ‘I’ve thought of a new way for us to tell the story, the one about the demon’ and continued to explain how we would relive the past so we could understand what happened between the two of them. Henry and Charles Bon, brothers and lovers,
one a victim and the other his murderer. I agreed to Shreve’s idea, thinking that it would free me from the chains of the South and allow me to release my pent-up longing. But I was wrong. Pretending to be Henry only made me realize not only that I will never escape my future, and that any romantic desire I have will only exist in storytelling.

Had Quentin raised his eyes to look at his friend, he would have noticed Shreve looking at him with far too much infatuated concern to be considered merely friendly, but his face remained downcast as he contemplated his future.

My love will only ever be words. I can admire his robust chest glowing with vigor and his strong muscled arms, but that won’t make it real. He doesn’t return my affection; all he cares about is stupid perfect Elizabeth Marlowe. I am still a virgin so we will never commit that sin more unfathomable than even incest. Yes, the sin which I believe to be love is not even a possibility, not part of the choice which I am given. I have no option but to resign to that precipitation of unfeeling unromantic union of man and woman.

Even here, geographically as distant from the tomblike Southern land where he was raised as part of his father’s own approximation of Sutpen’s vain dogged attempt to secure a progeny, Quentin could not avoid the destiny which he so desperately wanted to evade. He couldn’t even forget it because of that letter.

The letter folded away from Quentin with a kind of ironic levitation, as if the letter itself were aware of its ability to pull the twenty year-old college freshman hundreds of miles southward along the unrelenting Mississippi River. Levitation - no, that was not what taunted the elder inhabitant of the increasingly frigid alcove - it was the levity of the room’s other occupant which he really could not bear.

Over the past few months, Quentin had gotten used to Shreve’s sarcastic and sometimes crass personality, but now he was hearing his roommate repeat infinite story back to him. Shreve spoke with the carelessness of someone who was continentally divided from the South, the land to which he (Quentin) was irrevocably chained.

Shreve has never even seen that equatorial crucible of immorality, Quentin thought, the place where the ineluctable burden of dust continues to rise and disseminate. He mocks the South by saying that arranged marriages are founded on love, unaware that I face an involuntary wedding as part of Father’s own design. I know that an arranged marriage could never bring me love, and I tell him so, but he scoffs when I insist that it is not love. Maybe Shreve has a chance at love - he can choose whichever Elizabeth Marlowe he wants - but I don’t have that choice. He’ll never be able to understand that, especially if he keeps going on about his love for daft girls while taunting me with his naked muscular torso.

He tried to ignore it, but he was growing increasingly agitated with Shreve’s unwitting flippancy toward the past, present, and future which he could never escape. The Canadian had a blatant disregard - or perhaps merely lack of awareness - for the South’s pertinacious laws which would shape the course of his (Quentin’s) entire life.

He sounds just like Father, Quentin thought. Except at least Father knew that the similarity of gender hopelessly intervened. Father knew that love was - is - nothing but an illusion in a country founded upon hatred. No, it is not even a country; it is a cemetery of defeated ghosts, poisoned by the overwhelming dominance of not-love, which traps me and prevents me from escaping.

Yes, perhaps that is it, he thought. He (Shreve) can never understand what it is like to have one’s fate inextricably bound to that tomb with its history of bloodshed. The South - the land of murderous violence perpetuated even now by what he (the demon) called conscience. This conscience instructed
him to reject any factor which might thwart his design, so he discarded Charles Bon and his mother when he discovered that they weren’t white. Bon knew how pervasive this racism was and he told Henry, ‘So it’s the miscegenation, not the incest, which you can’t bear.’

Thinking (Quentin) yes, incest is less disruptive to the design than miscegenation. It was not a mistake which destroyed Sutpen, but his vain pursuit of an un tarnished progeny which led him to destroy it with his own bloodied hands. Everything he had built was reduced to flames because of his inability to reconcile himself with having a black heir. He was left heirless, with only the smoking remains of his crumbling house as a symbol of his failure. The South was not corrupted by the fornication between the races as Bon believed; it was corrupted by its own racism in denying that this intermixing of blood existed.

Quentin’s simmering outrage softened into despair as his vision blurred, his eyes brimming with unshed tears.

So one day my tears shall become one with the hated impregnable rain, as Ellen’s did when she was trapped into his second marriage, which he (the demon) delusionally believed would be adjunctive to the design. My fate caught in a deluge of not-love like Father and Mother before me, my lungs overflowing, I am unable to live or even breathe.

Thinking, it will happen over and over again, like ripples, flooding without opposition from each preceding generation. I cannot elude my role in the design any more than Henry could avoid carrying out his Father’s will by killing his brother. Perhaps even hell - that infernal chasm of sinful incendiary suffering - is preferable to existing in this land which clings to paradoxical morality; the morality of the South extinguishes any glistening hope of finding truth and love in this world.

If I could just have done something . . . something to flee the ravaging fires of immortality which will cremate my dead corpse; I will be dead unless I can find a way to flee. Maybe I can. The South, Colonel Sutpen, the unabating odor of wistaria: they will all vanish and I will put them to rest under a tombstone, burying them in the Mississippi graveyard to which I will never return. The antebellum South was driven to its end as the civilizations of old, not by Miss Rosa’s Cassandralike doom or Father’s fatalist premonitions, but by its own ironic and paradoxical moral foundations. And the South I know today will finally end when the design burns to the ground before being carried away by the strong winds of truth.

Quentin, staring once again at the suspended letter, could sense the shrewd spellbound attention of his roommate on his own sullen face. Shreve saw his roommate’s expression of introspective troubled silence but couldn’t possibly sense the tumultuous blazing fury of thoughts burning beneath the quiet surface of Quentin’s still form.

I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever . . .

“I’m done listening.”

Shreve jolted in surprise at Quentin’s uncharacteristically brusque statement, although he remained sitting when Quentin stood from his hunched brooding position and turned towards the door. Previously he (Quentin) had been unable to pass that door, yet now he proceeded through it out of sheer desperation to retreat. He needed to flee from the haunting endurance of the Southern shades which he had summoned into the room.

Abandoning the harrowing shade of the Mississippi cedars for the snow-laden oaks of Massachusetts, Quentin fled the room, leaving only the reverberating echo of the door which disturbed the silent darkness like tolling bells. Outside in the cold New England dark, Quentin finally
felt free from the attenuation of honeysuckle and wistaria that incessantly habitated his mind.

Without his overcoat to bar the zero degree snowy winds from his body, Quentin’s spare frame violently convulsed with shivers. He looked up from where he sat in the cold iron quad to the comparably warm sitting room where Shreve stood with the window open, presumably rehearsing his customary deep breathing. However, what Quentin did not know was that the Canadian was not relaxing, but instead growing increasingly concerned.

From high above the quad, he (Shreve) looked out into the snow covered ground, his bespectacled astute expression focusing on the solitary figure in the courtyard below. The moon’s reflection on the fallen snow had shed light on his panting shaking roommate and he was determined to help. As the chimes in the tower signaled for midnight, Shreve, now clad in his overcoat buttoned over his bathrobe, headed out into the bitter wind to console his sulking haunted friend.

Chapter End Notes

Phrases taken directly from the text:

“you wouldn’t have known what anybody was talking about if you hadn’t been out there and seen Clytie. Is that right?”
“‘Yes,’” . . .

“Grandfather was the only friend he had.”
“The demon had?” . . .
“All right,” . . . “He chose. He chose lechery. So do I. But go on.” (220)

“He sounds just like Father” (147)

“the similarity of gender hopelessly intervened” (75-76)

“So it’s the miscegenation, not the incest, which you can’t bear.” (285)

“I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever . . .” (222)

I’m really sorry if this is confusing it’ll get better
A midnight confrontation

Chapter Summary

Shreve tries to convince Quentin to leave his past behind him.

TW for internalized homophobia and depression

Chapter Notes

Shreve’s POV
Italics are his thoughts

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Before sinking back into the darkness where the spirit cried for the first time and was not heard and will cry for the last time and will not be heard then either”

Absalom, Absalom! (202)

Shreve suppressed a chuckle as his roommate left the Harvard sitting room, leaving only the resounding slam of the door. Apparently not only is the South a theatre for the playwrights of only the most sensational spectacles, he mused with a shrewd sarcastic smirk, but Southerners themselves have an affinity for the dramatic as ostentatious as their insistence on wearing tattered military plumes even long after they have surrendered their sabre.

Despite his amusement in being proven right about the South’s melodramatic temperament, Shreve turned from the window from which he had watched the forlorn figure below and wrapped himself in his overcoat. What did I do to upset you this time, Quentin? Shreve wondered, descending from the room to mend whatever damage he had unwittingly created.

As he entered the courtyard, Shreve immediately took notice of the other boy’s shivering form. However, he was more perturbed by the habitual brooding expression which had returned to his (Quentin’s) face. His face seemed to be frozen in defiant determination to remain still while the rest of his body quaked with chills.

Shrugging off his heavy overcoat, Shreve wrapped it around the still shaking figure who obediently accepted the warmth, though his eyes remained averted, consumed by far-off turbulent waves of memory and fatalistic anticipation of a future which was incomprehensible to Shreve. The hulking oversized overcoat swallowed his fragile quivering body as easily as a raging flood might engulf a single scrawny sapling, intensifying the already slight and wan silhouette.

Quentin’s convulsions began to subside, but the heat could not prevent him from remembering the place which caused him to tremble in smoldering quiet outrage. These tremors - the unhindered pervasive reverberations of the South - rippled outward from the shades Quentin had brought back to life: Thomas Sutpen and Henry and Charles Bon. He had recalled these shadowy ghostlike figures at
the price of returning to the overflowing meridional fountainhead where he was born. Although perhaps the spirits, guided by and materializing from the letter, had already been seeping into the ratiocinative snow-sealed corner of the North into which he had fled.

“Quentin,” Shreve began tentatively, sensing his roommate’s disturbance, with a caution seldom present in his brash and ungentlemanly (as Mrs Bland would put it) mannerisms.

Quentin clenched his jaw in response to Shreve’s presence, making his face appear even more sculpted and statuesque.

For God’s sake, Shreve thought. Even when you’re glowering at me, I can barely resist your sultry allure. I would even call it beauty if your despair didn’t worry me so much. I just need to get you to realize that you are alive. Not only that, but you give me life. I would kill to see you smile again, to see your eyes crinkle and your face light up with joy. But first I need to show you have to stop dwelling on the past.

“Wait,” Shreve continued. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to upset you. Just listen. Maybe I didn’t spawn from that legacy of spurious fallacious outrage that you inherited, maybe I wasn’t born in the land of moral indignation whose people are unable to acknowledge defeat, but you don’t understand it either.”

Shreve paused, glaring at the downcast face tensed in silent unwillingness to listen. Quentin’s uneasiness has been transmitted to him through the dead tone in which he (Quentin) had spoken; his melancholy was imparted onto Shreve - the foreigner, who had never ventured below the Mason Dixon line - by the very nature of his scathing depiction of the South.

Maybe I’ve never been there, Shreve thought, but I can still sense your despondency. Even here you hate the South's inexorable heavy particle-filled air that stifles regular breathing. You won’t admit it, but you hate that place, can’t let yourself return to that dust-layered urn which bore you.

“Jesus, I can’t imagine what it must be like,” he tried to empathize with his friend again. “To have that demoralized delusional destiny foisted upon you, with you knowing, knowing all along how it had failed your ancestors and their ancestors before them. And that it would fail you too if you were foolish enough to concede to it. To be born into that deceptive mausoleum cloaked in the meretricious aroma of blooms, with no alternative but your eventual fatal return to a defeated antiquity.”

“You would have to be born there to understand,” Quentin spoke quietly in a resigned lifeless voice, without any real opposition to Shreve’s previously ventilated claims.

“All right,” Shreve acknowledged. “Maybe I don’t. But I do understand something. You can’t beat it - the South, I mean. Not all of it anyway, but maybe some of it. You said it yourself. How did you say it? Ah, yes, Sutpen’s design. That design - that embodiment of spurious morality used to justify what was, in fact, the very antithesis of human morality and conscience - came down like it had been built out of smoke, not even leaving any debris. Done. Finished. Do you see now?”

Quentin did not answer, did not even stir except to breathe. Breathing in that brisk New England air nothing like the hot suffocating coffin-scented dust but which (to Quentin) even here had some fading presence, permanently suffused into even the crisp bitter wind.

“Listen,” Shreve persistently tried again. “I’m phrasing this all wrong. My point is, maybe you can beat it. At least some of it. You can escape it - all you need to do is stop clinging in vain desperation to the dissipated ashes of a delusion that never even existed. For God’s sake, there’s nothing keeping you there, you’re here at Harvard, away from the relics of the South which for some reason are like
death for you. There’s nothing left to tie you to it except the illusion that it holds some sort of power over you. None of your father’s fatalism shackles you to that crypt of decaying bones and scattered dreams like ashes - you’re a free man.”

Shreve ceased in the hope that a pause would emphasize his resolve. The ensuing silence was only disrupted by two corresponding patterns of vaporizing breath, leaving clouds of haze which diffused into the growing darkness. Quentin continued biting his lip before looking up at his friend, as if he had just processed the meaning of the words.

You really are beautiful, Shreve wondered as ashen grey eyes met his own bespectacled stare in an unprecedented act of concession. Unimaginably so. But you’re hopeless too. And that’s what worries me most.

Quentin’s gaze contained nothing of its earlier smoldering indignance, just the dimly glowing embers of surrender to the inevitable fate to which he (or so he believes, Shreve thought) was inextricably bound. Any form of retaliation was absent from this curious transposition, which contained only Quentin’s incongruous compliance with a demise that Shreve had told him he could evade.

Jesus, you aren’t even trying to resist it anymore, Shreve thought. Are you so trapped by your past that you can’t even realize what I’m saying? You can escape it, you can leave the South with me forever if only you would just listen. But apparently even just listening is too much to ask of you.

“Fine,” the nineteen year-old Canadian, as usual, was the first of the two to speak. “I offer you reconciliation yet you refuse. Go back to that sepulchral self-inflicted cemetery for all I care. Apparently you’re already there in your head. Just tell me one more thing. Why do you hate the South?”

However, to this too, Shreve was given no answer. Receiving neither acquiescence nor euphistic denial, Shreve, trying to comfort his friend, laid his ruddy hand on a trembling bony knee. The knee which, in a motion instinctive and inculcated, shifted away with the lowered brooding glare.

You still can’t stand it when I touch you, Shreve thought unhappily, not so much out of self-pity as concern for his friend. But not because you are disgusted as I first believed. You just can’t come to terms with your past and your future. You are blind to my affection; all you can see is your doomed Southern fate. Just open your eyes - look at me - and I’ll show you how you can leave all of it behind.

Quentin’s pivoted frame was now shaking, jerking next to Shreve though no longer due to the icy chilled draft. Not shivers from the cold but a silent restrained vibration in defiance of the morbid atmosphere - the hot stagnant catacomb gloom - which had risen like dust (or maybe ashes) from the smoking remains of the South.

“Jesus,” Shreve said, placing his hand on Quentin’s knee once more. “You’re freezing. Let’s go inside and get you warmed up.”

Quentin shifted his knee away again but otherwise made no effort to leave. He remained sitting there in feeble opposition, as if the comparative heat of his dorm room was a trajectory back to that hated dead region which suffused even into the very air he breathed.

Stubborn as ever, Shreve rolled his eyes. If you’re that cold, let’s go back inside. Even if the warmth of your bed reminds you of the heat of the South, it’s better than dying of hypothermia.

“Come on,” Shreve said, grabbing a slender wrist with unrelenting insistence. “Let’s get out of this damn icebox and go to bed.”
Shreve dragged Quentin, who was still shaking in obstinate refusal, from the snow-sealed iron quad to the dorm, the mental intransigence of his roommate proving to be more of an obstacle than his actual physical form.

*Even if you refuse to listen to me*, Shreve gently pulled Quentin into their room, *you’re too delicate to physically harm me, no matter how much you fight me in your head.*

The reason for the tremors was still unclear; whether they were in abnegation to his (Quentin’s) impending cataclysm of Southern inundation or an unwillingness to believe what Shreve had told him, nobody, perhaps not even Quentin himself, could tell. Shreve watched as the quivering boy wrapped himself in the blankets of his bed, thinking (Shreve), *One day you’ll see what I mean. You’ll understand that you can escape the South. Maybe your thin body can’t defeat your ghosts, but I know you have the mental strength to overpower them. And I will do whatever I can to help you.*

But it was clear that Quentin did not have the same conviction as he turned to face the wall with the same attitude of complicit resistance to both kismetic stifling heat and blunt truthful cold.

Chapter End Notes

Quotes directly from the text:

“You would have to be born there” (Absalom, Absalom! 289)

“design . . . come down like it had been built out of smoke . . . not even leaving any debris” (215)

“Why do you hate the South” (303)

“Let’s get out of this damn icebox and go to bed.” (292)

The next chapter will be more plot based though probably still a little confusing bc of Quentin’s thoughts interrupting everything- but more is gonna happen :)
A lesson in philosophy

Chapter Summary

Quentin starts to believe that maybe Shreve was right

TW for internalized homophobia, depression, suicidal thoughts, mentions of racism (through criticism of racism) and sexism

Chapter Notes

Quentin’s POV and italics are his thoughts
Might be a little confusing but there should be a clear connection between what’s actually going on and what Quentin thinks

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Quentin: “He [Shreve] had on a pair of my flannel pants, like a glove. I didn't remember forgetting them”

The Sound and the Fury (176)

Shreve: “Cruel fate may part us, but I will never love another. Never”

(131)

- Shreve makes an allusion to Phillis Wheatley’s poem “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth”

"To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth"

“Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song, Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung, Whence flow these wishes for the common good, By feeling hearts alone best understood, I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate Was snatch’d from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat: What pangs excruciating must molest, What sorrows labour in my parent’s breast? Steel’d was that soul and by no misery mov’d That from a father seiz’d his babe belov’d: Such, such my case. And can I then but pray Others may never feel tyrannic sway?”

~ Phillis Wheatley, 1772
The rosy dawn illuminated Shreve’s rubicund folded arms, he still glaring at Quentin with intent worried speculation. Then the incessant ticking of his watch began with its reminder of Father said all is temporary and will eventually fade into the dust from which it was borne.

“Are you coming to Philosophy today?”

Shreve’s curious prying gaze from behind his sun-reflected spectacles sparked a momentary lapse in Quentin’s immersion in time. Then he caught sight of the letter bearing the dead wistaria-scented air attenuated up from Mississippi, still levitating over the philosophy textbook, and the ticking resumed. Glancing down at his watch Father said that you might forget it now and then for a moment but I cannot seem to do anything but remember. Perhaps it is not even memory but being caught - doomed - the present only a continuation of the past. Time moves forward yet I cant move with it, only captured by the dusty shades I cannot escape or even forget.

“C’mon, quit that wallowing. Let’s get to class. We’ll be late if we dont leave now.” Shreve prodded Quentin’s shoulder in an effort to capture his attention once more. However, for once, it was his words rather than his touch that Quentin fixated on.

Late, he mused. It seems everything happens too late. Too many hours days years passed (or is it past?) to stop it. Stop not only that fierce relentless passage of time, but its indomitable fettering of any attempt to free oneself from the chains of restless ticking hands. Each movement is a reminder of how it advances while I remain rooted, anchored and unable to catch up. Captured by the maelstrom whirlpool dragging my mind back to the bloody legacy of rotting corpses and dead whipped generals.

Quentin was torn from rumination as Shreve yanked him by the arm into the stinging winds, across the courtyard of the events of the previous night, and towards the brick edifice, that cold pinnacle of rational thought.

Spoade sauntered up beside them, unusually punctual despite his customary leisurely gait. Blithe shirtless with chest nearly bare, the hair on its pale expanse raised.

Not like Shreve’s, Quentin thought dreamily. Shreve’s broad flushed nearly hairless chest in the moonlight. Echoing whispers of ghosts in my mind saying, ‘Dont look its unnatural’ but my gaze drawn to him with a magnetism stemming perhaps from that rush of blood to the surface.

There were no socks on Spoade’s feet nor shirt over his undershirt to buffer the icy bone-chilling breeze, striding without care or consciousness of the unrelenting measured pacing dictated by an ever-present watch.

No need for him to count the minutes, the seconds, Quentin sulked. He doesnt have to worry about that. What it must be like, to be free from the past’s manacles to determine what he will. Independence from ‘that crypt of decaying bones and scattered dreams like ashes’ how Shreve said it. Except Shreve doesnt - cant - know. Not what it’s like to be bound to a future destined to the same failure as the rotting withering past. Maybe mine is not even a future but just an impotent return to the parochial disintegrated past, structured on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage.

“How’s life as a married couple treating you two?” Jolted back to the present by Spoade’s insinuation, Quentin quickly wrenched his hand from where Shreve still grasped it. He didnt see how a shadow of hurt passed across Shreve’s face as he did so.
Stop touching me, Shreve. Spoade already knows how I long for you, how I wish what he says about you being my husband were true. If you keep touching me like that I won’t be able to hide it, he thought, before surrendering to the tide of memory.

I kissed a boy today Caddy said.

Quentin hasn’t done that, have you Quentin?

No, not even girls with their soiled underclothes.

Existing in that temporary state of virginity neither girls’ nor boys’.

Not boys, never boys, fast silent figures running rigid in the darkness.

Unattainable not-virginity, she teased me about it.

Splashing in her muddy drawers - why her and not me?

Why am I not unvirgin?

His flushed cheeks glowing in the lamplight, pink naked arms reaching out for my own. Twin moons shining in his spectacles.

Moons he (Father) said full and yellow as harvest moons her hips thighs. Glib consorted fit of man to woman, Father called it fate.

“See if I care,” Shreve retaliated to Spoade, grabbing Quentin once more. “Quentin and I have better prospects than you ever will. Good luck ending up with some bitch like that old crone Mrs Bland.”

No, Shreve, Quentin thought, you’re wrong. I don’t have ‘better prospects’. Even if you can’t understand it, I am destined to the same suffocating future as Mother and Father.

The camphor-reeking cloth on Mother’s forehead whining for Dilsey, with Father downstairs reading Aristotle over the decanter on the sideboard. Not love, not even happiness, only rain. Rain or tears I could not tell. My tears falling like rain, flooding, drowning.

Yet still I could not be inundated. I could not drown because my existence was nothing more than a shadow in the present - impervious to death because it had never lived. The soul and corporeality both trapped in the dust of the past from whence they had sprung.

It rained on that marriage, like it will rain on my own. Union between the demon and the swamp butterfly for a wife, dooming the entire bloodline, black and white, to the inevitable smoking cinders of destruction. This destruction brought about by his (Sutpen’s) conviction that there was nothing wrong with his design and it had all come from a mistake.

“I’m sure you do,” Spoade said, ignoring Shreve’s comment about Mrs Bland. “Send me a letter from wherever you two decide to go on your honeymoon. Say, there goes the spawn of the devil herself!”

They caught up to Gerald Bland, who was saying something about a girl he had tricked into sleeping with him, as they entered the classroom, Shreve still towing a forlorn dazed Quentin behind him. From where he sat, the open textbook resting on the desk taunted Quentin: “Ethics and Morality” it said.

Sutpen used the old logic and morality to justify an indisputably immoral design, Quentin plunged
into the surging river of thought once again. A design founded on the shedding of black blood, blood used to irrigate the fields of wealth and posterity. A bloody progeniture forced on me by that same fusion of man with woman which even at Harvard haunts me like my own shadow.

My shadow, more powerful than I will ever be. A dark harrowing shade, a reminder of the immoral exploitation and bloodshed watering the soil which begot me. The South was whipped and irrevocably beaten to the dust yet inexorably committed to the same oppression.

Thinking yes, Dilsey and Roskus and them all were all unwillingly sold to the same fate as the slaves before them. Given no choice, no chance for them to escape. Just as I was bequeathed to Father’s purpose which he could not realize was identical to that of Sutpen. The demon’s blazing immolation of his sons as payment for his infernal actions. Old Abraham saying he raised sons to carry the weight of his own licentious iniquities. Moral transgressions sanctioned by law and upheld by the unjust systematic persecution of souls bearing black blood. Honorable blood glinting on Sutpen’s Grandfather’s Father’s hands - my own hands? Are my own hands to join those before me in spilling innocent blood? Doomed to adjunction to the design, that cremated immoral dust of the South.

The professor began his lecture, “Conscious free will provides that an individual can be held morally responsible for the results of their own choices. This stands contrary to the fatalist belief that human action has no impact on what occurs, and therefore humanity cannot be reprehended for immoral behavior. While determinism states that events are a confluence of previous occurrences, determinist philosophy does not negate the possibility for free will.”

Shreve nudged Quentin’s shoulder beside him, his (Quentin’s) face still lowered, brooding at the textbook as he formerly had at the open letter.

“Despite the influence of the environment in our decisions, free will gives man the ability to act independently of fate,” the professor continued. “There is a real and even probable risk that our free will can result in immoral outcomes. However, the converse is that free will can be used to counteract existing immoral societal structures.”

Now I am realizing what Father believed, Quentin thought. Father said nothing mattered that much, not even death was permanent. Not aware that he was suffering the consequences of his own decisions and even the choices he didn’t make out of his misconceived perception of the absence of an alternative. He accepted everything without question to challenge it. Not only calling himself a fatalist but raising me as if there were no other option but to comply with the fated immoral Southern design.

“I told you,” Shreve relished as he leaned towards Quentin’s dejected face. Quentin lifted his gaze slightly, looking at his friend out of the corner of his eye. He could feel his roommate’s warm breath ghosting against his ear and the closeness of his searing lips as he spoke.

“Don’t you see?” Shreve whispered, moving his face even closer. “You don’t have to conform to your father’s vain illusion of success and prolongation of that tainted corrupt bloodline—tainted not by the presence of black blood but by the violence and acquiescence that the continuation of a pedigree represented, Quentin didn’t listen to the rest of Shreve’s sentence while he thought. Not revival, just resorting, clinging to the weightless ineludible ashes, in a futile effort to recreate the past.

“You have another choice,” Shreve said, his moving lips almost grazing Quentin’s earlobe as he continued. “Repudiate home and bloodline both, like Henry tried to. It will be a renewal, an escape from the ghosts of the South that seem to constantly plague you.”

Shreve drew back with a self-satisfied smirk, reclining in his chair and crossing his arms in finality.
Quentin looked in open-mouthed shock at his roommate, who returned his stare with a daring raise of his eyebrows. Had he even come close to uttering the thoughts tumbling overflowing his mind, Quentin would have been struck speechless in realization.

*Maybe it is possible, he thought. Maybe you are right after all, Shreve. Maybe I can rid myself of this burden which Father said I could never discard.*

*My escape will not be a fiery immolation at my Father’s hand. No, only the cool soothing waves of darkness can soothe the fever burning within.*

Chapter End Notes

Direct Quotes:
“that you might forget it now and then for a moment” (The Sound and the Fury 93)

Reference to “that state of virginity neither boy’s nor girl’s” (Absalom, Absalom! 259)

“on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage” (209)

Reference to “between two moons balanced. Moons he said full and yellow as harvest moons her hips thighs” (The Sound and the Fury 159-160)
• Quentin’s immediate jump from picturing Shreve to remembering his father’s words shows his internal homophobia

Reference to “sons to bear the burden of mine iniquities and persecutions” (Absalom, Absalom! 260)

Phillis Wheatley’s “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth”, 1772
Personally I think this was Faulkner’s way of indirectly crediting people of color even if his Southern audience would not be receptive to the ideas put forth by women of color.
https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/06154_FPS_0.pdf
An unprecedented connection

Chapter Summary

Quentin doesn’t understand why he’s still a virgin

Kinda a segue between Absalom, Absalom! and The Sound and the Fury

The double entendre of glissade:
1. a way of sliding down a steep slope of snow or ice, typically on the feet with the support of an ice axe.
2. a movement, typically used as a joining step, in which one leg is brushed outward from the body, which then takes the weight while the second leg is brushed in to meet it.

Chapter Notes

Quentin’s POV again
Italics are his thoughts

. . . which get pretty confusing and it’s kinda a mess be he’s starting to reach the mindset of The Sound and the Fury

TW for internalized homophobia, depression, suicidal thoughts, sexism, and extremely mildly dubious consent

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“They [Quentin and Shreve] stared at one another - glared rather - their quiet regular breathing vaporising faintly and steadily in the now tomblike air. There was something curious in the way they looked at one another, curious and quiet and profoundly intent, not at all as two young men might look at each other but almost as a youth and a very young girl might out of virginity itself - a sort of hushed and naked searching, each look burdened with youth’s immemorial obsession”

Absalom, Absalom! (240)

February 1910

In the cold dark night, Shreve stood at the open window, practicing his deep breathing. Quentin watched with rapt fascination as his broad pink naked back expanded and contracted with each respiration.

Thinking (Quentin), If only my body could be yours to do with as you will. If only we could be free from the tomb-borne cinders of old unchanging Southern morality in our cold ratiocinative Harvard dorm. Harvard’s cold iron darkness, where the similarity of sexes would no longer be a sepulchral wall, or so I believed. But I was naïve. I still cannot escape it: the toxic deathly flames of the raging South hang in the very air which I breathe - suffocate on, rather. Even now, here, I am unable to act,
unable to shake the impermeable evanescence of ashen ghosts.

Even Father would not deny the irony of it, he scoffed bitterly. I have found someone for whom I would renounce my home and birthright and all I have known, but the very perpetuation of that known land impedes any action which I might take for what I deign to call love. Not the not-love of Ellen and Sutpen, Mother and Father, not the tear-streaked wedding for money and status that leaves only rain. No, I have found love. Perhaps it is unrequited, he would never talk about me the way he did about Elizabeth Marlowe. If only he knew that the dejection he felt when she turned him down is exactly how I feel every time I look at him. Nonetheless, our relationship is formed on the basis of caring and understanding.

Love can overpass the design, the malevolent design which carries on the legacy of violent immoral bloodshed. Love can free me from remembering the design and my place in it, if only for a moment. Love of pink naked arms and broad hairless chest and bespectacled glacier-blue eyes-

The chimes rang an hour before midnight as they did each night, though no story stopped short at the echoing signal piercing the dark freezing room. Although they were both still awake, Quentin and Shreve were not even talking to one another like they usually did. However, Quentin's thoughts were interrupted, each of the eleven reverberations saying to him, ‘Not love. Not enough time for love. No time for love when the antiquated past consumes all potential for a hazy wavering future.’ He (Quentin) counted down the minutes seconds. The passing strokes of the watch belied his predicament of being irrevocably buried in memory which was not even his own, trapped in time where minutes and seconds did not even matter.

Quentin turned away from Shreve to face the wall, reminded of that grim uneasy paradox of time. My time - life - running short and simultaneously not even passing because I am nothing more than a shadowy ghost who just as well might never have existed at all. The wisteria ashen effluvium smoking, burning my lungs until I cannot breathe, cannot even exist, without choking on the smog. I have no chance for love or even life when only the cremated wreckage of that design prevails.

No chance for love, he brooded. But Shreve helped me realize that there is a chance to escape it. Only the cool shadowy depth of waves can quench the smoldering embers of an unbeatable spectral past.

Quentin shifted on the bed, trembling as he had in the cold iron quad.

That doesn't mean I can think of him. Towering bearlike figure hulking over my own, depths of concern hidden in his flippant tone, warm surprisingly gentle touch of his large hand on my knee-

“It’s not enough, is it?”

As startled as he had been by the resounding chimes, Quentin moved so he was once again facing Shreve, whose back was now to the open rectangle of window. He (Shreve) was looking, searching Quentin’s face with a curious expression of sympathy bridged with smug satisfaction. The latter quality was similar to the resultant pride one might feel in having witnessed a long-anticipated outcome which the other did not foresee. Shreve smirked, knowing he had been right all along.

“This verbose attitude free of flesh - our metamorphosis through storytelling - it's not enough for you anymore,” the shirtless man concluded. “Not only can you not bear the retelling of the past, but it doesn't satisfy you anymore, does it? Acting out our own desires through spoken transubstantiation isn't enough for you, is it?”

Our desires? Is it not only me who feels this way? Quentin wondered hopefully but said nothing. Shreve continued, chuckling in amusement.
“You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this,” his naked abdomen contracted as he laughed vigorously. “My plan worked after all. It’s no longer enough to be the two the four the two in the minds and bodies of Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry. I’ll admit, you held out longer than I thought you would. Finally - you’re admitting that you need more than just words to fulfill your desire.”

What plan? What are you talking about? Quentin didn’t answer and turned away again, thinking, Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen - the Mississippi shades of unsated desire - are only the warning of my inevitable engulfment in the dusty flames of history. A reminder that passion can only be played out in the suspended lore of verbal overpassing and of mine and Henry’s unavoidable damnation to the design. This doom can only be evaded through the final turbulent undulation of death’s soothing glissade.

“That’s right,” Shreve said. “Don’t try to deny it. Because I would know you are lying.”

He knows, Quentin thought. Not repulsed or perturbed like I thought, just saying it short and simple like that. Not afraid of saying it aloud or even of the sinful human touch. Touching my hand my wrist my knee without reluctance or even second thought. So close he can even feel my tremors in the frozen iron darkness of-

Quentin felt, rather than saw, Shreve lie down behind him. Not touching but close enough to feel the radiation of bodily heat in the otherwise frigid dorm room.

Remembering (Quentin), flushed horizontal bodies writhing in the rose-scented gloom

one minute caddy was standing in the door, mother shrieking at her

benjy pulling at her dress

bemoaning the loss of his sister the loss of his pasture

we have sold benjy’s pasture so that you may attend harvard

mother and father’s vain illusion that harvard would save them from their inevitable collapse

father didn’t know he was like the demon, all his progeniture doomed to fail him

forty acres for harvard, our harvard boy

boys not girls, fleeting moments in the darkness

one of us still virgin but not her

lots of girls, i said, i’ve been with lots of girls
caddy laughed

she knew i couldn’t

i never could do anything

father said no one could

when i said i have committed incest father laughed

i couldn’t
never could
not with natalie not with anyone
not even shreve
not like caddy, she could do anything
i said i have committed incest
father asked if i wanted her to
i told him i was afraid she might
caddy unvirgin
why her and not me
me, the virgin, damned to that whipped immoral crypt in a land worse than hell
i forever virgin, ghostlike, unliving
trapped in that mausoleum of progeny and design doomed by their own infernal motives
even here at harvard i cannot escape the south
the south’s spilling of blood surging like a river, overflowing with the tortured bodies of slaves
that bellowing abysmal river flowing northward
benjy bellowed when damuddy died
dilsey said he could smell death
an inundation in the river of blood ashes flames all one; all death
i am submerged suffocating unable to escape
unable to do much of anything
why couldnt it have been me and not her who is unvirgin?
“What was that?” Shreve interrupted, moving his head so that it was just behind his friend's, his
exhaled breath whispering past Quentin’s ear.
“What?” Quentin responded, pulling himself from the hurricane deluge of thought.
“You said - ‘Why couldnt it have been me and not her who is unvirgin?’” Shreve rested his chin on
top of Quentin’s shoulder. Quentin shuddered at his closeness. “I'm pretty sure I know what you
mean, but one never can tell with you. Care to explain?”

Quentin merely stared away as he had before, trembling, perplexed by the way his roommate seemed
to overhear the thoughts boiling in his mind. Then Shreve reached out to touch Quentin, different
from the chaste gentle comforting touch to the hand wrist or knee. Quentin immediately noticed the
change

when shreve touched me
the cool inrush of alpine air
she let them touch her, unhesitant no reservations not caring
did you love them caddy?
caddy said when they touched me i died
when he touched me
i didn't die when he touched me
pure clean air filled my lungs for the first time
but maybe i was already dead
dead until this moment
dead, watching blood flow over cremated corpses
dead generals, grandfathers who were more power in death than in life
caddy was full of life until dalton ames
she did not say love, only said
when they touched me i died
she not loving but unvirgin
i loving but still virgin
they all knew it too
she laughed
father laughed
still virgin?
shreve still touching me
fresh clean canadian air not mississippi fumes
but i cant escape the wistaria ashes smoking ruins suffocating
he touching me
still virgin?
Yes, still virgin.

Quentin abruptly sat up and hurdled over his roommate's horizontal form to leave his bed. He bolted from the room, not seeing Shreve’s expression of perplexed bemused rejection as he remained prostrate on the bed.

Not even his love, his caressing touch, can shirk that corrupted presence of not-love. Thinking while
he ran down the corridor, Sutpen and his offspring were forced to accept it just as Father Mother Caddy all were, I am just next in line. A bloodline of grandfathers and the running river of the slaves they murdered.

I am forced to continue the bloodline. Next to offer my body lying exposed, naked as sacrifice of all the love I possess. The love surging to my surface, surging like blood to the limbs. Love is as impotent in resisting the not-love as the cold Harvard twilight is to the malignant miasmic Mississippi dust.

Nothing - not even love - can bring me solace from the maelstrom of bloodied corpses and scorched ashes. The haunting leavening feeling not of passing minutes but being suspended in time, a time period which by all moral reasoning should no longer exist. My own body is a mere corporeal manifestation of this immorality and I am left with no choice but to extinguish the dying embers.

Now I know what I must do, Quentin thought. It is only a matter of time.

Chapter End Notes

Direct quotes:
“That’s right” . . . “Dont say it. Because I would know you are lying” (Absalom, Absalom! 260)

“when they touched me I died” (The Sound and the Fury 186)

“Why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin” (96)
An inundated end

Chapter Summary

Picks up at the end of Quentin’s section of The Sound and the Fury (see ch 1 for summary)

At this point in the novel, Quentin has already given a letter to the Deacon to give to Shreve on June 3. However, at the end of the section, Quentin describes feeling Shreve’s letter in his pocket which he has to take to the post office. This works on the assumption that two letters were written for Shreve preceding Quentin’s suicide.

Chapter Notes

Quentin’s decision is finally made, although it probably was a long time ago.

Italics are his thoughts
Normal text is what’s actually happening so hopefully it’s not too hard to follow

TW for suicidal thoughts/suicide and depression, vague mention of racism, homophobia, and sexism

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I can be dead in Harvard . . . in the caverns and the grottoes of the sea tumbling peacefully to the wavering tides because Harvard is such a fine sound forty acres is no high price for a fine sound. A fine dead sound we will swap Benjy’s pasture for a fine dead sound.”

(The Sound and the Fury 217)

About 4 Months Later

June 2, 1910

Shreve had a brush. The bag, shut forever, sealed and waterlogged like my fate. Closed off in finality to the echoing rippling cry of the South that haunted me for twenty years. The world will roar away and only the cold rush of water and then silence.

He continued brushing his hair thinking, it’s almost as if he is touching me again. That one time he softly gently caressed me, stroked me, his hand in my hair, knife at my back. Not the strokes of Grandfather’s watch, not during that moment more than five months ago. Shreve’s hands, not the ticking hands of time. Time elapsing and I am stuck in the past never to have lived at all.

Not when they touched me I died. Not like Caddy said. No, perhaps just for a second, when he touched me I lived for the first time. A second of rebirth from the cemetery from which I was borne
and to which I am destined. A moment of renewal in his arms. Yet I am still virgin and he hasnt touched me since.

He set down Shreve’s brush, picked up his bag, and left the room for the last time. No peeling stroke marked his departure; the only disturbance in the silent darkness was the letter crinkling in his pocket.

I shall have to go to the post office, he thought. Shreve wont get this letter until it is far too late. I will have already succumbed to the ebbing tide which we call death. Not temporary but that final escape from immoral ashen embers of a spurious delusion through submergence in water. The ironic delusion of Sutpen Grandfather Father to which I can - will - never reconcile myself. I will be gone, not dead as I have been for twenty years, but instead vanished from the surface of the ruined corrupted land.

He was ripped from the sea of thoughts perhaps by the change of scenery as he entered the post office. His stride was deceptively composed in his cleaned suit with the sealed bag in tow, almost as if the decision itself told him that he would finally be free.

“I need to mail this, please,” he told the postman, in the same reserved courteous tone he had used when speaking with the Deacon earlier that day. A hint of the Southern drawl was still present in his voice. It was, to him, as if that inculcated tone proved his inability to flee the South for good and all.

“And Alberta?” the postman asked, astonished. “It will be a while before your friend here gets your message.”

“That’s all right,” he responded. “He’s got all the time in the world.” Not like me. Less than a quarter hour and my time will finally be up.

He left in the same determined manner in which he had entered, poised with head raised facing forward, but not seeing. Only thinking, that silent echo of soon it will all be over. Not like Father said it would be, not temporary. Not an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh and aware both of itself and of the flesh. Father said it will not quite discard you you will not even be dead. I will be dead - I have been dead these past twenty years stuck in the mausoleum. The whirling vortex, void of all desire and morality, from which I came and from which I can finally be free.

The scent of honeysuckle faded out and was replaced with the pure fragrance of damp air. The air was misty from the churning river fifty feet below and he could feel the flat-irons where he had hidden them earlier. It was twilight now, and his shadow was invisible, merged with the dark peaceful swirling water below. Not visible, but he could feel it. That shadow of the past if only he could drown it.

And that’s all right too, he thought. That’s what the flat-irons are for.

He could still smell the gasoline on his newly cleaned vest. The gasoline in her coffee-colored hand as she poured it like blood over that rotting house. Clytie burnt down Sutpen’s Hundred till nothing was left but raging smoking debris. Not Clytemnestra killing Agamemnon but the King bringing this death upon himself through what he blindly called virtue. Not conscience or morality as he put it but quite the opposite. The fire was only the inevitable conclusion of a design built on the whipped bloody backs of slaves.

And Spoade said, ‘What do you do on your holidays? burn houses?’

Clytie succeeded in destroying it with fire, he thought. I will destroy my Father’s design too. Though not through flame like Clytie but with water to douse the smoking embers. Finally stifle it, smother
The inescapable attenuating wistaria-dust. The flat-irons to blot out my shadow and the water to swallow the design. Silence the ticking reminder of passing time because time will stop and I will stop. Not that I ever started. Never even lived.

He looked down at the dark tranquil undulating depths under the bridge, the flat-irons providing a comfortable weight in his coat pockets.

*Can I die if I never even lived? All my life spent in the debris of a crypt imposed on me by my Father, his Father, all those dim shadowed figures of the past. So it is not even that I am killing myself but an empty shell containing only the shadows and echoing cries of defeated ghosts. In drowning myself I do not prematurely stifle the breathing of a young man, but quell the immoral raging outlived demons that harrow my future.*

He smelled the gasoline attenuating into the wave-churned air and felt his side pocket where the letter had been.

*Except I did live. Just for one instant. When he touched me. I didn't die like Caddy but lived, felt the cool inward rush of air filling my lungs. Not the surge of the poisonous cremated miasma from the South. Not the wistaria dust-ridden effluvium which suffocated me since the day I was born.*

*When he touched me. For the first time I breathed. Brisk alpine air miles above that lowly quagmire morass of a mausoleum Father called home. Not reeking of haggard cedars but wafts of fresh Canadian pine smelling like him.*

*I lived in that instant. Even if it only made me realize how all these years I have been dead. Not six feet above the ground but six feet under. That's why I couldn't let him. Each time he touched me only a reminder that life cannot stop it.*

*Nothing can stop the tide of the ghostly ashen past. Not life not even love. Only the watery escape to the dark cavernous grottoes of the sea which we call death. But at least I can say I lived. Lived for the first time in his arms. Lived if only to die again.*

He clenched the bag and looked down thinking, *only the flat-irons will come floating up. Creating no ripple, no displacement of water. Only the smooth coursing river and then, silence.*

Chapter End Notes

**Direct quotes:**

*“the world would roar away” (The Sound and the Fury 220)*

*“an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh and aware both of itself and of the flesh it will not quite discard you you will not even be dead” (220)*

*“What do you do on your holidays? burn houses?” (205)*

**Reference to** “his [Quentin’s] very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names . . . a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever which had cured the disease” (Absalom, Absalom! 7)
The first letter

Chapter Summary

Shreve gets Quentin’s letter.

Also, Spoade only has one joke and uses it at the worst possible time.

Chapter Notes

Shreve’s POV
Italics are his thoughts
Shreve might seem OOC but who wouldn’t be?

TW for suicide and mentions of racism and homophobia
This is where it finally gets less confusing!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? a kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forever more as long as your children's children produce children you wont be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manassas?”

~Shreve to Quentin about the South

Absalom, Absalom! (289)

June 3, 1910

Shreve woke to the bell ringing for first lecture, his mind still groggy and his head throbbing.

Maybe I had one too many glasses of wine last night, his head ached at the piercing toll of the bell. Although I think that the wine was the only reason I survived Mrs Bland’s horrendous picnic. If only Quentin had come, he could have kept me entertained and I wouldnt have to deal with this awful headache.

Suddenly remembering, Shreve immediately got up, his head spinning with the unexpected movement, and went to the other room to see if his roommate had already left for class. He still didn’t know where Quentin had run off to last night.

He probably just needed an excuse to get out of that godforsaken picnic, Shreve thought. I dont know why he couldnt have included me in his plan.

But then Shreve remembered that yesterday his friend had been acting even stranger and more
withdrawn than usual, spacing out most of the time then suddenly trying (and failing remarkably) to beat up Gerald Bland. Quentin was always the quiet type and one never really could tell what was going on in that head of his, but Shreve couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that something really had gone wrong.

He (Quentin) had been more meticulous than usual about his appearance, as if it were the only thing that mattered. Not that Shreve minded all that much (admittedly he always appreciated a man in a fine suit, and that new suit had accentuated every tapered curve and slender contour of his body), but it was unnerving to see Quentin obsess over the blood on his shirt while completely disregarding the growing bruise around his eye. It was almost as if he were only a shell of a human being, impenetrable to physical wound because there was no carnal flesh from which to draw blood. The actual violent letting of blood seemed to cause Quentin no pain; it was the indisputable mark left by the blood which he could not stand. Then, after fussing over the bloodstains, he had declined any help and departed as if nothing had ever happened, as if none of it mattered that much.

The Southerner was distant - Shreve knew this better than anyone - and Shreve had seen him become even more trapped in the caverns of his mind since returning from his sister’s wedding in bucolic Mississippi.

Or maybe that’s not it, Shreve thought candidly. Maybe I’m trying to avoid my own responsibility just like his old man. It got worse after that night - the night when I touched him. I know it did. I thought he wanted me to. For God’s sake, he was shaking even. Breathing deeply in pleasure one minute, then running away the next. And he hasn’t let me touch him since.

Shreve dressed, not so much with the ambition of getting to class, but rather to discover where the room’s other occupant had absconded to. He was still caught in his thoughts when he found a note carefully perched on a pile of clothes, addressed to him.

Dear Shreve,
Please give these to Deacon. I won’t be needing them anymore. You know where to find him. He has something for you as well. Please thank him for me.

The note was left unsigned, but that was not what troubled Shreve. The complete outfit, laid out neatly just as Quentin had left it, was disconcerting in its finality, that quality of being placed in one simple terminal act. The neat lingering stillness bothered Shreve so much that he grabbed the clothes and immediately left the room, letting the note fall to the ground.

What have you done now, Quentin? Shreve wondered. Always so high-maintenance. Getting too proud for your new clothes even.

He immediately realized how wrong this first assumption was, No, not getting too good for them. Jesus, by now I know you well enough not to think that. Giving them away to that poor black man, trying to undo the sins committed by your forebears. That Southern immorality of Sutpen’s design which haunted you so. Always so morose - all dressed up and mooning around like the prologue to a suttee.

Shreve halted and broke his determined stride, stopping in grim realization.

Wait, he thought, though this time there was no one to hear him. Wait. It’s not the clothes you care about, is it? You don’t care about the mooning around. It’s the suttee, that self-immolated cremation, that you were working towards.

Shreve’s pace quickened once again, long legs moving faster more urgent than before, unwitting tears fleeing their ducts like small rivers coursing down his rosy face.
He killed himself. Quentin killed himself. At the realization, his forlorn thoughts switched to the past-tense. He approached Harvard Square thinking, but Why? Why? What future could have been so terrible that even death provided more comfort? I told him so. That he could shirk that legacy of defeated generals and even leave the South. Come with me away from that dead demolition of inequality and bloodshed. I see now it was the bloodstains which he couldnt bear. The bloodstains on his clothes reminded him of that coerced destiny forced upon him by his father. He couldnt stand the blood of millions on his hands; innocent bodies slaughtered in the name of that spurious vain illusion which he thought he could not escape.

But why at least didn’t he tell me, let me bear some of that crippling indomitable burden? Did he really see no other way out of that quagmire? No one he could confide in and share his inner turmoil with?

It was then that Shreve found the Deacon, standing in his usual place at the train station. Wearing the patched clothes - Quentin would have said something from Uncle Tom’s Cabin. He (Shreve) wiped the tears from his face, his bespectacled eyes meeting the warm brown ones of the Deacon. Kind amber eyes untarnished by knowing of the tragic events of the previous day.

“I was told to give this to you,” the Deacon said, his voice laced with the sincerity of knowing the Canadian wouldn’t care for the obedient servant façade like Southerners did. His (the Deacon’s) multifaceted personality could adapt to whatever situation was thrown at him, not learned by trying but through the involuntary experiences of his life. That inherited background of two hundred years of exploitation and bloodshed stripping a people of land, home, family, and identity. This systematic racial oppression (one might even call it a design) had forced them to adapt an ingenuity unique to the oppressed in order to compensate for being robbed of all else.

“Yes,” Shreve managed in a tear-choked whisper. “He wanted to thank you. And I have this for you.”

Shreve handed the Deacon the clothes in exchange for the sealed unstamped letter. As both nodded in acceptance and gratitude, the Deacon spoke in his tone of genuine honesty.

“A right gracious young man, isn’t he?” the Deacon said thoughtfully. “I suppose you know Southerners well enough - they’re fine folks. But you can’t live with them.”

“No, I reckon not,” Shreve responded, internally admonishing himself in sardonic self-flagellant bitterness, I tried to live with him. There was nothing I wanted more. Look how that turned out. “You enjoy your day now.”

“Same to you,” the Deacon answered, still with that same guileless courtesy. “And let Quentin know I appreciate his kindness.”

If only I could, Shreve raised his hand in parting, the other hand still clutching the letter. He was now certain of what it contained and more importantly, what had happened to his friend. Just like that, the rivers began again, not soft and steady, but roaring and surging and overflowing from beneath the spectacles.

There was no haste in his stride now, his gait reduced to an amble with head lowered, not to hide the tears but in an effort to block the onset of reality. It seemed that if he were to gaze up at the worn path before him - the route he knew his now deceased roommate had taken not a day’s length earlier - he would be faced with concordance to the indisputable fact of Quentin’s death.

Shreve knew at this point he would be late to class and make a fool of himself in front of the entire first lecture. Not that it mattered that much. He - the astoundingly intelligent foreigner who spent his
free time reading Aristophanes, investing himself in academia, and reimagining stories with his roommate - would be late to class for the first time. Everyone would laugh at the irony of it. It didn’t matter at this point though, since being a humiliated freshman was preferential to being the grieving friend of a dead one. Only I am both.

Perhaps better not to go at all, he thought, touching (nearly fondling) the letter which was now in his pocket. But then I would have to think about it - him - and it would start to seem real. I dont even know for certain what he did. He might not have committed suicide. But then why the letter.

He fell into stride with the student beside him, his face still downcast and lowered at the ground. Still avoiding confrontation with the reality of life and death through the lowered head of futile obstinance.

“Ah, Shreve,” Spoade said in an unhurried greeting, customarily late to class with neither socks nor shirt. “Running late for class I see. And alone - that's unusual. You and your beloved Quentin are always so intimate, as thick as thieves. Seeing you apart is like Pyramus without Thisbe. Where’s your Southern belle of a wife?”

*Pyramus and Thisbe*, Shreve completely broke down at the reference to the Greek myth, letting the sobs consume him. *The star-crossed lovers. A perfect analogy, Spoade, but you're wrong about one thing. In the myth, Thisbe didn't die. Quentin, on the other hand, is most certainly dead. I should have seen it coming. I should have recognized the despondent hopelessness in his eyes. I could have stopped him. But I didn't. And now he is beyond my reach, forever submerged in the irreversible currents of death.*

Spoade looked at his friend in astonishment. They both stopped walking, paused perhaps by Shreve’s choking sobs or by Spoade’s disbelieving incredulity to what he was witnessing. Shreve, the flippant teasing smart aleck, had been brought to tears wracking his entire body like a leaf caught in a gust. Spoade saw only one source for the freshman’s obvious despondency.

“Christ, are you ok?” Spoade asked, still shocked at Shreve’s uncharacteristically vulnerable behavior. “There’s only one person who can turn the confident sarcastic genius that is Shrevlin McCannon into a nervous sobbing wreck. I dont know how he does it, but he's certainly stronger than he looks if he's the one who caused all this. What did Quentin do to break your heart this time? Did your bride refuse to consummate the marriage?”

*No. It wasn't a wedding. It was a wake all along,* Shreve thought, brushing off Spoade’s insinuation as he always did. He turned away from his friend without a reply and headed back to the dorm, so quickly so as to appear almost transitory to Spoade’s skeptical stare. Spoade was paralyzed in disbelief as Shreve left, his shoulders shaking with sobs as he vanished.

In his brusque return, Shreve bumped shoulders with one of the girls from Radcliffe, the girls’ version of Harvard. *Quentin always liked knowing that girls were being educated at a similar standard to their male counterparts, he thought. He truly didn't fit in with the South. He even tried to be the champion of everything the South hated. Rebelling against the sexism and the racism and the classism he was raised to believe in. He sure didn't learn to treat black folks and women with respect in Mississippi, but he did try to change while he was here.*

Shreve deflected his face from the girl, again not due to embarrassment of his crying but to avoid confrontation with an undeniable truth.

*Quentin wouldn't have noticed how her tight skirt clings to her thighs,* Shreve pondered as he kept walking, bitterly laughing through his running tears. *For all his defense of females, he was never very good at hiding his complete sexual disinterest in them.*
Neither could he hide his desire. Once Spoade pointed it out to me, I couldn't believe how I had missed it at first. So many times I caught him looking when he thought I couldn't see. And maybe I did walk around shirtless on purpose; I knew what it would do to him. He couldn't help but look at me. Brooding in vain attempt to hide the pining longing in his ashen glowing multicolored eyes. His eyes, steely grey and devoid of warmth. Not like it had never been there, but as if it had died like the doused coals of a fire. No, that's not right. Quentin's eyes still had that flickering warmth, it was never extinguished, so then where did I see-

Shreve abandoned his perplexed confusion upon entering their room, with everything still neat exactly the way it was the night before. The night before - before he -

He proceeded to his side of the room and sat down on his own bed, keeping his head down to avoid looking at the unnerving and haunting scene on the other half of the room. Simultaneously dreading and yearning to know what was inside, he opened the letter with pink trembling fingers. The paper folded open without effort on his part, the sloping scrawl of the writing made visible.

My Dearest, Shreve,

At last, I can finally say what has been trapped in my mind for months. I know you, and I know at this point you have already realized what I have done. I always admired that about you: your ability to combine ratiocination with empathy in order to understand something. Not like me. I've always been too sensitive, too emotional to bear the pain and suffering behind the future which Father bequeathed me. He did not even realize it, but there was so much of his (the demon's - as you would say) design in Father's goals for me. So much that it was not even a future but just damnation to being trapped in the past. I saw only one way to escape. I'm sure I ask this in vain, knowing you, but do not weep for me.

I feel like I have always been trapped in that mausoleum of the past. My life has felt like nothing more than an hourglass containing not sand but ashes, ashes of invincible conquered ghosts of the South. All my life I have suffocated on these smoking remains, unable to breathe and perhaps not even living. Maybe I did not even know what living was. Then I met you.

And then I was sure I had never known what living was before I knew you. You were so different from everything I had known, ruddy cheeks accustomed to cold Canadian winters and a tall broad frame that could encompass mine if I let you. I wish I had. But then we started the bonfire - we began talking about Sutpen and the design - and the smoke was in my lungs again and I remembered that the South was still with me. Like my shadow, sometimes lurking in thunderous silence, but always there. Constantly behind me, following me. Even you, with your pink hairless arms and erudite glowing smile, could not rid me of its haunting presence. If only I could drown it.

I did manage to forget it once. When you touched me. I won't elaborate as to when - I know you will remember which time I speak of. You sensed my unspoken need, the unwritten words of love which I could never inscribe. At least, not in life. You touched me, and I breathed. Lived. For the first time, I felt what it must be like to be alive.

You gave me hope. When you said you would never love another, I wanted to say it back. I had felt it all along despite what dead voices told me. I knew it was love. I knew you didn't believe in fate and that in your eyes we could escape it, if only I would tell you what was in my mind. You tried to tell me that we could leave the past behind. And I wanted to. I wanted nothing more than to stroke your face, kiss you, say they will

But I also knew I could not say that. Because it could not be true. Even the breath of fresh air which you gave me was not enough to conquer it. Never mind that though, death was quotidian in my experience. Life, on the other hand, was unique, and you brought me that. I’ll leave you with this:

Live, keep living. Make change if you can - to use your own words, you can beat it. I could not, but you are stronger than I.

Maybe someday the children of the South will be able to learn about their history without being shackled to relive it. Maybe someday morality will vanquish that old indomitable demonhood. Maybe someday we will all be seen as equals regardless of race, class, or gender, and love will conquer all.

Love, I can write it now - how liberating it is. I feel free now. I could not say it then, but now I do. How Spoade would smirk at those words. 'I do'. Did that make you smile? I hope so. But he wont know what I've written here; this letter is meant for your eyes only.

Love. I love you, with the blazing passion of fire and cold cherishing embrace of wind. My own hot rushing blood from Mississippi is forever merged with your cooler purer blood. Everything is so much easier in words. In escape.

I love you. I have loved you, and will love you. Always.

Forever yours truly,
Quentin

Looking up from the letter, ink running in tears across the surface of the parchment, Shreve could see Quentin’s watch in his own drawer. Its irrevocably cracked shattered surface was bloodstained, but the hands were still moving. Still ticking, marking each passing second and minute in the formidable unceasing continuation of time.

Chapter End Notes

Direct quotes:
“All dressed up and mooning around like the prologue to a suttee” (The Sound and the Fury 125)

"they're fine folks. But you can't live with them” (123)

Reference to “Is it a wedding or a wake?” (100)
The second letter

Chapter Summary

Caught in the raging fire of World War I in France, Shreve finally reads the second letter.

IWW: the Industrial Workers of the World, a political organization committed to class struggle as a method of overthrowing capitalism

Wobblies: members of the IWW

Chapter Notes

TW for violence, depression, and references to suicide

Brief Shreve/OC

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Peace not between men of the same race and nation but peace between two young embattled spirits and the incontrovertible fact which embattled them, since neither [Quentin and Shreve] were the first young men to believe (or at least apparently act on the assumption) that wars are sometimes created for the sole aim of settling youth's private difficulties and discontents”

Absalom, Absalom! (269)

Five Years Later

Canadian Expeditionary Forces

France, June 1, 1915

Amid the rush of wounded bleeding bodies and the earthshaking storm of total war, the shattered watch ticked in the pocket of Shreve’s uniform. In the trenches with the body bearers carrying in the relentless stream of nearly-dead soldiers, the watch reminded him of the looming inevitable approach of death.

Every nameless body brought in for surgery was a cadaverous derision of the one corpse he had never seen. Every movement of the clock’s hands - more felt than heard - jeered at him, saying that he could have stopped that one death. The numerous lives he had saved on the battlefield were not so much a testament to his surgical skill as they were futile compensation for that particular life which he had not been able to save. He could save a million wounded soldiers, but it would do nothing to alleviate the pain of losing the one person he had loved. Even the reverberation of the mortars launching exploding shells overhead could not drown out the restless motions of the twisted hands pulsing next to his heart.
Not drowned out, he thought, clenching the scalpel in fury and sorrow. Not like its owner. Although time might have stopped for him, it didn’t for me. These past five years all I have done is remember. Remembering him with each passing stroke of the watch. He was haunted by the spurious ghosts of the past, and now I am haunted too. Not haunted by an outdated future like he was, but I am left to contemplate a future which was possible and did not occur. A future with him which is no longer possible-

Shreve’s hands began to shake in time with the watch, much to the worry of his assistant.

“I’ll finish this up, Captain,” his assistant said, though the large now trembling man was two years his junior. “Go ahead and take a break. A surgeon with unsteady hands is about as useless as a fish out of water. You look as if you could use some rest.”

“All right. Thanks,” Shreve muttered as he headed off to his stiff wooden bed with no intention of resting, the watch in his pocket still ticking away.

Not that I can get any rest, he thought. Not even sleep can bring me relief from the constant pulsating reminder that he is gone while I am still here. And still I can’t understand why. Why? Not why he did it - I’ve come to terms with that - but why did he feel like he couldn’t tell me? I tried to tell him, understand him, so why didn’t he see me as someone who could quell his internal embattlement?

Shreve reached into his uniform pocket with his still-shaking hand. Clutching the broken timepiece in his pocket, he could feel each resounding stroke of the unrelenting tireless movements course through his body like blood.

And that damned watch. It’s always there, ticking, each movement of the hands an admonition that he could be here with me but isn’t. Nothing is left of him but memory. Nothing of him with me but the cursed changing positions on the watch. And the letter.

The intransigent folded letter had rested beside the watch for nearly five years. Five years tomorrow, actually. Leaving the wretched broken watch, Shreve pulled the letter from his pocket and rested it on the table. It had been five years and the seal of the crumpled letter remained intact, unopened. Stamped and addressed in the unmistakably familiar handwriting. Shreve knew all too well what it would contain.

“Wait till you get your hands on this, Cap’n,” Lieutenant John Ibbetson barged into the small room, clutching a newspaper. “The goddamn communists are forsaking the war again.”

“Really,” Shreve responded dully, without any apparent spark of interest. “And since when does the Royal Army Medical Corps take time from work to discuss trivial bavardage?”

“And since when do Captains take time from work because of shaky hands? Don’t be such a hypocrite. Just take a look at what those cowards are saying, Cap’n,” John responded, thrusting the newspaper at Shreve.

The Crimson
Cambridge, Mass., May 28, 1915

“My Alma mater? All the way from Harvard? Where’d you manage to find this?” Shreve asked apprehensively as he read, his hands still trembling.

“I have my sources,” Ibbetson responded with a coy smile that bordered on being coquettish.

“I’ll wager you do,” Shreve replied, knowing full well how resourceful the other man could be.
“Just go on and read it already, would you?” the Lieutenant badgered while maintaining his wide grin. He lingered in the doorway in eager fidgeting anticipation of Shreve’s reaction.

“‘Boston Chapter of the IWW Calls for Strike Against War,’” Shreve read aloud. “‘Local Wobblies claim that war is the capitalist’s tool to exploit the masses for their own economic gain and thereby urge citizens to resist the draft.’ All right. But what’s this got to do with us?”

“Dont you see?” John was relentlessly persistent as he moved closer to where Shreve sat on his bed. “The Wobblies - those socialists - are trying to vilify those of us who are brave enough to volunteer for our country, be it Uncle Sam or the Dominion of Canada. C’mon McCannon, that Harvard education must’ve given you more than just your good looks.”

“That’s Captain to you, Lieutenant,” Shreve chided lightly, though with a kind of strained and forced levity.

“You and I both know our relationship runs a little deeper than that.”

But Shreve did not answer. He was too busy staring down at the photograph accompanying the article he had read. Something unnerved him about the otherwise innocuous image of what was labelled as a group of young anti-war activists. Ignoring the raised hairs on the back of his neck, Shreve turned to face his companion.

“I know you’re not really all that interested in the chicanery back in the United States,” the higher-ranking Canadian man stated confidently. “So what was your real reason in coming here?”

“C’mon Captain, I think you know why I came,” the Lieutenant responded in the same flirtatious tone as he approached Shreve. "Or why I will come, if I'm being literal.”

Still fixated on the oddly haunting photograph, Shreve lay back down as the other man began to strip off his uniform. The surgeon couldn’t pinpoint exactly what perturbed him about the picture, but it may have been something in the intense glares of the strikers which carried their moral outrage even in printed ink.

*It’s almost like simple marks on paper hold more power over my life than even the exploding cartridges,* Shreve thought. *First that sealed letter which I cannot bring myself to open, because I already know what it will say. Constantly weighing me down as if it were wrapped in iron rather than paper. And now this photograph. That familiar expression of quiet flickering outrage even when knowing that fighting the battle is a lost cause.*

As the other man took Shreve in his mouth with practiced confidence, Shreve’s mind wandered back five years in time and space.

*And to think. His body lying next to mine on those frigid tomblike New England nights. His lean supple body thin enough that I could envelop him completely in my own to stop his shaking. Shaking like my hands, trembling not from the cold but out of that deeply concealed unsatiated want which he could not express with words, except in death. Lying close but never touching, except once.*

*So strong was his desire to caress me explore my body but even stronger was his inculcated will not to do so. He fled as soon as he realized what my touch meant. Something that his spectral Southern heritage could not reconcile itself with. But he longed for my touch. I know he did. I should have told him that there was nothing sinful in the human touch, as he had been taught to believe. That it was not mere sodomic lust that fueled our desire, but the universal emotion that drives true morality and compassion. If only I had let him see that I offered him love, not the arranged marriage forced upon him but my own pure and full-hearted love. Love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency,*
but nothing fault nor false.

Then there would be no need to console him with words; for no written or spoken phrase could express my caring concern for his troubled mind fused with my burning passion for his lissome anatomy. A sympathetic need which at the time I could only demonstrate through touch, the impulsive action without verbal consolation, causing him to flee. If I had just prepared him first, then he would have seen no reason to leave the room. Maybe he would not have decided to end his life. Not if he had love to live for. Not the heady lust of Thomas Sutpen or the loveless cloistered marriage to uphold the design. No, it was love - my own steady unwavering flame to reignite his dwindling asphyxiated light.

I would touch him and let him know he could do the same to me, his gracile tentative limbs brushing against my own, Shreve thought as arousal stirred within him. Not the hurried rushed encounter with a lower-ranking soldier in the trenches of a battlefield. No, it would be the calm contented peace of knowing that the war had been won. Perhaps the war was not won in the eyes of his father and grandfather, but it gave his generation the chance to start anew. Maybe he would have never come to Harvard if not for the outraged defeat of the Confederacy; he was sent Northward to give his family the final groping chance at establishing themselves in their nugatory Manifest Destiny. The vain pursuit of not only the South but the entire deluded country.

Had I never met him, I would have never seen the pale thin form wracked by shivers. The aroused haunted trembling which I wanted nothing more than to relieve. A gentle sweeping touch of limbs before submerging him in my own love, carrying him away from the toxic vapor of burning defeated corpses and into a state where he would no longer feel the burden of his ancestors hunching his shoulders. I could have guided him, gently and slowly teaching him the pleasures of touch. How to become unvirgin, as he would have put it. I could have helped him realize that it was not something to fear or rush. It was the cherishment of the human form and soul. I could have taught him to think of it not as a clandestine rendezvous in the dark, but the climactic summit of virtue and affection. Then those could have been his lips around me, his delicate hands on my thighs the expanse of my back running up and down my torso.

And then I would look down and his gaze would meet mine. Like all those dark frozen nights spent imagining him as Henry and myself as Charles Bon. Glaring at each other out of the unresolved tension created by the love itself. He would look up from his downcast position and glare at me in defiance, reminding me that it was not love. He could never let himself believe that it was love. Maybe because he knew that he was expected to acquiesce to the chatelaine lack of love insisted upon by his mother and father, the entire defeated South, and even the victorious United States. His eyes carried the resolute cinders of being fated to a relationship devoid of love. But still there was a faint luminous quality in his eyes that, despite his pessimism, hoped for love.

Glowing embers for eyes staring into my own with the introspective gaze of one who had lived far beyond his mere twenty years. Little did I know that the glowing embers were not burning but reaching the suspended state of dying before being extinguished once and for all.

Shreve was partially torn from his rippling thoughts as Ibbetson pulled off of him. However, he was still absorbed enough not to notice his guest reaching towards the side table where the letter lay. If only I had taken notice of those dying eyes, I could have stopped him.

“What’s this?” the Lieutenant inquired as he examined the letter.

Shreve, still caught in the deluge of his stupor, took no notice as John opened the envelope that had been sealed for five years. If I had just looked into his eyes and seen the pain, the stifling suffering, that drove him to the edge of death’s precipice. He had so little trust in me that he turned down my
affectionate touch for the cold embrace of watery gloom. Surrounded by my embrace only the one time, now forever engulfed in unreachable depths, caressed only by the cold ripple of dark river torrents.

“Did you have another lover you decided not to tell me about?” Ibbetson joked lightly, unaware that the other man was not listening. “Clearly he doesn’t have much of a knack for words. And - based on what he wrote - your relationship didn’t end well. Hey McCannon, are you even hearing me?”

Shreve was fully startled from his rumination this time, though not so much by the man’s words as by his horror at noticing the opened letter which had remained sealed for so long until this point. He released all of his repressed guilt and frustration surrounding his former friend’s death upon seeing the opened envelope. He was overwhelmed by thunderous waves of fury as he bellowed for his companion to leave. Startled by the sudden outburst, John scuttled from the room as quickly as he had come. Shreve’s release of the pent-up river of unresolved self-reproach left him with only the faint vibration of the slammed door and the uncannily foreboding silence.

Shreve reached a tentative shaking hand to grab the long-anticipated letter. The single line of familiar sloped handwriting appeared to slant off the page, as if it were composed of more than just parchment and ink. No need for greeting or conclusion, only the simple and irrefutable line of script.

  Don’t go looking for me.

Chapter End Notes

Direct quotes:
  “Love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false”
  (Absalom, Absalom! 253)

The next chapter goes back in time to 1910 but after that it will be 1915 again. Hope this chapter was more straightforward and easier to understand :)
An unforeseen denouement

Chapter Summary

Denouement: the final part of a play, film, or narrative in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved.

Another look at the day after Quentin’s suicide

Chapter Notes

TW for suicidal ideation and vague mentions of self-harm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“He [Quentin] lay watching the rectangle of window, feeling the warming blood driving through his veins, his arms and legs. And now, although he was warm . . . now he began to jerk all over, violently and uncontrollably until he could even hear the bed, until even Shreve felt it and turned, raising himself (by the sound) onto his elbow to look at Quentin though Quentin himself felt perfectly all right”

Absalom, Absalom! (288)

Five Years Ago

June 3, 1910

I couldn’t.

That’s why I couldn’t.

Never could do much of anything, Father said. Said that I would never finish it, that even death was only a temporary relief from the bloodshed before plunging back into the dark churning maelstrom of life and the inescapable vaulted future. He couldn’t have foreseen this, though. Didn’t think I could shirk my fate any more than he could, but he was wrong.

Maybe I also knew I couldn’t do it, thinking, perhaps I knew I wouldn’t do it from the moment I wrote that second letter. The short single line betraying more of how I felt than I even knew at the time. That I wouldn’t have the strength to do it, never did. But somehow in the writing I had the subconscious realization that there was another way. An escape beyond death. I didn’t know this in my mind; rather, I conceived the idea in the very act of inscribing those five words in the letter. If death is temporary then I could never free myself of the bloodshed. Not even the river’s depths could flush out the smoking ashes filling my lungs, suffocating me. But there was another way I could escape.

Quentin looked up from the trickle of blood merging with the running water in the sink below to
meet his own glaring eyes in the mirror.

The razor on my face arms legs. Not very much hair to begin with but enough to justify shaving. No more hair than Shreve’s pink naked arms or his smooth cherubic face. He always joked that between the two of us there was no need for a razor. The razor. It’s curious how one tool can suit a man in so many purposes. The mundane removal of hair by the same instrument used for violent slicing. Versh told me about a man mutilated himself. Went to a ditch somewhere and cut them right off. I couldn’t have done it. Lucky I never had any to start out with.

Father told me that. Laughing at me when I said I have committed incest because he knew I wouldn’t. Couldn’t. Caddy knew it too. I told her I had been with lots of girls then rivers on my face. Not a roaring surging river below me. Not like last night. Just trickles stemming from within, trying to carry away that fuming corpse-reeking dust of the South. Tears running in a vain effort to escape the crypt for a cradle in which I was born and destined to die. The sepulchral tomb for a future and me trying to pry open the walls with weak arms. She saw me fail and even I knew in that moment that I could never evade it. I would never be the fine figure of a Southern man because I couldn’t play the part. Though there is another part I can play.

Spoade saw it too. Calling Shreve my husband. He didn’t know how I wished it could have been so. But that would make me the bride. When we played, Caddy was always a king, not a queen or a princess. The way Spoade put it, I would always be the bride. Frail virginal bride of death, consigned to her fate and too weak to prevent its onset. I am the delicate sylphlike Persephone, trapped in the coffinlike wistaria-gloom of the Southern Tartarus befitting Greek tragedy. Only not anymore. No, no heroic valiant savior full of hubris to vanquish my enemy. No meretricious Orpheus to scale the walls of that tomb to rescue me. I had to save myself. No one to save me but my own wan evanescing Eurydice.

Quentin put down the bloodied razor and began to brush his hair, though he did not use Shreve’s brush this time.

Only one person to ever believe I had any. He never doubted that I had them in the first place. And he didn’t forsake me because of my masculinity. Maybe he even desired me because of it. When he touched me, he must have known. Stroking me while feeling the undeniable presence of manliness. His secret forbidden touch which I constantly longed for, yet could not bear when the smoking fumes filled my lungs again.

The wedding - our wedding - which Spoade had predicted was almost finished when the objectors intervened. The objectors - Mother, Father, the South, the design. Their contaminating suffusion left the bride no choice but to run from the altar, denying the marriage and the possibility of life, running back into the comforting familiar arms of death. Although I didn’t know it then, it was not death that I ran to. No, it was another life, a life I had not even known could be possible until I refused to succumb to death’s cold accustomed embrace.

After his hair was smoothed back along his skull, Quentin began to adjust the wig on his head.

Another life in which I may break out of the wistaria-scented, dust-layered tomb of the dead unflagging Southern design. Not through death, which Father called only a temporary solution, although the perceived death is instrumental in the completion and success of my plan. If they believe I am dead, there is no reason for them to go looking for me to drag me back into the infernal chasm of immorality and bloodshed. The death to help me escape the South’s pertinacious effluvium which has suffocated me all these years. In death, at least the presumed death, there could be renewal.
Quentin pulled on the long tight hobble skirt that even on his frame extended to his ankles.

It's a wonder that women are able to move in these, he thought as he pulled on the small heels. Especially with heels. How can women focus on reading Gertrude Stein or studying politics when wearing such restrictive garments? If all one is taught to care about is her appearance, how can she take time to expand her knowledge through education?

He stood up, walking around the small room and practicing his stride.

Last night I did not even believe that I would live to see another day, thinking, I did not think I would take another step after the one. The final step to fall fifty feet into the rippling abyss. I did not think I would walk again and here I am walking around in heels. Perhaps I would be as tall as him now. Only an inch or two taller with the heels. Surely I would be taller than Father, whose obdurate aging height I could never outgrow but only equal. Maybe now I would see eye to eye not with Father but with Shreve. My increased height symbolic of my acceptance of his (Shreve’s) encouragement to start over after disavowing my immoral lifeless catacomb heritage through death.

He carefully applied the makeup, smearing the crimson lipstick as he had seen Caddy do so many times.

If I told them, then it would be real. Then I could escape the smoking ruins of my future. It didn't work when I told Father I had committed incest. He laughed because he knew I wouldn't. Couldn't. But this is different. They will believe that I have killed myself, succumbed to that watery submerged death, because I myself believed that it would be so. Death is not an end, but an escape. No one to know that I am not dead, therefore no one to drag me Southward like the spurious Cerberus that takes the form of Mother and Father. Consigning me to the destiny they wanted for me, clenching me with sharp piercing fangs, that entire fecundity of dragons’ teeth. If they heard of my death, then they would have to stop trying to sell me to the ashen Hades of their design. But there is one person who will discover what I have truly done.

Quentin closed the door and began walking, somewhat unsteadily but confident in his plan, to the college which many considered to be the girls’ equivalent of Harvard.

He will know as soon as he opens that second letter, he thought. He will know that I am alive and he will do exactly what the letter warns him not to. At the time, I meant to tell him not to see the same tapered effortless serenity in death that I had seen. Now I realize that was not what I meant. I didn't write to him just to beg him not to seek solace in death. Instead, I wanted to give him a sign that I had not exchanged the life he gave me for the cold comfort of death. Perhaps I even saw the possibility that we might meet again, that I cared enough about him to-

Quentin was torn away from his thoughts as another student taking the familiar route to Harvard in the opposite direction bumped into his shoulder.

Shreve.

Quentin’s gaze met his roommate’s for a second, then Shreve averted his eyes and muttered a rushed apology and continued walking rapidly, clutching the letter and shaking violently and weeping uncontrollably. Quentin remained rooted in his place, staring after Shreve with concern.

What have I done? He couldn't even tell it was me. Blinded by tears and convulsed by sobs. I did this. Somehow smaller than his actual height and breadth, shrunk in despair. His lowered brooding face so similar to my own. What have I done? I escaped my own suffering only to bestow it upon him. Should I run after him, telling him I am still here, loving him? Force him to look into my face and let him know that I chose to live because of him?
No, I can't tell him yet. Then Harvard could find out and tell Mother and Father that I am still alive. Then I would be trapped again in the cemetery of my upbringing with a cracked gravestone saying nothing of love. That would do no good for either of us. Better for me to wait. While I wait, I will do what I can to stop the immoral design wherever I see it. Perhaps then we can conquer it. He will discover the truth soon enough. All he needs to do is wait for the second letter.

Chapter End Notes

Direct quotes:
Reference to “When he put the pistol in my hand I didn’t. That’s why I didn’t” (The Sound and the Fury 98)

“Versh told me about a man mutilated himself” (The Sound and the Fury 143)

Reference to “yes yes lots of times with lots of girls” (189)

Reference to “if i could tell you we did it would have been so” (220)

“that entire fecundity of dragons’ teeth” (Absalom, Absalom! 214)

Were you surprised? :)
Was it too obvious? Not obvious enough?

Note: I do not claim that Quentin has gender dysphoria or identifies as a woman. Neither do I want to stereotype his homosexuality by feminizing him. Rather, this is a way of using his emasculated identity in the novels to explain what happened on June 2.
A startling revelation

Chapter Summary

In the midst of WWI, Shreve tries to understand the meaning of the second letter.

Chapter Notes

Shreve’s POV
italics are his thoughts

TW for suicidal thoughts/ideation and anger at suicide attempt, more explicit content

Shreve/OC

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I don’t know,’ Quentin said.

‘All right,’ Shreve said. ‘Maybe I don’t either. Only. Jesus, some day you are bound to fall in love. They just wouldn’t beat you that way. It would be like if God had got Jesus born and saw that He had the carpenter tools and then never gave Him anything to build with them. Don’t you believe that?’

‘I don’t know,’ Quentin said. He did not move. Shreve looked at him. Even while they were not talking their breaths in the tomblike air vaporized gently and quietly”

Absalom, Absalom! (259-260)

Five Years Later

Canadian Expeditionary Forces

France, June 2, 1915

“Don’t go looking for me?”

The next day found a sleep-deprived Shreve sitting on his bed, still holding the open letter with its ambiguous message. In the dark curiously quiet hours of the time between night and early morning, Shreve could not read the words, but his endless cyclical repetition of the phrase had emblazoned the sentence in his mind.

What could he possibly mean by that? Jesus, not only did he abandon me, leaving me alone in this limbo of violent suffering; he actually had the audacity to try to stop me from ending my prolonged and now isolated torture. For God’s sake, did he really believe that I would follow him to that early grave? Did he view me as the impulsively loyal Pyramus to his tortured Thisbe? Little did he know how right he was. How often I thought of it. How easy, how simple, it would be. The possibility was
always there, the temptation of the blade of a knife or the coil of the rope, a way out. Jesus, it would be so effortless now, in the constant blasting of cannons and firing rifles. Walking onto the battlefield to join him in a matter of seconds. Finished. Yet I did not.

Glancing up from the letter, Shreve caught sight of the newspaper on the side table, the photograph still compellingly and eerily potent in its stark black and white image. His enraptured focus on the picture reminded him of the way that Quentin had stared at the letter all those years before; an inanimate document had dragged him back in time, disregarding the miles and years of separation. Shreve likened the power of his evocation to the suffusion of the South into Quentin’s life. The only prominent difference was that Shreve’s mind was already immersed in a flood of thoughts about his roommate without the need for the picture.

*Don’t go looking for me. Trying to save me from death, prevent me from committing that same self-inundation of liberation.* Shreve’s spine straightened from its formerly hunched position and he snatched the newspaper to examine it more closely. *Or is that not what you meant.*

Looking more closely at the faces of the photographed people, he realized what had been so disconcerting about the image. He could understand his initial confoundment in identifying the source of his unsettled reaction to the photograph.

The setting placed the body out of context, creating an insurmountable disconnection which concluded in disbelief. The body itself could not have been more unfamiliar, as if it were a mirage intended to deceive the viewer. The long skirt and blouse were a false optical illusion leaving the impression of a distinctly curvaceous figure, a voluptuous shape which Shreve knew did not exist. It was the eyes that betrayed the identity - the intense smoldering moral indignation - an outrage directed both at the rapacious evil of international war and (as only Shreve knew) the indomitable desolate American South.

*Damn you, Quentin Compson,* Shreve was awestruck at his revelation. *What have you done now? So that’s what you did. Led everyone to believe you were dead, while you were off promenading around disguised as a woman? Escaping the iron grasp of your parents and the design while disparaging any force reminiscent of the same unscrupulous incentives. But you had to deceive all of us in the process. Do something so extreme that no one would question it. Not even I doubted that you killed yourself, though now I see that I should have. After all, the wild beast didn’t actually kill Thisbe.*

*You clever bastard,* Shreve thought as he was reduced to uncontrollable hyperventilating. His outburst of laughter verged on sobbing, and indeed he himself could not tell if he was crestfallen or elated at his discovery.

*You beautiful cunning scoundrel,* he couldn’t believe how he had been deceived. *You found a way to evade your own distressing destiny in drowning yourself, then found a way to avoid death as well. Mr and Mrs Compson never would’ve thought to look for a girl. You didn’t have to worry about an undesired marriage in which you would return to your accustomed corpse-like state. Not anymore. You left the South behind and began anew. You left us all behind to start a new life, albeit in a restrictive skirt, but nonetheless a free life. You had to make us believe you were dead, then none of us would have noticed you even if we passed one another walking down the same street.*

As the idea passed through his mind, Shreve suddenly realized where else he had seen the figure from the photograph. His hysteric intensified as fuming fury surpassed any and all other emotions. His thoughts boiled over in uncontrolled seething rage, gushing out in a stream of resentful incandescent words.

*You scheming perfidious crafty astute charlatan.* Shreve became indignant with comprehension; his
breathing was reduced to panting, and he was unaware that he was verbalizing his outraged thoughts.

You cagey duplicitous bewitching swindler. Swindled not my wealth, you knew I couldn't have cared less about that. No, you had to swindle yourself away, away from the world and away from me. Stole from me the only thing I cared for in this life, my only reason for living, even if you might not have known it.

You elusive ravishing son of a bitch, he seethed. You saw me that day. Jesus, we touched even. I just kept walking, blinded by rivers of tears and unable to confront the reality of your death.

Because I didn't know it then. I scarcely even met your eyes, only long enough to see the steely resistant gleam. Even if I had looked longer, I doubt I would have been able to understand who you were. I was too visionless in denial and grief to know it then. But you did. You must have seen what it did to me. That your death destroyed me. For God's sake, that second letter even proves that you knew how it would affect me. All it would have taken was a hand on my shoulder, touching my skin, the familiar connection. Then I would know it.

Then you would be wiping the tears from my face and saying that everything would be all right. Using our language from all the cold snowy sleepless Harvard nights, saying ‘All right all right all right’, though this time not to silence my opposing voice but to soothe my unsolicited sobbing. Christ, you could have saved me then and you didn't.

You let me believe that I was the one who failed to save you. I didn't know then that you had saved yourself and deserted me in the process. Perhaps you yourself didn't even know what you had done to me. But you saw me. Looked straight into my agonized face my streaming eyes and continued with your plan. Lounging about a bedroom in a gown and slippers such as women wear, safe from the ghostly shadows of graves that had always plagued your mind. Serene and untroubled in your new life - a new life without me.

At this point, Shreve was in such a thought- and emotion-induced frenzy that he did not notice John Ibbetson sitting down on the bed beside him until the other man spoke.

“Good Lord, McCannon! What’s gotten into you?”

Though the Lieutenant’s statement was crass, it was warranted by the Captain’s complete deviation from his typical witty nonchalance. Shreve himself could sense how his demeanor had changed in the past five years, culminating in his current outraged distress. Perhaps he had unwittingly adopted the introverted, sulking, and volatile personality of the person whom he had believed to be drowned until this point.

The irony of it, Shreve thought bitterly, though his hyperventilating subsided as the man beside him began to rub soothing circular motions into his back. We have switched positions, departing from our own natures and each assuming the behavior of the other. Compensation for the lack of one another’s presence, as necessary for the deep breathing as oxygen-rich air.

Their attitudes were as converse to their respective temperaments as the chilled clean Northern wind was to the static ashen smoke of Mississippi. Shreve’s newly adopted shaking brooding character had formerly been Quentin’s. As far as Shreve could tell, Quentin’s recently acquired vibrant glowing expression (perceptible only through the printed photograph) was formerly Shreve’s cherubic rosy levity.

How the tables have turned.
Shreve held himself above the other man, who had moved from sitting erect to lying prone on the bed, his legs resting on the Canadian’s shoulders. Despite his intimate physical closeness with Ibbetson, Shreve’s mind transposed his body across the vast ocean separating him from the subject of his thought.

*I used to be the one to point out the hypocrisy instilled in you by your forefathers. Now, not only have you permanently rejected their ideas, but you have begun to point out the moral flaws of a political and economic system. An anti-war activist and a socialist. Not to mention a homosexual disguised as a woman. What would your reactionary redneck Mississippi family say if they saw you now?

*I suppose infuriating them was your aim all along, though. All your life you had been searching for a way to rebel against them. And now you have found it. You are speaking out not only against the defeated spurious region from whence you came, but against the entire country, world even, which adheres to that unflagging design. Jesus, you might not know it, but you are even criticizing me for my participation in the war. I used to be the one to point out the hypocrisy of the place you came from. Now, you have realized that it is not only an affliction of the American South. The design permeates the globe - sometimes stealthy and secretive, sometimes violently bloody - spreading the immoral disease. You shun those who willingly take part in the War, viewing them as blind adherents to the design. Including me. What would you think if you knew?

Shreve’s shaking finally stopped as he climaxed, the man beneath him stilling as well. The room, however, was still trembling with the culminating explosions of war overhead.

“C’mon,” John said, still slightly breathless. “Let’s get ready to go. You can’t afford to be late, what with all the time you took off yesterday.”

Shreve did not answer, too immersed in a newfound determination to survive.

*You say the War is like the South. You were able to defeat the South. Maybe I can do the same. I thought that I could not give you a reason to survive, but maybe I did. You certainly have given me the will to make it through this war. Now I have my own reason to keep living.

Even the earth-shattering thunder of war could not shake his new conviction. He thought about the war but mostly his thoughts concerned what he intended to do after the war. The war which he was now convinced he would beat.

*Perhaps Spoade was right after all. Maybe it is time for me to get myself a Southern bride.

Chapter End Notes

Direct quotes:
“All right all right all right” (Absalom, Absalom! 179)

“Lounging about a bedroom in a gown and slippers such as women wore” (253)
An international design

Chapter Summary

Even the leftist political gatherings can’t prevent the (re)appearance of Southern ghosts.

Chapter Notes

Quentin’s POV
Italics are his thoughts

I don’t own Helen Keller

TW for unwanted advances and mentions of racism (through criticism of racism)

Brief Quentin/OC

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Strike Against War”

January 5, 1916

“The future of the world rests in the hands of America. The future of America rests on the backs of 80,000,000 working men and women and their children. We are facing a grave crisis in our national life. The few who profit from the labor of the masses want to organize the workers into an army which will protect the interests of the capitalists. You are urged to add to the heavy burdens you already bear the burden of a larger army and many additional warships. It is in your power to refuse to carry the artillery and the dread-noughts and to shake off some of the burdens, too, such as limousines, steam yachts and country estates. You do not need to make a great noise about it. With the silence and dignity of creators you can end wars and the system of selfishness and exploitation that causes wars. All you need to do to bring about this stupendous revolution is to straighten up and fold your arms”

~ Helen Keller

Carnegie Hall, New York

January 5, 1916

As Helen Keller’s slow annunciated final words resounded throughout the room, the crowd of spectators erupted in applause like a flock of starlings breaking into flight. Paralyzed in hopeful amazement, Quentin watched the woman who had graduated Radcliffe ten years before him descend from the stage of Carnegie Hall. Her involvement in the anti-war movement and the IWW reflected his recent opposition to global injustice, however what truly attracted him to her was her ability to escape from her own unscrupulous Confederate ancestry that mirrored his own. He remained
anchored in his spot as the sea of onlookers disbanded in waves.

She must have realized it too, thinking, that the design which we believed to be only the foundation of the South is not just regional but international in its scope. Even blind and deaf, she was able to escape from the smoldering implacable wistaria-reeking cinders of the design. She left Alabama only to discover that the design would haunt her wherever she went; she found that she could not escape the river of bloodshed which flows not only in the United States, but runs throughout the world, connecting people and countries in its pillaging violence and savage exploitation.

The entire world has been reduced to a theatre for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty, following the same vain illusion as the South. That demonic corrupted belief was not only invoked in the building of plantations on the bodies of murdered slaves, but it was also used to justify the exploitation of countries and their peoples in the formation of voraciously powerful nations. The plantation owners enslaved their chattel - slaves not chained together in tens but packaged within entire countries - so many years ago. So much time has passed since their initial act of subjugation that these plantation owners, these established global powers, are supported in prolonging their ravaging imperialist demolition.

Yes, the authority of countries like Great Britain and the United States is not questioned; they remain comfortable with their continued naval supremacy and white columned mansions. All the while, they receive support in the down-looking, giving them the power to turn away the boy at the door and send him to enter through the back. And Germany, Sutpen, the boy-symbol at the door, all off to a late start in competing for the blood-spattered coin necessary to the forwarding of that design.

With all the incessant brawling between the world’s plantation owners and the boys seeking to attain the wealth and status of their rivals, no one thought to notice their slaves. They are the persecuted tyrannized specimens of humanity; they are people with no choice but to labor arduously without reward to construct the plantations which they know they will never own. Not only the people of Africa, stolen from their homes torn from their families beaten into subjugation, but Asia and South America and all of the colonial assets of the established landowning class. The working people here and around the globe are repressed murdered coerced into compliance by the oppressive avaricious design. Given no other choice but to bear the burden of a fate that holds nothing for them, they are even forced to sacrifice their lives in the name of a nation that provides them with nothing but destitution.

Quentin began to make his way through the receding crowd in the hope of speaking to Helen Keller, the woman with whom he shared a strikingly common experience. He believed that perhaps she would be able to tell him how to resist the pervasive relentless design.

Once she became aware of the vast scope of humanity’s corruption, she found the renewal. The one Shreve told me about all those years ago. She was not only able to flee, but now she is working against the design in the realization that its immorality consumes the entire earth. If only she could advise me, show me how to use my own rebirth to counteract systemic depravity. She could tell me how to bring about the revolution which will end the violence terror bloodshed which I have spent all my time trying to escape, yet always haunted by the-

Quentin’s thoughts were disrupted by the gentle touch of a hand on his shoulder.

“Dont I know you from somewhere?”

There was an oddly familiar quality in the polite measured Southern cadence of the voice, but Quentin could not place it. Remembering the clothes and the wig and the makeup, he composed himself before turning around to face the man.
Nothing could have prepared him for the sight of a man who had not crossed his mind for six years. Quentin nearly lost control of his bearings as he was overcome by a tide of suspended emotions regarding the man before him.

*Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Still so charming and captivating after all these years. Dalton Ames. His shirt still makes his face so brown his eyes so blue. I wonder why he - the fine figure of the modern Southern man - has come here. Has he deserted the South as I have? Given up taking young girls’ virginities for frequenting anti-war protests in the North? Is he as disillusioned with the South’s defeated ashen fury as I am?*

I suppose it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if he hates the South like I do. He already thinks he knows me from somewhere. If he recognizes me, he could spread word that I am still alive. Then Mother and Father would know, and I would be trapped and sunk and doomed. My new life would be reneged and I would have only death as I did for those first twenty years. My coffin would be sealed and I would be stuck inside with only the suffocating ashes of my decomposing body smoking in the spurious rage of the tomb.

Quentin realized that he had left the other man’s question hanging in the air like the pervading odour of honeysuckle in the humid static gloom, an aroma which he thought he had left behind forever until this moment.

“No, I don't believe so,” he responded in the high breathy Northern intonation which had become progressively easier to feign.

Dalton’s brow furrowed in speculation as he (Dalton) replied in a seductive tone that Quentin had overheard far too many times in conversations between the man and his sister Caddy.

“I can’t help but think I’ve seen those mesmerizing eyes before. But if you insist that we’ve never met, we could take this opportunity to get to know one another.”

Despite the suggestive and charming allure in Dalton’s words, Quentin could not help but feel that the man meant well and perhaps wanted nothing more than to talk. Quentin could tell that he certainly was not the same man who had abandoned his pregnant sister after taking her virginity, though his (Quentin’s) change in opinion might have stemmed from his departure from assuming the conventional role of being the Galahad (half-baked as Herbert had said) who wanted to protect his family’s perceived purity. Now, he felt no allegiance to his family’s rotting public image because it had never been pure; it had been constructed through spilling the blood of innocent black slaves and was therefore antithetical to any illusion of purity.

Although Quentin was genuinely curious to learn how his former self-described enemy had changed, he knew that he couldn’t stand to take a risk. Even with only a quick glance, Dalton had nearly penetrated Quentin’s female disguise. With no ambition of having his new life reduced to cremated dust, he decided that he needed to dissipate as quickly as possible.

“I’m sorry, but I really must be going.”

Averting his eyes in an apologetic motion intended to avoid further recognition, Quentin excused himself and disappeared into the crowd. Dalton started after him, not aggressively, but with the hasty confusion of being unable to place where he had seen the reticent taciturn mannerisms before. Despite his persistence in discovering why the demure demeanor was so familiar, Dalton quickly lost Quentin in the rippling masses of people.

Looking behind him, Quentin could tell that he had nearly evaded his pursuer. He was fairly confident in his escape when he suddenly slammed into a hard wall of a man. He apologized
briskly and continued to rush away, only to be stopped by a firm unrelenting grip around his wrist.

“Need some help, sweetheart?” the man who Quentin had bumped into only moments before did not relinquish his hold. In his other hand he held a smoking cigarette with the all of the nonchalance of a libidinous tomcat. Quentin raised his deflected gaze to survey the other man. Even with his added height in heels, he felt his posture diminish in comparison to the towering build of the stranger.

Just exactly like Shreve, he thought, ignoring the prying scrutiny in the man's eyes. If he were here and had not vanished, swept away with the cool cleansing alpine draft of Canadian wind. The familiar broad tall frame hulking over my own, though nothing of his (Shreve's) warmth about the face or the cheeky and gently mocking glimmer in his eyes behind his spectacles.

“Sweetheart,” the formidably huge man spoke again. “Turtledove. Turtledove - that suits you. You look as if you could use some help. Lover's quarrel, is it?”

Quentin only nodded slightly in response, not paying attention as the still-unnamed man wrapped his arm around his shoulder and escorted him through the undulating crowd, still deluged with memories of his roommate.

If only he were here now, he could take me up in his pink hairless robust arms. He could whisk me away to a land undamaged by the design and I would never have to see any of my ghosts again. Not Dalton Ames. Not Caddy. Not Mother or Father. Not even the harrowing shades of Sutpen and Henry and Charles Bon. He would embrace me and then I could finally breathe clean Canadian mountain air and be free of the stench of the South’s attenuating miasma forever. He could even help me work to permanently assuage the bloody flooding river of war and violence and exploitation that gushes across the world.

Quentin emerged from the fog of reminiscence to see the stranger directing a possessive and scathing look at Dalton, the latter of whom still looking thoroughly bewildered. The man’s clasp on his shoulder did not loosen as he guided a dazed Quentin outside.

“I suppose I should introduce myself,” the man finally surrendered his hold. “Edward Carlyle, professional rescuer of damsels in distress.”

Quentin remained silent, unsure of whether to follow his instinctive urge to leave or to hear what the self-proclaimed chivalrous knight had to say. Expediently, he was given no chance to decide, because Carlyle had his hand laced into the wig and was pulling Quentin’s face close. Just before Carlyle met his lips, Quentin turned his face and pushed the other man away.

“You don't know who I am,” he whispered in refusal, though still in a higher pitch than usual. “You don't want to do this.”

“Please,” Carlyle immediately countered with the same irreverent nonchalance as before. “I know you’re not a woman. That makeup and skirt can only conceal so much.”

Quentin couldn't prevent the gaping slack-jawed stare he gave the newly acquainted man. He had spoken with Dalton Ames on numerous occasions, and he (Dalton) had only been able to vaguely recognize Quentin and had certainly shown no sign of suspecting that he might not be a woman. This man (Carlyle, he calls himself) had been able to see through the veil in a matter of minutes.

“How . . . what-”

“Quit gawking, Turtledove,” Carlyle smoothly retorted. Quentin closed his mouth but remained stunned in astonishment.
“Suffice to say that I have an acutely developed eye for spotting enticing prey,” Carlyle continued rather arrogantly. “Speaking of which, I don’t believe you’ve given me your name yet. Your real name.”

Quentin was still too shocked by the man’s shrewdness to even think of the possible repercussions before stumbling over his own name.

“Q-Quentin C-Compson.”

“Sweetheart, the stuttering is endearing, but you don’t have anything to be frightened of. I won’t tell anyone about your little secret. Say, your name sounds familiar. Compson, was it?”

Quentin looked away again, thinking, he doesn’t seem to know who I am. At the very least, he clearly doesn’t have any connection to the smoking remains of the South with that accent. Maybe I could tell him. It would be such a relief, to have someone to share the burden of my haunted past and concealed present. He already knows my name. He will have heard about what I did. Or rather, what I didn’t do.

But Quentin did not have to provide any answer because Carlyle had already answered his own question.

“Compson… Isn’t that the Harvard freshman who jumped off a bridge more than half a decade ago?”

Quentin, filled with a rushing river of relief in sharing his secret, met Carlyle’s eyes with his face still lowered and raised an eyebrow.

“Ah, I see. They never did find his body. And now I have.”

Carlyle approached Quentin once again with his hand extended.

“Please, call me Edward. Well Quentin, now that I know who you are, why don’t I finish where I left off?”

Quentin, charged with the electric euphoria of having someone know his past and accept him for it, remained immobilized in rapturous inebriation as Carlyle (Edward, he says) raised the downcast face to his own. The larger man crashed their lips together with a surge of unfettered blazing ardor, but it was not this breaking wave which the smaller of the two men was swept away by. Instead, Quentin was plunged beneath the surface of a vast tempestuous ocean of roiling recollection.

Nearly six years have passed and I can still feel the echoing ghostly breath of his touch. It lingers with each inhalation, reminding me that it is the only reason I am here. Without it, I would not be caressed by the pristine zephyr of life but beyond all human touch in the cold lifeless lurking watery depths.

When he touched me. His rubescent strapping arms radiated warmth in the cold iron darkness. No, not when they touched me I died. I didn’t die when he touched me. I breathed for the first time. His touch was like a gust of alpine wind, unpolluted by the smoking ruinous ashes of the Southern funeral pyre. He gave me crisp clean air exhaled from the winds of glacial mountains. When he touched me, I drew my first breath. I lived for the first time.

Edward continued to kiss Quentin, whose mind remained stuck in the cobwebs of time six years behind his body. When he touched me, I thought that I couldn’t live. I even saw death as the ultimate solution, the final escape.
Then I learned that I could be reborn, evading the design of my Father and forefathers in another life. How ironic that the very person who gave me the will to start anew is absent from the revived existence he created. He is no more a part of my life than the furiously smoldering embers of the South which I sought to escape.

If only he were here, I could give him my love not only written but finally effectuated, unimpeded by the ashen ghosts of the design. What would he say now? Maybe he would speak with that flippant tenderness, ‘Jesus, it took you long enough to decide. Now I can finally choose lechery.’ And I would let him. I wouldn’t flee as I did before. I would accept his touch as if it were life-giving air in a dark cavern of poisonous fuming smog. Yet he is not here, and I may never see him again.

Chapter End Notes

Direct quotes:
“his face so brown his eyes so blue” (The Sound and the Fury 113)

“A theatre for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty” (Absalom, Absalom! 202)

The rest of Helen Keller’s speech can be found here:
http://gos.sbc.edu/k/keller.html
A portentous masquerade

Chapter Summary

Tension comes to a boil.

Featuring . . .
• Shreve nerding out over doctor stuff and kind of being an asshole
• Gratuitous imagery to set the mood
• And DRAMA

Chapter Notes

Shreve’s POV
Italics are his thoughts

Ernest Amory Codman is a historical figure - I don’t own him

TW for slut-shaming and references to suicide and PTSD

Quentin/OC

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Statement to the Court: Upon Being Convicted of Violating the Sedition Act”

September 18, 1918

“While there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free”

~Eugene V. Debs

Boston, Massachusetts

Estate of Ernest Amory Codman

1918

The last dying hour of light passed rapidly, as if time were dictated not by the movement of hands on a dial, but instead accelerated in pace with the impatient anxious minds of humanity. In the closing glimmering crepuscular rays of sunlight, the New England air was laden with the tense condensation of humidity that precedes a sudden downpour. No one knew it, but the haze in the fading sunset was not a forecast for a tranquil cloudburst. No, it was not a warning for a gentle sprinkling of rain; it was the looming harbinger of a cataclysmic thunderstorm.

Shreve turned away from the falling dusk visible through the window. He regarded his opulent
surroundings with a mixture of reacclimatizing shock and reverent appraisal. Elegantly dressed men and women filled the vast luxurious expanse of the ballroom, dancing like a swirling ocean glittering with vibrant colors. The crystal chandeliers began to glow, flickering with electricity as the light outside dimmed.

Not a week ago, Shreve had been drenched in mud, surrounded by lower class soldiers fighting killing dying under the storm of firing rifles and exploding cannons. Charming the sophisticated upper echelons of Boston society was a volte-face from his crude and grueling interactions in the so-called Great War. Shreve shifted his attention from the gleaming filigree on the imposing walls to the only recognizable face in the myriad waves of masked guests, the host himself.

*Dr Ernest Amory Codman,* he thought. *The first surgeon to implement a follow-up system to improve the quality of health care. He created the End Result Hospital to ensure a one month observance of recovering patients. And to think. He invited me here. What have I done to deserve not only his presence but the honor of attending one of the most prestigious events of the year?*

What Shreve failed to realize was that it was not merely his surgical skill that had caught the eye of the more reputable surgeon. Rather, their mutual affinity for crass humor and sensational levity had forged an almost immediate friendship.

“Dr McCannon,” the host approached Shreve with a roguish grin. “Or is it Captain? You look dazed. Did the shellshock finally get to you?”

“C’mon, Dr Codman,” Shreve retorted with a confidence that belied the surge of nervous excitement that always prevailed when speaking with his idol. “It’s just a striking change of scenery from the war. As for the shellshock, as a surgeon you should know that I’m sturdy enough to withstand that.”

“Physically, yes,” Codman conceded. “As for mentally, that remains to be determined. Are you enjoying my party?”

“Naturally,” Shreve replied evenly. “Though I might not, if its host continues to doubt my mental faculties.”

The latter retaliation was accompanied by a playful glint behind the gleaming spectacles, which informed Codman that the comment was only part of their instinctive frivolous banter.

“Tell me, Shreve,” Dr Codman quipped in his suave witty manner. “Have you ever heard the joke about why the Southern wedding ended so fast?”

“No, I cant say that I have,” Shreve said. *Though I nearly took part in a Southern wedding myself, he thought. If you asked Spoade, he’d say I already did. From the moment we met, it was a relationship transcending the bloodlines that governed his life. Spoade called me his husband. I knew better than that. It wasn’t a marriage, not even an elopement. We both wished it could have been. I could have held him in my arms and then carried him away to where none of his ghosts would find us. But you cant have a wedding without the bride. And my bride fled from the altar, leaving the groom behind, wondering what he had done wrong.*

Dr Codman continued with his inadvertent heedless joking, much like Shreve himself would have done.

“They didnt have to change the names on the marriage license.”

“That’s Southerners for you, Ernest,” Shreve laughed. “They’d take incest over miscegenation any
day. Though I must add that it’s the land, not its people, which poses the real problem. A design which drives them to immorality. My roommate at Harvard was from Mississippi, and he wanted nothing more to do with that defeated legacy than I did. All he wanted to do was leave the South for good and all.”

“Interesting,” Dr Codman replied. “Imagine what that would be like. Does he still live in Cambridge?”

But Shreve did not answer. The ornate staircase at the other end of the ballroom magnetized his attention as two backlit figures descended from the conjoining wings. The newly arrived couple could not have been more paradoxical in appearance; the towering burly muscular male outline loomed above the svelte female silhouette. He (Shreve) subconsciously turned completely away from the party’s host to face the shadowed mysterious guests. When the light revealed their chandelier-illuminated masked faces, he was struck with the electric shock of jolting revelation.

So we meet again after all these years. Even this masquerade ball can’t disguise you. At least, not from me. You can cover your face all you want and I would still know it was you. I could recognize those eyes anywhere.

Shreve chuckled to himself, All right all right, maybe the newspaper was an exception. But I figured out that it was you eventually. And I can identify you now. Now, draped in layers of voluptuous bejeweled fabric to obscure your willowy figure, you still can’t hide from me.

Quentin drew nearer on the arm of the tall unidentifiable man, whose gaze fell level with Shreve’s own as he steadily advanced. While the daunting stranger’s eyes remained unnervingly fixated on Shreve’s concealed face, Quentin stared at the floor with the same troubled brooding look which had adorned his expression eight years before.

Maybe he doesn’t recognize me, Shreve worried. We’ve both changed since the cold dark sleepless nights spent lying beside one another at Harvard. For God’s sake, he’s sauntering around dressed as a woman now, sashaying on the arm of some overly protective stranger. The war changed me as well, though my own maturation has been of a more permanent nature. When I look in the mirror, there is no flush of youthful levity, only my haunted eyes behind the spectacles. A face, like his, harrowed by memories of death and lost love. Yes, maybe that’s it, maybe he can’t tell that it’s me.

As they faced one another, Shreve bowed and extended his hand to Quentin’s escort with brazen forward defiance.

“Shrevlin McCannon,” he stated assertively. “Former Captain, Royal Army Medical Corps.”

Quentin stayed silent, but his face instantly rose from its downcast state with horrified amazement blazing in his eyes.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Captain,” the tall man abased with sickening saccharinity. “Edward Carlyle. And might I introduce my companion, Miss Elizabeth Marlowe.”

Elizabeth Marlowe? Shreve coughed, struggling to choke back his laughter at the alias his friend had chosen. Elizabeth Marlowe - really Quentin? Is that the best you could come up with?

Shocked from his stupor, Quentin bowed his head and began to curtsy, but the Canadian’s next words cut him short.

“We’ve met.” Shreve deadpanned. “And you and I both know that’s not her real name.”

Still poised in a half-curtsy, Quentin jerked his head up in alarm. He glanced around, darting eyes
scanning the room to see if anyone had overheard this indiscretion. Seeing no sign that anyone had noticed, his gaze pierced through Shreve’s mask and conveyed his thoughts in an intent stare.

Quentin's silent glare was so unchanged since the nights at Harvard that Shreve had to remind himself of their current surroundings. His smoldering smokey eyes melted through the spectacles with a look of repressed admonition, telling Shreve, ‘In all this time, haven’t you learned how to control your mouth yet? Now it is time for you to stop talking.’

*For Christ’s sake, Quentin,* Shreve thought. *You have the nerve to tell me what to do? Don’t bother trying to stop me from having my say. Jesus, these eight years without you were unbearably slow. I need to be with you. I’ve waited long enough.*

”May I have this dance, Elizabeth?” Shreve bowed and extended his hand to Quentin with a debonair flourish.

Quentin remained silent as he took Shreve’s proffered hand with a backward glance at Carlyle, whose jealous rage was quickly seeping through his slick veneer.

Then Quentin turned back to Shreve, his softly glowing look still warning his partner not to flaunt his victory in front of Carlyle. Shreve took this unspoken advice, but he couldn’t repress the triumphant gleam in his eyes as they glided to the center of the ballroom.

With his arm around the slender waist which the dress had widened into an hourglass shape at the hips and bust, Shreve pulled Quentin into the rhythm of the music as they fell into step with the dancers around them. The pair spun into the sea of dancing guests, eyes locked on one another, not exchanging a single word. Somehow, in the moment both of them had been anticipating for eight years, there were no words to express their festering pain, bereavement, and longing.

*All these years and we still don’t know what to say,* Shreve thought as he held Quentin, who kept averting his gaze, in his arms as if he would never let him go. Shreve raised a gentle hand to lift his partner’s downcast face, thinking, *All this time and you still won’t look me in the eyes? What troubles you so much that you can’t even meet my face without looking away?*

At the touch of Shreve’s hand, Quentin looked back up. Through the mask, Shreve could see the aching desire in his eyes, flickering tendrils of passion that he (Quentin) could not extinguish except by averting his eyes.

*So that’s why you won’t look at me,* Shreve concluded, still lifting Quentin’s chin so that their eyes met in a flash of connection. *You don’t want him to see how you still love me even after all this time. Isn’t my love worth more to you than staying silent just to please some stranger? Why can’t you just tell him? We could still be together if you did. He can’t have that much power over you; it’s your decision what you do with your life, after all.*

Despite his frustration, he remained uncharacteristically silent as they danced, content with finally seeing and embracing Quentin even if they did not speak. He could feel his former roommate breathing where his hand lingered at his waist, ribs expanding and contracting with the beat of the music; he could tell that there was even less flesh than he remembered, flesh which Quentin couldn’t afford to lose in the first place. He longed to ask about the eight years, what had happened to erode the already too-skinny man into a nothing more than a paper-thin sliver underneath his clothes.

*You feel too light, almost insubstantial, like you would blow away with even the slightest gust of wind. Like you would slip from between my fingertips as I reached out for you. Did he do this to you? Starving you to emaciation, all part of his scheme to make you dependent on him? Did he force you into this, keeping you complacent and reliant and within his nefarious grasp. You must not be*
happy with him; I can see it in your resistant eyes and your attenuated figure. There’s no chance that you would subject yourself to this, unless you really have moved on, clinging to his side and leaving me behind for good?

Shreve knew he couldn’t say any of this. He was already treading on thin ice around his sensitive friend, and any impulsive misstep would send him crashing into the icy water. Asking probing questions about the nature of Quentin and Carlyle’s relationship would most certainly create upheaval, so Shreve kept his mouth shut. However, his patience had worn away when the song began to draw to a close. By the time the final notes were ringing in the air, Quentin would no longer look him in the eyes, his face brooding at the floor.

“Jesus, won’t you say anything?” Shreve burst out as they left the dance floor. “Nothing at all? Do you not have a single word to say to me after eight years of not seeing each other?”

Quentin just sulked without glancing up in acknowledgment, not even bothering to reprimand Shreve as they returned to Carlyle. The other man had composed himself by the time they came back, his envy hidden beneath ingratiating. They stood as they formerly had, Carlyle wrapping his arm around Quentin and smirking at Shreve, who glared at both of them. Currents of electric tension radiated between the three of them, and Shreve couldn’t stand it anymore.

“I would ask you for another dance, Elizabeth,” Shreve could no longer keep the sarcasm from his voice. “I didn’t tell you how stunningly ravishing you look in that dress. Truly a sight for sore eyes. But it’s clear you already have your sights set on another man.”

He knew it was too harsh, but it had worked. Finally, Shreve had forced Quentin to look at him. Quentin glared at him, no longer lightly admonishing him for his inability to control his mouth as he had before; his eyes erupted into seething flames of blazing righteous outrage.

“Calm down, Captain,” Carlyle smoothed over with only a hint of jealousy. “That’s no way to speak to a lady. With your manners, that dance must have been catastrophic. Now, let’s try to be civil. You said you served in the war. I’m sure Elizabeth would love to hear all about that.”

Shreve could sense the manipulative undertone in Carlyle’s reference to the First World War, which had caused Quentin to flush in indignation. The slight quiet man spoke for the first time, with only a faint lilt in the inflection to trace his voice to the Southern land from which he had fled. His soft-spoken words were muted, but his quiet anger resonated with each crisp punctuation.

“Yes Shreve, tell me about the War,” his eyes burned into Shreve’s with unresolved passion. “What was it like there. What did they do there. How do they survive now. Why do they live at all.”

Quentin had almost precisely echoed Shreve’s own words from eight years ago. Startled to hear his own criticism of the South relayed back to him, Shreve returned Quentin’s glare exactly as he had on the nights spent discussing the implosion of Thomas Sutpen’s design.

So you really are upset with me, Shreve thought. You finally decide to speak, and all you do is just mock me with my own words? What you can’t understand is that I wasn’t fighting for the immoral values of a decrepit country. Not like Henry and Bon. But maybe you were right about the War. Maybe war is the culmination of the decaying nature of man. It is an obliterating vortex that consumes human lives, devastating countries and eradicating all faith in human virtue.

“Say what you like,” Shreve retorted, omitting his thought process because he knew that Quentin would understand. “At least I can admit what you couldn’t.”

The rest of Shreve’s sentence was left unspoken, but both of them knew what he was referring to. I
hate the War just as you hate the South, even if you couldn't say so. Just as before, Quentin gave no response to Shreve's audacious statement.

Shreve had had enough of Quentin's stubborn silence. Though his aim was not to provoke or harm the other man with his scorn, he was overwhelmed with years of suppressed resentment and spoke brazenly without thinking.

“It’s not only the war that bothers you, is it?” Shreve asserted boldly. “Are you angry that I left you here when I went to war? Because I thought you were dead. You made me think you were gone forever. You can glare at me all you want, but you left me first.”

Quentin just pouted in resignation at the parquet floor; Carlyle drew his sullen wispy form close to his own massive body, as if to ease his obvious distress by pulling him away from Shreve.

“Captain,” Carlyle spoke in an obsequious tone which was quickly wearing away at Shreve’s patience. “Try not to upset her. Please, we could discuss something other than-”

“And now you cavort around brooding in silence, as if you were the only one who was hurt by all this?” Shreve was not finished, although he lowered his voice in hushed anger. “Do you have any idea what you did to me? There wasn’t a single day when I didn't think of it. You. Wondering what I did to make you feel like you had no reason to live, unable to escape the memories of you, aching to join you. But, despite how the ghost of you tormented me, I didn't. I survived.”

Tears were now running from Quentin’s eyes while Carlyle tried in vain to console him by enclosing him with both arms, but Quentin pushed away from him so that he was facing Shreve.

“Please,” Carlyle pleaded, still trying to turn Quentin away from Shreve. “Can't you see what you're doing to her?”

“No,” Shreve maintained. “She needs to hear this.”

Quentin’s brimming eyes met Shreve’s with determination not only to hear him out, but to actually listen.

“Then,” Shreve whispered scathingly, bringing his face close to Quentin’s. “I discovered that you had been alive all along, disguised as a woman. Joining the anti-war movement and speaking out against the injustice that reminded you of the South. Even though you weren't dead, you had left me. The moment you were dead to the world, you moved on and left me behind. Jesus, you even touched me that day. The day after you 'died'. You looked into my eyes and must have seen through my tears how your death had killed me. But you said nothing. And you moved on.”

Quentin bristled angrily and opened his mouth as if to protest, but Shreve cut him off.

“And now,” Shreve seethed in a whisper, moving his face so close that their noses were almost touching. “You show up here, unannounced, on the arm of some sleazy man. I’ll admit it, I had my own flings. But I thought you were dead. Those men never meant anything to me because each time I could think of nothing but you. I continued to love you while you began your new life: replacing me with another man, even while knowing that I was alive, waiting for you. You - the Mississippi virgin who eight years ago couldn’t even allow the human touch - show up here, draping yourself across a hulking bear of a man. You’re too gossamer-thin to say anything, leaning on him while I stand here before you, still loving you after all this time.”

And for a moment, Quentin did not try to refute Shreve’s accusations; at Shreve’s final words, his silent stammering stopped, leaving his mouth open in surprise. He raised an astonished hand to his
mouth but still could not seem to hide his amazement. His eyes widened and the outraged glare disappeared, transforming into shocked faintly glimmering hope. Though their faces were already almost touching, Quentin moved dreamily - drifted like a cloud - so that he was closer to Shreve, until Carlyle stopped him.

“Captain,” Carlyle tried to subdue him once again, trying to pull Quentin backward into his own arms. “Elizabeth came here as my guest, and I would greatly appreciate it if you would treat her with the respect she deserves.”

“I can see you truly meant everything you wrote in that letter you sent me,” Shreve ignored Carlyle, directing his sarcasm only to Quentin, who was now crying - not in sadness - but in indignant denial of Shreve’s harsh indictments. And, (though Shreve did not know it), he was crying in the pining despair of finally receiving confirmation of Shreve’s love for him and the fact that he was unable to say anything in return.

Ironically, although Quentin himself could not find the words to express his painful longing, Shreve continued his tirade by repeating Quentin’s own confession from his first letter,

“Undying love and all that. What did you say in the letter? Jesus, I repeated those words to myself enough times to know by now. - ‘I will love you. Always.’ - I can tell. No sooner did you trick me into thinking you were dead, than you began to flirt with any random stranger you happened to seduce.”

His remark, like his previous accusations, was not intended for derogation; his harsh derision concealed the youthful shame of being moved by love. Although Quentin had broken into sobs, Shreve could tell that he realized that his own enraged condemnation originated not from hatred but love. He (Quentin) had always been able to look past Shreve’s impulsive fiery words to the tender affection behind them.

Nonetheless, knowing that Shreve’s lambasting was the product of his love did not prevent Quentin from weeping, his flooding eyes glaring intently into Shreve’s. In his tears, Quentin was not so much showing his distress as he was refusing to comply with his former roommate’s accusatory degradation. Furthermore, the falling tears embodied his relieved desolation in verifying that his love for Shreve was reciprocated, but Carlyle interpreted Quentin’s intransigent tears as a signal for himself to step in.

“Sh-Shreve,” Quentin faltered in a broken tear-choked voice. “D-dont listen to-”

“Our relationship has become quite intimate,” Carlyle ruthlessly went in for the kill. “I suppose you wouldn’t know what Mississippi virgin flesh tastes like, but I can assure you that it’s quite delectable. I speak from experience when I say that it is as sumptuous as you could only imagine.”

“That’s not tr-” Quentin stopped short as Carlyle snatched his arm.

“Hush, Turtledove,” Carlyle coerced. “I’m sorry, Elizabeth and I really must be going. If you would please excuse us, Captain.”
He dragged Quentin upstairs away from Shreve, who, still seething in raging fury, looked after them, immobilized. Quentin turned back to catch Shreve’s eye with a curiously pleading expression.

*Jesus,* Shreve sulked. *Even when you are clearly spending your nights lying beside another man, you can still bewitch me with only one look. For Christ’s sake, I would follow you to the infernal depths of hell if you but looked at me.*

As the pair absconded from his sight, Shreve realized that it was not just the entrancing power of Quentin’s final crying glance that perturbed him. Their facial communication had always betrayed more than their words, and their most recent exchange had left Shreve unsettled. He was unnerved by something further beneath the surface of Quentin’s expression, a kind of imploring request for help.

*All right,* Shreve conceded, unable to reconcile himself with whatever he had detected in Quentin’s final look. *All right. Fine. I’ll follow you one last time. But don’t expect me to do the same for you after this.*

With that, Shreve left the ballroom and ascended the staircase. The clouds outside grew dark and heavy, burgeoning with foreboding in the growing twilight.

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Chapter End Notes

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Direct quotes:
Reference to: “Tell about the South. What’s it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all” (Absalom, Absalom! 142)

“His remark was not intended for flippancy nor even derogation” (220-221)

“The youthful shame of being moved” (225)

Eugene V. Deb’s Full Statement:
https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1918/court.htm
You know how last chapter I said tension would come to a boil?
The pot’s overflowing now.

“Probably by that time he had learned that there were three things and no more: breathing, pleasure, darkness;
and without money there could be no pleasure, and without pleasure it would not even be breathing but mere protoplasmic inhale and collapse of blind unorgasm in a darkness where light never began”

Absalom, Absalom! (240)

Two pairs of running eyes met as Quentin looked back at Shreve, who was still simmering in rage, although Quentin now believed that this fury was primarily directed not toward himself, but at the man currently hauling him out of the ballroom. Through the tears trickling in rivulets down his face, Quentin tried to transmit all of his thoughts in one final glance.

Nothing Edward said was true, he conveyed in his stare. I know you’re furious with me, but if you have so much as a glimmer of love left for me as you say you do, listen to me. I still love you. I never stopped. Yours is the only touch I ever accepted. You were the only one who could supply me the strength and will to free myself from the incendiary coffin which was laid out for me by my Father and my Grandfather and all of the implacable ghosts of the South. You touched me and I breathed. And then I knew that, for the first time in my life - I would live.

Quentin tried to fixate on Shreve’s eyes again, but from the growing distance between them he could only make out the chandeliers twinkling in Shreve’s spectacles.

You gave me the very air I breathe. This merged exchange of life-giving breath connects us; vaporizing love commands our lives, transcending even our mutual harbored resentment. After I chose to live, I needed you. You gave me my first inhalation of fresh air unpolluted by smoking Southern smog. When you touched me, I lived for the first time, and I was intoxicated. I couldn’t live without you. And you were gone. You left me.

Now you criticize me for starting my new life without you? You have absolutely no right to hate me
for moving on. You thought I was dead. At least I told you that I loved you. I didn't know you loved me until today. You never told me anything. Even when you discovered that I was still alive, you didn't think to tell me anything. I thought you had left me. But I waited for you nonetheless. And I never stopped.

Quentin tore his gaze from Shreve’s face and caught a glimpse of the world outside the window as Edward Carlyle dragged him up the stairs. The calm dusky clouds had condensed, drawn closer to one another in the overcast sky with the menacing threat of rain.

I thought I had escaped the tear-streaked wedding, thinking, I thought in abandoning the dust-layered smoking cemetery of the South’s ghosts I would escape that design. Yet I did not. So then why did I believe that a renewal would protect me from a precipitated involuntary fate? All of this happened because of that indomitable immoral design. And my attempt to escape the design only made it worse.

I thought that I was free from the reluctant union watered by the fjords of my tears and the falling sorrowful rain. Only now it is not that I am consigned to a loveless marriage. Instead, I am divided from my love by the unfathomable cavernous abyss riven by years of anguished resentment. His (Shreve’s) acrimonious desire for me, the love he lost, fissured this sepulchral chasm. And now he has given up all hope of bridging the ravine, because he mistakenly believes that I moved on, leaving him for another man.

This last thought heaved Quentin from his rumination just as Edward yanked him into one of the many rooms of the mansion, closing the door firmly behind them.

He doesn’t know, Quentin thought. Shreve doesn’t know that I kept loving him. Just as he says he kept loving me, the love I spoke of in that first letter endured. He doesn’t know that I was never with another man, despite what Edward claims. Edward only wanted to kindle his (Shreve’s) fires of rage, trying to tear us apart. After seeing how - even in our storm of fury - we were lured to one another - he (Edward) wanted to break our longing transfixion with one another.

“You’re still a virgin.”

It was a statement, not a question. There was a cold licentious glint in the imposing man’s leer. Quentin lingered in the doorway; he felt like an ant under a magnifying glass. He fidgeted under the much larger man’s surveying stare and wiped the last of his running tears and said nothing.

“Turtledove,” Carlyle regarded Quentin with the same intense appraising scrutiny through his mask, his eyes boring into Quentin’s own with greedy menace. “I’m sorry to have dragged you out of there like that. I could see you were distressed, and your friend back there got a bit reckless with his words. I think the Captain needs a lesson in what is and isn’t his, dont you? Maybe it’s time for us to teach him.”

Quentin stayed flush against the shut door, paralyzed, unable to move, as Edward stood and stalked toward him, tearing off his wig but leaving the mask.

“I was posturing back there, but I have always wondered about how those enticingly gracile limbs would feel wrapped around me,” Edward continued, reaching underneath the dress to rake his meaty hand up Quentin’s inner thigh. “I was often tempted by the thought of how that demure temperament of yours would manifest in bed - there must be some feisty resistance beneath your timid serene front. I’ve seen it in your eyes enough times. I can bring out a side of you that even the Captain hasn’t seen; perhaps a rough arousal can ignite your quiet embers.”

Carlyle’s fingers had almost reached his crotch when Quentin darted sideways in fear of the
larger man’s intentions, but Carlyle trapped him between his beefy muscular arms.

“And now I discover that no one has tried before,” he leered as he kept Quentin from running away.
“I can be the first to venture into the orifices of that limber physique.”

No, Quentin thought as Carlyle ripped off the dress, the torn beads scattering across the floor: showering and pelting the ground like sleet. No, not the first. He touched me. I am still virgin, but he was the first. And I would have let him. I wish I had. I would have let him, if not for that ever-present smoking miasmic gloom pervading my mind, stifling my breathing.

“Skinny little thing, aren’t you?” Edward jabbed at his exposed bony chest with an intrusive finger. Then his fingers were squeezing Quentin’s hips, his stomach, his thighs. “There really isn’t much to you, is there? I suppose that’ll make this easier, though. At least, for me.”

Then his hands were grabbing Quentin, pushing him down onto the bed, roughly grazing his skin, raking down his bare chest.

When he touched me, even as Carlyle pushed him down, his thoughts didn’t stray from Shreve. Eight years have passed and I still remember. Hesitant and light, asking for permission. The cremated smoke cleared with the inbreath of cold crisp clean Canadian air. A billowing waft of alpine wind sweeping away the toxic volcanic ashes of the defeated South. The only one to clear my mind of the deathly fumes of the Southern design. The only one to make me unvirgin.

Quentin startled from his dreamy thoughts of Shreve. Edward was pressing him into the mattress, one massive hand pinning his wrists back above his head, the other forcefully groping him. Quentin was plunged into a familiar circling whirlpool of thought.

Caddy said when they touched me I died.

Now I see what she meant.

Not the gentle compassionate touch warming my skin in the cold New England dark.

Not the fleeting contact of willing limbs illuminated by the snow-gleaming celestial window.

No, not love’s caress to soothe my tremors.

He is restraining me.

My body shaking but not from suppressed desire.

Not desire, I am trembling in fear.

He thrusting me down, fierce furious ferocious.

His dense weight above me as asphyxiating as the oppressive effluvium of incinerated spectral dust.

Under him I am suffocating, dying like Caddy said.

When he touched me-

Carlyle began to undo his own pants, one hand still shackling Quentin’s hands to the headboard. He loomed formidably above Quentin, who struggled beneath him in anguish, kicking his thin legs and twisting his narrow body back and forth. But he couldn’t escape the man’s hold; in addition to some 10 centimeters in height, Carlyle had a minimum of a 35 kilogram advantage of heavily fleshed-out muscle on Quentin.
“I knew I would be able to coax out your smothered fire of defiance,” the heavier man relished in leering self-satisfaction between labored breaths. “He’s not the only one who knows the ardent passion that lies under that quiet demeanor.”

when they touched me i died
i didnt know what caddy meant
not when shreve touched me
i lived then
but now i understand
he is touching me
and i am dying
back to my corpselike existence
deep like i was in the south
the design infiltrates even here
pursuing me wherever i flee
i thought i had escaped but i am
penetrated by his strangling libido
the demon tore violently a plantation
now i am being torn asunder

Edward raised Quentin’s thrashing legs onto his own shoulders with an iron grip. He (Edward) struggled to clench the writhing limbs, but his significant advantage in bulk and strength prevented Quentin from wrenching himself free.

“Fight back as much as you want, Turtledove. You and I both know that you wont be able to escape me,” Carlyle bragged, although he was having difficulty keeping Quentin in place. “You’re too delicate, too weak. If you think that your fragile little body stands a chance against mine, you’ll be sorely disappointed. I like seeing you resist, though. In the end, I will have my way with you, and watching you fight back only makes you more of a pleasure to defile.”

Using Carlyle’s momentary struggle as an opportunity, the defiant constrained man worked to dislodge his hands from the manacled grasp.

he chains me like the design
even here in the north
he is driven by the same lust
the same lecherous greed as the demon
and it is killing me
malignant smoke flooding into my lungs
choking me like the south’s ashen fumes
no breath of purified mountain air
only toxic vapor dragging me south
back to the defeated crypt of death
the unrelenting tomb of my birth and demise
i pleaded why her and not me
but i never begged for this
not the annihilation i had escaped
i said why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin
but i never wanted death
i didn't ask for my life to be taken with my virginity
i have a life now
and love, albeit discarded
and now i know he loves me back
shreve loved me back all along
and he still does
i still have my forsaken love to live for
and i wont die again

Quentin finally wrested his dominant hand free and struck his captor across the face. The stinging slap forced Edward to move, preventing him from impaling the man who had just escaped his hold. Quentin slipped from the bed and ran. Carlyle quickly came to his feet and swung his arms madly at the escapee, who dodged the frenzied lashes of his infuriated tormentor.

“Ah, there it is,” Carlyle gloated with a calmness that contradicted his deranged manic swipes at Quentin. “That blazing fervent outrage. You couldn’t maintain your shy reticent façade forever.”

Wary of the other man’s demonic hysteria, Quentin faced his attacker with steely grey determination as he moved toward the exit. He pushed the door open, vaguely conscious of his naked form but indifferent because his sole worry was escaping the room and the violent man.

“Turtledove,” Edward chided; his voice remained ominously steady as he lunged for Quentin. “Sweet delicate little fledgling. Don’t go flying away just yet. I still haven’t had my way with you.”

Quentin stumbled backward out of Carlyle’s reach and toppled out of the room, only to crash into the solidly built figure entering the room. He had not noticed the oncoming form in the doorway until he collided with it.
He (Quentin) was suddenly acutely aware of how his lack of clothes exposed his mauled naked flesh - his sharply jutting bones, scarred limbs, and the bruises already blossoming on his pale skin.

He came for me after all. Perhaps he even still loves me like he said. But we need to leave.

Shreve caught Quentin, who writhed in his arms, trying to leave the room.

He came. Holding me in his hefty robust powerful arms. No - I cant think of that now. We need to get out of here now. We need to escape.

“Quentin! Oh my God! What the hell did that bastard do to you?”

Receiving no answer, Shreve wrapped his overcoat around Quentin’s shivering bare form not only to subdue the tremors but to cover the emerging bruises on his exposed skin and to protect him from his assailant. Edward was progressively advancing toward both of them in a lingering hedonistic delirium; Shreve protectively stepped in front of Quentin to guard him from the approaching man.

“Ah, so the daring Captain returns,” the crazed man baited. “I’m afraid you’re just moments too late. Arrived just in time to see your precious little darling here deflowered.”

“Shreve, stop,” Quentin grabbed Shreve’s arm and tried to drag him back toward the door. “Dont bother with him. He wants to upset you. We need to leave.”

Quentin tugged Shreve’s hand in an attempt to pull him backward, but Shreve moved forward to crash his fist against Carlyle’s already welted cheek.

“You demonic monstrous son of a bitch,” Shreve pounced on the other man. “If you touch him again, I’ll kill you. What the fuck did you do to him?”

“Oh Captain,” Edward goaded, smirking despite his swelling bruised face. “That’s exactly what I did to him.”

No, Quentin thought as he tried to dissuade his bristling friend. We need to leave now. Dont waste your time on him, Shreve. He wants to provoke you so he can shirk the blame. If you lash out, he can claim self-defense when he attacks you. We need to get out of here.

As Quentin predicted, Edward immediately returned Shreve’s punch with an equally thunderous blow. He brutally continued hitting Shreve, who countered with his own striking rage. Abandoning his hopeless attempt to drag Shreve from the room, Quentin turned his attention to their assailant.

With all of the resolute force he could summon, Quentin wrapped his sinewy arms around Edward’s thick neck and used every centimeter of his being to pull him backward. Finally, he tore Carlyle from where he had been violently pummeling Shreve. Having succeeded in pulling the battering man away, Quentin looked back to where his former roommate lay beaten nearly senseless on the floor.

No, thinking, no no you cant be dead. Not after all you survived. No no you lived through the war you cant be dead now. Not after we were finally reunited. Not after we both found a way to live. Not when we still have a chance. Not after you finally told me you love me.

Quentin lept toward the unconscious body, but he was halted in midair by an inexorable manacled grip on his wrist.

“Turtledove,” Carlyle oozed through bleeding lips. “Did you really think you could escape me that
Blood still trickling down his face, his grip tightened even more as he hauled himself from the floor. Then, surprisingly, he let go of Quentin’s thin-boned wrist. Released from Edward’s iron clasp, Quentin flung himself toward Shreve’s body. Edward began to dress himself, apparently unworried that Quentin would try to flee because of the latter’s weeping concern for his friend and lover.

He seemed equally disinterested in thepliant supple figure which, mere minutes before, he had bruised and ravaged with insatiable lust. But Quentin did not notice this disconcerting change in Carlyle’s objective, too preoccupied with dismay for his fallen friend.

You arent dead. Quentin lay shaking on Shreve’s chest, which was just barely rising and falling. You didn’t die. How could you die when this demon pertinaciously clings to life? He will tear us apart again. He will take me away and you won’t know where we went or even if I am still alive.

As he moved his head, Quentin felt a hard round shape in Shreve’s breast pocket. Tears clouding his vision, he pulled the object out and was shocked to find his broken watch, still spattered with his own blood.

So you kept it after all this time, he thought. You bore the burden of time which I couldn’t. It tormented both of us, but maybe now it can help me. If there were just some way to let you know . . .

Warily glancing up at Carlyle to ensure he was still preoccupied with getting dressed, Quentin took the sharp glass edge of the watch and slashed his wrist in a familiar motion. As the blood flowed in a crimson cascade, seeping onto the cedar floor, he felt confident in his plan.

A third letter, he thought assuredly. I never thought I would need it. But it will help you now.

He had almost finished the last word when his trembling weight was ripped upright without any force on Edward’s part. He discreetly pulled down Shreve’s overcoat sleeve to hide the cut and dropped the watch into his pocket. The newly dressed man towed Quentin, without sympathy for his almost naked vulnerability, downstairs in the direction they had come. Limp after being wracked by sobs, Quentin strained to see into the room where his battered friend still lay and watched the drops of his blood mark their path in satisfaction. Despite his resistance to leaving Shreve behind, he was only able to catch sight of the weeping sky in the window.

He discovered that it was not only raining on his face. Through the rectangle of the window, the rain had begun to come down, gray and solid and slow, making no sound, Quentin not aware yet of just where they were because he had been looking backward in panicked desperation.

When he tore his disconsolate gaze from the lamenting clouds through the glass, Quentin found himself at the top of the stairs above the turbulent sea of guests, whirling and rippling below.

I need to get away from here, he struggled against Carlyle’s iron handcuffs. I have to go back to that room. To him. He’s alive. He’ll wake up any second. If only I could get to him, he wouldn’t have to find me. I’ll go to him and then we can leave this place. Leave everything behind. Edward Carlyle and the destructive war and the spurious design and the ashen smoking ruins of my haunted past. We will leave them and they will all be behind us. We won’t have to worry about the suffusion of the South and its malevolence. We will breathe clean air in the merged inspiration of our Harvard nights. Free from the deathly remnants of our pasts. Forever.

But however much he fought, Quentin could not free himself this time. He redirected his effort to grating his left forearm against his hipbone, trying to keep the flowing blood from clotting. He tried to twist his arms in Carlyle’s grip to reach the broken watch in his pocket, but the man’s clasp was
too tight. Self-consciously drawing the overcoat about himself, he looked up through his tears at the man chaining him in place above the crowd. Carlyle was smirking with a nefarious glint in his eyes when he seized the attention of the audience with his booming voice.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Edward proclaimed with the oratorical honey-tongued charisma of a thespian. “Allow me to introduce to you a face that Boston society hasn’t seen in eight years. He is a ghost whose name haunts Bostonians to this day, and he disappeared so completely that no one thought to question if he was really dead. Masked from all those who knew him, he thought he had disguised himself from the world for good. Without further ado, I shall present to you his unveiled face.”

Edward now had the rapt attention of the entire ballroom as he dragged Quentin into nearly naked exposure to hundreds of astonished curious eyes.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the obtrusive suave voice thundered as he dramatically removed Quentin’s mask. “The boy who drowned himself, Quentin Compson.”

The rain erupted into a deluge of pouring tears and flashes of lightning. There was a resounding uproar of confusion and shock, and Quentin used the momentary distraction to grab the watch with his freed hand. He quickly sliced Carlyle’s arm with a shard of glass on the dial’s surface. The larger man cursed in surprise and pain, finally relinquishing his hold on Quentin, who sprinted to a safe distance before looking back at his traducer.

“It’s the least I can do, Turtledove,” Quentin whispered just loudly enough for the man to hear, smirking at Carlyle’s shocked expression with a strained smile. Then he ran down the staircase, leaving Carlyle clutching his bleeding arm and staring after him in thwarted bewilderment.

At the bottom of the stairs, he found himself on the edge of an ocean of people, most of whom were talking to one another conspiratorially, but one face emerged against all of the others, his glare fixed on Quentin. In the back corner of the room, this man had jarred at Carlyle’s final words and instantly bolted for the staircase where Quentin remained paralyzed in disbelieving astonishment. As the man’s face drew nearer, Quentin could just make out a pair of cold beady eyes, narrowed in avaricious fury, which pierced his own with fuming storming outrage. It was the face of his tortured past and the face of his doom.

Outside, thunder shook the earth as the sky exploded.

Chapter End Notes

Attempted sexual assault starting at “Maybe it’s time for us to teach him.” and ending at “Quentin wrested his hands free”

Direct quotes:
Reference to: “Just as the rain began to come down again gray and solid and slow, making no sound, Quentin not aware yet of just where they were because he had been riding with his head lowered against the drizzle” (Absalom, Absalom! 152)

Who was the man at the end? Anyy guesses?
A sea of upheaval

Chapter Summary

Shreve looks for Quentin at the masquerade

Chapter Notes

Shreve’s POV
italics are his thoughts
TW for homophobia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh then the darkness seemed to breathe, to flow back; the window which Shreve has opened became visible against the faintly unearthly glow of the outer snow as, forced by the weight of the darkness, the blood surged and ran warmer, warmer”

(Absalom, Absalom! 288)

Shreve awoke on the floor, the crash of thunder pounding and reverberating in his already throbbing head. Then, as the echo died away, he remembered why he was lying on the floor in a secluded room.

Quentin.

He was gasping now, both from the physical pain of lifting his injured body from the floor and in panicked outraged desperation.

Where the fuck did that monster take you? Goddamn that conniving demonic brute. I dont even know how far he had already gotten with you, but all I need to know is that he harmed you. The bruises on your arms legs torso are enough evidence - scars of his violent rampage. I need to get you away from him before he does even more damage. For God’s sake, he could break you in half like a twig if he wanted to.

Slender shivering body that only wanted to escape. That’s all you ever wanted, wasnt it? Just to escape all of it - your future, the South, the design, that son of a bitch Carlyle . . . and I couldnt - no, didnt - help you. Why did I ever believe him? I had no reason to believe a stranger who told me you had moved on, and I had every reason to trust you, who told me without words that you would never. I chose to believe him when he said that you seduced him. Now I see that it doesnt matter whether or not you willingly laid with him before. I could never hate you for that - I have no right to make your decisions for you. It’s up to you what you do with your body. But he tried to force you tonight. That much I’m sure of. God only knows what the hell he’s done with you now. But maybe this time, I can save you.
As he finally stood upright, Shreve noticed a puddle of blood staining the place where he had just been lying.

*Jesus,* he thought, touching his head to find the source of the blood. *I didn’t know the murderous son of a bitch got that much out of me. But it’s not an excuse. I should have sensed your uneasiness. Even downstairs, he was too possessive, pulling you in close when all you wanted to do was warn me, looking to me for help. You tried to tell me what he would try to do if I continued as I did, and I paid no attention. Too blinded by my own jealous rage to notice your imploring request for me to rescue you. I was too late. By the time I arrived he had already hurt you. That fragile frame shaking in fear, mutilated by his hands. Now you are paying the price for my inability to notice your pleading eyes, begging me to help you. And now I have no way of knowing where he took you. The irony of it! I finally realize that you just wanted my help all along and now I can’t help you.*

Then Shreve noticed the words scrawled in blood.

*hot rushing Mississip*

And he knew exactly what Quentin meant.

*Oh, you clever intrigante,* he ran, following the drops of blood that led him out of the room. *You knew that I would know exactly what you meant. I even told you downstairs that I had memorized that first letter. The same words you used to describe your own blood. Your hot rushing Mississippi blood forever merged with mine. You never needed my saving - always so intelligent and resourceful. I was wrong about Thisbe. No, you never meant to deceive me. You found a way to use your wit even when faced with unfathomable obstacles. You aren’t powerless but cunning, guiding me in my confusion. Ariadne leading the befuddled Theseus through the labyrinth with the direction of red string.*

The blood puddled on the landing at the top of the stairs, pooling outward like a scarlet lagoon, as if Quentin had been standing there for a long time.

*What happened here? Shreve thought, why would Carlyle take you to a place where every single person could see you?*

But he didn’t have time for contemplation. Shreve ran down the staircase, sprinting in the direction of the trail of blood despite his blurring vision.

Then he lost the trail; even if it did continue he could not see it beneath the surging sea of party guests, blending dulled colors of expensive garments interflowing in chaotic undulations. Shreve looked at the expanse of masked unfamiliar faces, which came in and out of focus as they danced and blended together with his wavering vision. Shreve could only barely make out the mustached face of Ernest Codman, raised above his guests and surveying the crowd with a disapproving critical frown. Shreve approached the host, who still looked upset by some apparent disruption in his party.

“Ernest,” Shreve began urgently as he took off his mask. “I need your help.”

“Jesus Christ, what happened to your face!” Codman exclaimed, shocked by Shreve’s face, which was nearly beaten beyond recognition.

“It’s not important,” Shreve pressed onward without explanation. “Look, I need to know if you’ve seen my friend.”

“All right, but you should really get that looked at. A surgeon’s advice after all.”
“You wont know him by name,” Shreve ignored his friend’s concern and continued. “He would’ve come down less than half an hour ago, maybe accompanied by a larger man. He’s a young man, dark hair, about my age, a couple inches shorter than I am, thin, wearing an overcoat.”

“You dont, by any chance, mean Quentin Compson, do you?” Ernest’s immediate reply from this incredibly vague description startled Shreve.

“Y-yes, t-that’s him - um how do you know his name?” Shreve spluttered in astonishment.

“Christ, didnt you see it? I didnt take you for being that oblivious. I suppose you were too busy getting yourself into mysterious brawls,” Codman scoffed.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I couldnt tell you why, but another guest revealed his, Compson’s I mean, identity very dramatically in front of the entire crowd. That’s what created all this disturbance. Apparently he’s that Harvard student who killed himself back in 1910. Threw himself into the Charles River. Though it turns out he never actually did it and was—”

“Ernest, I know who he is!” Shreve didnt have time to be polite. “That’s why I’m looking for him! For God’s sake, just tell me what happened to him!”

“Well, after all of the uproar,” Codman continued, slightly put off by Shreve’s impatience. “Everyone started to chatter among themselves, and no one paid him much attention. The last thing I remember was a man carting him off claiming he knew Compson—”

“Where did they go?” Shreve urged.

“Damned if I know,” Ernest replied. “With all these people, they could be anywhere. Hey Shreve, are you sure your head is—”

But before he could finish his sentence, Shreve had already run off into the crowd.

He surveyed the parquet floor for any sign of blood, thinking, Goddamn Carlyle, that duplicitous son of a bitch. Where did he drag you off to now? No, it wasn’t enough for him to rape you, or at least try to do so and harm you in the trying. He wasn’t satisfied until he had betrayed your identity to hundreds of people, ruining the entire life you had created: exposing you to half of Boston before abducting you again. Perhaps even that wasn’t enough to fill his voracity; maybe even if you escaped his vengeful lust the first time, you can’t run away now. And he could have taken you anywhere . . .

Shreve found himself immersed in the masses of dancing people, pushing through the turbulent throng, trying to spot a familiar despondent figure among the masked faces. As thunder rumbled and the room vibrated, his head throbbed and his already unfocused peripheral vision darkened.

Without any sign of Quentin visible within his bleary sight, Shreve was about to begin searching the hallways, where the blood would at least be visible, when he discerned the broad distinctive height of the other man who currently occupied his thoughts.

Carlyle, Shreve fumed as he bolted to where the man stood, charmingly deceiving two other guests as if nothing had ever happened. Where the hell is Quentin? How can you talk without a care in the world after what you did to him? You manipulative bastard, you go from nearly raping a man to disparaging him for show, then carry on as if none of it had even happened?

“. . . I just decided that it was time for people to know who he really was,” Carlyle smarmed to the
other guests with his back to Shreve. “Yes, it may have appeared overly theatrical, but he was living a lie. After all, now his family can finally.”

“What the hell did you do to him?”

“Ahh, if it isn’t the Captain himself,” Carlyle sneered as he turned to face Shreve. “Took quite a beating, I see. I’m afraid I haven’t got a clue what you’re referring to. Please, enlighten me.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Shreve only resisted punching the man in the face because he needed any information he could coerce from the charlatan. “Where is he?”

“Oh Captain,” Carlyle feigned pity while he cradled his apparently injured right arm. “I’m sorry to say that I haven’t had the pleasure of seeing your little sweetheart. Not since I told everyone who he really is. You see, I got everything I wanted from him, so there was really no use for him anymore.”

“You lying scoundrel,” Shreve immediately shoved Carlyle up against the wall, choking his neck with one arm. “What happened to him?”

“Look, like I said,” Carlyle chuckled between rasping breaths, though he seemed surprisingly weak, as if he had already been attacked once. “I got everything I wanted from him. I didn’t need him anymore, so I discarded him.”

“That’s not all,” Shreve had trouble believing the deceptive man, but dumping Quentin after using him did fit Carlyle’s modus operandi. He clenched the man’s throat tighter until his breath was coming in wheezing gasps.

“Fine,” Carlyle croaked in resignation. “Some man came up after I revealed his identity and took him. Said they knew each other—” he slumped to the ground, gagging as Shreve released him.

“Be glad you’re still breathing,” Shreve said. “What did the man look like? Where did they go?”

“Tall, but shorter than you or I,” the collapsed man retched in defeat, clutching his arm as if it caused him more agony than the lack of air. “Brown hair, hazel eyes. He dragged Quentin out of here not ten minutes ago.”

“Words cannot express my gratitude for your compliance,” Shreve sniggered, his voice oozing sarcasm. “I hope you rot in the infernal chasms of hell.”

With that, he left the once imposing man coughing in a pile on the floor and turned down a hallway, figuring that, even if he couldn’t trust Carlyle, he would have seen them in the ballroom if they were there. As he left the heavily populated ballroom, a faint dribble of blood became visible on the floorboards, although the stains were too scattered for him to determine which direction Quentin had gone.

At least I know he was here at some point, Shreve thought as he proceeded down the dimly lit corridor, noting the small drops that continued in the direction he was headed. Less than ten minutes. They can’t have gotten far. Even if they left, they’re still close enough that I can catch them. But what reason can this man have for taking Quentin with him? They knew one another? I wonder—yes, the description fits. Did Spoade happen to come here without me knowing? Was he trying to help Quentin by getting him out of here?

The path that Quentin had left was now reduced to a single droplet approximately every two meters, so Shreve assumed that the trail continued out the door. Passing Dr Codman’s private library, Shreve was about to leave the building when the name of his Alma mater, spoken in a hushed angered voice, caught his attention.
“. . . all this time I thought that at Harvard they teach you how to go for a swim at night without
knowing how to swim,” the ranting voice was harsh with bitter envy. “But that’s just what you
wanted us to think. Leaving Father drinking himself to death with not even enough money left to buy
himself a one-armed strait jacket.”

Shreve furrowed his brow in confusion as he stood outside the library door. *There’s no way that’s
Spoade. North Carolina never gave him that much of a Southern drawl.* The voice continued
spitefully.

“No money left for the Compsons now, that drunk fool done sold near all of it to send you to
Harvard. And you tricked us all. I reckon Mother wont be able to say nothing when she finds out
what you done.”

“No,” Shreve recognized Quentin’s voice instantly despite its quiet reverberation. In comparison to
the other speaker’s thick Southern accent, he sounded like a Canadian. “No, I’m not going back
there.”

“If they find out you’re not dead,” the other man was vindictive now. “You wont have no choice but
to return.”

“I wont go with you,” although Quentin’s voice was barely audible, it vibrated with resonant
determination. “You cant make me go back there.”

“I’ll tell them,” the stranger menaced with the ease of a practiced tattletale. “Think of what they’ll
say when they hears what you been up to all this time. You’ll have to come home once I tells them
what you done.”

*That’s enough,* Shreve fumed, slamming the library door open.

”What the hell is going on in here?” he stormed into the library, immediately noticing two figures
facing off in front of the fireplace as if they were magnetically repelled by one another.

Both Quentin and the other man, whose hazel eyes blazed with the threatening ferocity of an inferno,
wheeled around to face Shreve. Quentin looked more thin, more pale, and more haggard than ever,
leaning on the mantel of the fireplace as it it were the only thing keeping him from falling over. *All
that blood you lost,* Shreve thought. *But that doesn’t explain why you look so terrified.*

“Quentin and I was just having a friendly little talk, wasn’t we Quentin?” the unidentified man looked
to the other side of the fireplace with a patronizing leer, but Quentin had already left him for the
comfort of Shreve’s arms.

“And I’m sure that’s precisely why he just ran away from you,” Shreve
scathed, supporting Quentin’s trembling (from fear or possibly loss of blood) form with one arm and
massaging his back soothingly with the other. “But it doesn’t matter what you were doing, because
we’re leaving.”

“Well, well, well . . . what do we have here?” the man ignored Shreve, speaking only to Quentin, “I
always known you was one of them little faggots. I told Father so when I caught you gawkin’ at
Dalton Ames like you wished you was Caddy, but he wouldn’t listen. You couldn’t do no wrong in
his eyes, always the perfect son. If only he wasnt dead, he would finally realize what a devious
traitor you really was all along.”

Quentin glared scorchingly at the accusation, but then wavered unsteadily on his feet, facing Shreve
and trembling like the insidious words themselves held power over him. Shreve was disturbed to
observe that his friend was more petrified by this man than he had been by Carlyle. Upon this realization, he turned away from the man, half-carrying Quentin, who would not look up from where his ashen face was buried into Shreve’s chest, to the door.

“However enlightening your obsolescent hillbilly rant has been,” Shreve sarcastically snarled in defense of Quentin, “We have better places to be. We’re leaving, and that’s final.”

They turned and were about to leave the room but stopped short when the man behind them began to cackle hysterically.

“You wont get far,” the man snickered. “He cant run away from his family forever. He knows it, too.”

Shreve twisted in place, still holding a shaken Quentin in physical and emotional support, to stare down at the man with intimidating contempt.

“You obviously dont have the slightest idea what you’re talking about,” Shreve scoffed, ignoring how Quentin shook his head in denial of his words. “He left the South. His family cant control him anymore.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” the man laughed, although he had regained some semblance of self-control. “You’re the one who dont know what he’s talkin’ about. In Mississippi, blood relations is the only thing that can always control a man.”

“Unfortunately for you, this is Boston,” Shreve derided, still not noticing how Quentin’s shaking head refuted his own claim. “We’re not in Mississippi right now, nor do I have any desire to visit the rotting incestuous cesspool which you so proudly call home. I may not know why you wanted Quentin to come with you, but I do know that you dont have anything powerful enough to force him to go back there.”

“No, Shreve,” Quentin sighed, finally capturing his friend’s attention as he pulled away to meet Shreve’s eyes, his hands on his friend’s shoulders. “You dont understand. He’s right.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Shreve was incredulous as he stabilized Quentin’s lightheaded staggering with one gentle hand on the small of his back. “What can I possibly not understand? What do I not know that gives him the ability to drag you back to the place you hate so much? Even if they do find out, they cant make you return.”

“No,” Quentin said, leaving Shreve’s hand on his back but swaying with dizziness. “They can.”

“And they will find out,” the man intruded with a burst of jeering laughter. “I’ll take care of that. And all of Yoknapatawpha County will be furious when they hears what young Quentin Compson really done. They’ll say worse than suicide, I reckon. It just aint right when a man deserts his family, ‘specially when he should be working to support them.”

“But you have no authority to tell him what to do,” Shreve argued, holding Quentin, who was growing faint from blood loss and the prospect of going back to Mississippi, in one arm again. “You dont even know if his family wants him to return.”

“I do know,” the man smiled triumphantly. “I reckon I know what his family wants better than anyone. I’m his brother, Jason Compson.”

“No, that cant be true,” Shreve looked disbelievingly at Quentin, expecting a hasty denial, but his pale wasted friend only gave a single nod before collapsing. Shreve caught him and glared back at the man.
“Even if you are his brother,” Shreve asserted, missing the confident smirk that spread across Jason’s face as he rotated to face the door. “You can’t take him with you. Not anymore. We’re leaving.”

And with that, Shreve carried Quentin out of the library and into the dark night, illuminated only by the bright sprinkles of stars in the midnight sky.

Chapter End Notes

Direct quotes:
“at Harvard they teach you how to go for a swim at night without knowing how to swim” (The Sound and the Fury 243)

Reference to: “if he’d sold the sideboard and bought himself a one-armed strait jacket with part of the money” (245)
An (almost) consummated marriage

Chapter Summary

A little smut and a lot of banter
Nothing bad happens for once :)

Chapter Notes

Shreve’s POV
Italics are his thoughts

TW for mentions of suicide attempt, references to attempted sexual assault and self-harm
But seriously nothing as depressing as in previous chapters

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Shreve stood beside the table, facing Quentin again though not seated now. In the overcoat buttoned awry over the bathrobe he looked huge and shapeless like a disheveled bear as he stared at Quentin (the Southerner, whose blood ran quick to cool, more supple to compensate for violent changes of temperature perhaps, perhaps merely nearer the surface) who sat hunched in his chair, his hands thrust into his pockets as if he were trying to hug himself warm between his arms, looking somehow fragile and even wan in the lamplight”

Absalom, Absalom! (235-236)

The midnight darkness enveloped the sleeping neighborhoods of Boston, not with the overshadowing eclipse of Stygian gloom, but as a loving parent might tuck a child into bed, with the blanketing assurance of celestial protection. The thunderous clouds from earlier that evening had parted and dissolved; the clear nighttime revealed winking stars stippling the sky with flecks of shining silver.

Shreve turned from the window where he stood to look around his small apartment. Clutching a steaming mug of bergamot tea, his gaze was drawn to his own bed, where his damaged friend lay sleeping peacefully.

Jesus, he wondered, I thought you were beautiful before, but I never imagined that you could be even more bewitchingly radiant.

Quentin’s face had lost its pallid hue in the starlight; the stellar shafts of faint illumination softened its gaunt edges, replacing the harsh pallor with an almost ethereal glow.

Then Shreve remembered; it was as if his recollection itself dimmed the unearthly mirage of starlight, casting shadows of somber reality on the drawn supine face. Once they had returned to the apartment, he had lifted the sleeve of his own overcoat to bandage the bleeding wound, revealing the
older scars that lay beneath it. He had redressed his unconscious friend in his own clothes, oversized and long enough to cover his forearms, and then put the overcoat back on him. Shreve tried to forget them by covering them with two layers of fabric, and for a moment he had. But he couldn’t tear the memory of the scars from his mind, each one a tally mark for enduring one aching minute of his (Quentin’s) harrowing past.

Shreve began to pace the length of the room, pinching the bridge of his nose beneath his spectacles as he processed everything that had happened in the past eight years, the past twenty-four hours, even the past thirty minutes.

I wonder if you planned to tell me, he anxiously repeated the short distance back and forth, thinking, Would you have told me if I didn’t find out myself? I know how much agony you have suffered; you should know that I would never judge you for it. With the South and your ‘suicide’ and Carlyle and your brother coming back after you escaped all of them, I understand why. Or at least I want to understand why. That’s not why I’m upset. I would never blame you for it. I just wish that you felt like you could tell me.

What made you do this? Shreve sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at Quentin’s sleeping face, the rest of his body covered in the blankets. It wasn’t just Carlyle or the South, was it? This was before Carlyle. Or was last night not the first time? Damn that ingratiating son of a bitch, I should have given him what he deserved back at the party. If he ever even tried anything . . . and you were forced to suffer all this time - you had no choice but to withstand his wicked aggression. And what he did tormented you to the point that you would do this?

Or maybe even that’s not it, Shreve decided, begrudgingly confessing, You seemed to trust him before last night. Was this because of me? Did I do this when I left you? Did my unexplained absence mar your once flawless skin? What have I done? None of this mutilation was here before. Before you left me. And before I left you.

Quentin began to stir beneath the bedcover and Shreve stood up in panic, unsure of how to act around the friend whom he had not talked to or even seen for years. He put the mug down on the nightstand and resumed his anxious pacing, wringing his hands and fretting about how to approach the sensitive topic.

“Where ‘m I?” Quentin blinked owlishly, looking alarmed by the unfamiliar surroundings. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw Shreve standing at the end of the bed, looking abnormally timid. “. . . Shreve?”

“Shhh calm down,” Shreve consoled his friend but did not move from where he stood at the base of the bed, fidgeting with his shirt cuff. “Everything is all right.”

“You still say that . . .” Quentin murmured, his voice soft, slurred with sleep.

“What?” Shreve didn’t know what Quentin was talking about; he was still worrying about how he would raise the issue which he had only discovered not thirty minutes ago.

Why are you so calm? he thought. With everything that happened in eight years, even within the past few hours, and you’re more serene than I’ve ever seen you. I haven’t seen you like this since the first winter we met, when you were completely entranced by the snow, eyes shining in enchantment. But that was before all of this happened . . .

“All right,” Quentin’s smiling words disrupted Shreve’s thoughts, “you always used to say that.”

“Hmm,” he replied without listening, thinking, that’s what’s on your mind right now? What about
last night? We saw each other for the first time in almost a decade and then engaged in heated verbal sparring (well, mostly staring on your part). Then, you were raped - at least, that’s what the bastard himself claims - by a monster of a man. You cut open your arm, getting closer to unconsciousness with every fallen drop, just to lead me to where you would be without even knowing whether or not your absurd plan would work.

Still not satisfied after sexually assaulting you, Shreve seethed while Quentin looked at him, perplexed by Shreve’s atypical silence, the sycophantic devil decided to publicly reveal your identity to the entire party, emotionally destroying you and annihilating your new life. Disparaging you in front of half of Boston, announcing a secret which held the power of life and death over you. And if all that’s not enough, your redneck brother somehow corners you and tries to force you to go back to the coffin-like prison of Mississippi. And then, after losing half your body weight in blood in some insanely genius scheme to lead me to you, you blacked out for hours. And when you wake up, the only remark you have is that I used to say ‘all right’?

“Are you all right?” Shreve looked up to see Quentin simpering cheekily as he spoke these last two words. Observing his former roommate’s levity which was completely incongruous with their traumatic situation, he (Shreve) couldn’t contain his distress anymore.

“You’re the one asking me that?” Shreve burst out. Despite his incredulity, he was tactical enough not address his foremost concern. “You cut open your arm just to tell me where you went. You were in such a dangerous situation that you had to resort to self-inflicted injury to escape. If anyone should be asking that, it should be me.”

“Haven’t you noticed that you’re missing something?” Quentin said, evading the inference in Shreve’s words with artful circumvention.

“No,” Shreve replied with a faint undertone of reproach, “I’ve actually had more important matters on my mind.”

Ignoring the slight, Quentin pulled the watch from the pocket of Shreve’s overcoat, which he still wore, and handed it to its new owner with a playful smile.

Jesus, Shreve thought as he took the bloody watch, as if there wasn’t already enough of your blood on that damned thing. And you’re smiling about it?

“Quentin,” he began tentatively, “You could have killed yourself.”

Shreve was further perturbed when Quentin responded with bitter laughter, “By now, you should know that I wouldn’t.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Well, my plan worked, didn’t it?” Quentin was still smiling for some incomprehensible reason.

“Yes,” Shreve conceded, “and then you blacked out for hours.”

“What was my alternative? Better to be unconscious than in the South.”

“I suppose you’ve got me there,” Shreve admitted, thinking, why are you not more troubled by this? What reason can you possibly have to be so carefree after everything that happened?

“The South,” Quentin continued with the same lighthearted tone, “the deus ex machina of verbal argument.”
He paused, waiting for Shreve to respond, but Shreve was silent. The lack of conversation lingered in the midnight air, as if the starlit darkness had absorbed the absence of sound before reflecting it back into the small room.

“This is strange.” For perhaps the first time in their history of speaking to one another, Quentin was the first to break the silence.

“What’s strange?” Shreve hoped that his companion would finally address one of the many occurrences of the previous evening.

“Just talking.”

_That’s what’s strange?_ Shreve once again found it difficult to conceal his exasperation, “You don’t have much experience with that.”

“Well, I’m learning now.”

You sure are, Shreve thought in irritation, but you won’t talk about anything that matters, even when I try to bring it up. I need to know what happened to you; even if it obviously doesn’t trouble you, I have to know how much you’ve been through.

He gave Quentin another chance to speak, wishing that he would be the one to bring it up, but the room remained silent. Neither of them even stirred, as if even the slightest movement would shatter the illusion of piece, as if disturbing the silence would break the comforting starlight sky into a million shards. Receiving nothing but empty muted darkness, Shreve convinced himself to speak.

“Quentin, stop trying avoid it.”

“What do you mean?” Quentin looked away with a pained expression that contradicted his callow words. “I’m not trying to avoid anything.”

Shreve moved to sit beside his friend at the top of the bed; as the creak of the bedsprings marked Shreve’s approach, the downcast face looked up in diaphanous hope. He tenderly lifted Quentin’s chin so that their eyes met and spoke softly, “Stop pretending like you don’t know what I’m talking about. I saw the scars.”

Quentin moved his face from Shreve’s hand and stared forlornly down at the blanket, looking like he wanted nothing more than to run away from the conversation. As he lowered his head, his seraphic radiance faded into his accustomed dejected brooding.

“Seriously, what’s all this?” Shreve asked the frank question gently. He lifted the injured arm which he had bandaged from beneath the sheets and rolled up the sleeve.

Quentin would not look Shreve in the eyes, and Shreve didn’t try to make him. When he finally raised his gaze to meet Shreve’s, his masquerade of frivolous behavior evaporated. His smile vanished like gossamer dust carried away by a strong gust of sincerity, giving way to faltering devastation.

“I-It’s my own f-fault,” he began before breaking off, shattering into shaking sobs.

“No, no,” Shreve hugged his friend’s trembling form to his own chest in consolation. “No, you can’t blame yourself for this. You couldn’t prevent any of the horrifying events of your life that caused you to do this.”

“Yes, it is my fault,” Quentin was still quivering, but his voice was steady as if to emphasize his
resolve. “I decided to pretend to kill myself.”

“What?” Shreve asked, not understanding how the faked suicide was related to the scars. *What does that have to do with any of this? You didn’t kill yourself. You didn’t even try to - unless I was wrong about that too. I always thought you knew in the back of your mind that you never would, even when you wrote me that first letter.*

“If I hadn’t done that,” Quentin adamantly pressed onward, as if the words were building up inside of him and the very pressure of their burgeoning weight was forcing them out, “the only reason I had to live wouldn’t have vanished into thin air.”

*So I was right,* Shreve thought despondently. *This was my fault. I did this to you. If I didn’t go to War, leaving you thinking that I had left you, this wouldn’t have happened. You didn’t know that I loved you then. Is that why you did this? If only I had told you sooner, you never would’ve done this.*

“You can’t blame yourself,” Shreve choked back his sobs in realizing his own culpability, “I did this.”

Quentin shook his head vehemently against Shreve’s chest, “You couldn’t have known.”

“If I’d opened the letter sooner,” Shreve massaged Quentin’s convulsing back soothingly, almost in compensation for his own afflicting guilt, “I would have known. And I would have looked for you, just as you warned me not to.”

“I thought you would,” a strained smile appeared through Quentin’s tears, “but just because it took you four years doesn’t make it your fault.”

Shreve didn’t bother denying this, but the main reason for his lack of response was that he was troubled by another problem which they had not discussed.

*Even if I couldn’t have prevented you from cutting yourself,* Shreve clenched his jaw in anger, *I could have stopped what happened last night. Even if I couldn’t have understood that you were still alive from the second letter, I should have seen your desperation at the party. I was too caught up in my own outrage to notice how your eyes pleaded for my help. I didn’t stop him when I could have - it’s my fault that that manipulative son of a bitch did whatever he did last night.*

He knew that Quentin was thinking of the same incident when he looked up at him with a fallen face. Even though both minds dwindled on the same topic, neither of them would broach the subject. Shreve knew that bringing the matter up would irrevocably destroy the tranquility of the astral night, but he had to know how much his friend had really suffered during the stormy events of the previous evening.

“And Carlyle . . . did he . . . would it help to talk about it?” As was customary, Shreve was the first to speak, caressing his friend in solace as he did so.

“He tried.” Quentin began, averting his gaze.

“That goddamn scoundrel! I should have strangled him to death while I had the chance!”

“But I stopped him,” Quentin looked back up at Shreve with a smile that did not reach his eyes. “The watch - it’s not just my blood.”

“Ahh,” Shreve said, returning his friend’s smile faintly, “that explains why he didn’t put up a fight when I confronted him. Clever of you to think of that.”
“I told you my plan wasn’t as crazy as you thought.”

Shreve arched an eyebrow at this, and Quentin smiled weakly. Then they grew somber again, the darkness absorbing their futile flippancy, as Shreve waited for Quentin to continue.

“I’m all right,” he said quietly, “it’s over now.”

“Still,” Shreve reached beneath the shirt to lightly skim his hand over where he knew the bruises had formed, “you’re not fine. You don’t need to pretend like you are.”

“I’m better than I’ve been in eight years,” Quentin’s words, although too lighthearted for the situation, were sincere.

“Hmm, let’s see,” Shreve responded sarcastically, “In the past eight years, you pretended to commit suicide, had to wear women’s clothes in public to disguise yourself, were lampooned by the government for your opposition to the War, and all that time you thought that I had abandoned you. I’d say that’s a pretty low threshold. If this is good, it must’ve been a rough eight years.”

“You have no idea,” Quentin said, not looking down like he usually did but instead staring into Shreve’s eyes, with an expression of repressed anguish which Shreve recognized all too well from catching sight of his own reflection in the mirror.

“Actually, I do.” Shreve was serious now, deciding that revealing his own past would help his friend understand the severity of their situation.

“What?” Quentin seemed genuinely surprised at this.

“I constantly thought about it, what you pretended to do,” Shreve said softly, sorrowfully, “how you did it and what would happen if I did too.”

“I know the War was horrendous, but did it really lead you there?”

“No.”

“What?” Quentin was evidently confused again.

“It wasn’t the War.”

Quentin lifted his head from where he had laid it on Shreve’s chest and looked up at his friend in question, gently curious and yearning to understand just as Shreve had mere minutes before.

“What you said about your reason for living vanishing,” Shreve started, “you weren’t the only one.”

“Oh, Shreve,” Quentin wrapped his arms around Shreve and hugged him like the embrace would channel his own experience of being driven to contemplate death.

“I didn’t.”

“Me neither.”

“Then what’s all this?” Shreve carefully unwrapped the bandage on Quentin’s left arm and gently ran his fingers over the raised surface.

“Coping,” Quentin made no effort to pull his arm away.

Shreve raised the scarred limb and kissed down the length of it, “Don’t do it again.”
“Why would I?” Quentin’s question was honest, if overly cheerful, as Shreve rose to get the ointment. “I don’t need to cope anymore, I can live now.”

Shreve sat back down next to his friend and began to rub salve onto the wounded arm. When he finished, Quentin rested his head on Shreve’s shoulder. They remained like this, warm in the cold all-encompassing darkness, breathing in as one and exhaling into the gentle star-scattered night. Then Quentin raised his head to look at him and broke the silence for the second time.

“Shreve . . .”

“Mmm hmm?”

“You know he was lying.”

“You’ll have to specify there,” Shreve replied with his old sardonic wit, “you could be referring to any of a number of men, each of whom seems to possess an uncanny propensity for lying.”

“Carlyle.” Quentin answered solemnly. “When we were still downstairs. What he said about my virginity. He just wanted to upset you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Shreve assured firmly. “Not that at least. I was angry at you then, but I had no right to be. As long as he didn’t try anything like he did upstairs before last night, it’s not my place to intervene.”

“I know.” Quentin responded quietly. “I’m just trying to say that I wouldn’t have, even if given the choice.”

“You’re too good for me.”

“Low threshold?” Quentin smirked at his own reference to their earlier conversation as he stood up and began to walk around the room tentatively, like he was afraid to fracture their momentary happiness.

“Excuse me?” Shreve feigned indignation, deciding that joking might actually help his friend, “I’m a low threshold? Who was the one who showed you ‘what it must be like to be alive’?”

The last lines mimicked Quentin’s faint Southern accent, who scowled at the exaggerated impression, although he couldn’t prevent how the corner of his mouth twitched upward into a half-smile.

“You really did memorize that letter,” Quentin laughed and sat down at the end of the bed.

“I could go on,” Shreve boasted teasingly, before continuing in the same impersonation of his friend, “I wanted nothing more than to stroke your face, kiss you, say they will never part us, never.”

“That’s not a good imitation of me,” Quentin tried to express his disapproval but ended up giggling again, “I don’t sound like that.”

“You do,” Shreve was still cheerfully mocking him with a blithe glimmer in his eyes. “At least, that’s exactly what you sounded like at the time you wrote the letter. But apparently I’m a ‘low threshold’, so it doesn’t seem like you feel that way anymore.”

“I was joking!” Quentin reached forward and slowly trailed his hand down Shreve’s arm. “You’re quite the catch. Bravery, brains, beauty . . . need I go on? You’re too good for me, Doctor-Captain.”
“Ugh,” he grimaced at the last word, “I don’t think I can bear hearing that last one again. I might end up punching the next person who addresses me as Captain, present company excluded.”

“My savior,” Quentin said sarcastically with an exaggerated swoon. “But what should I call you to express my gratitude for rescuing me? Would it be better to call you something else? Perhaps my darling Doctor?”

He crawled up to where Shreve sat and looked up at him seductively through his eyelashes, although his impish smile betrayed his facetious intentions.

“Hmm . . . Let me think . . . No,” Shreve laughed as he pulled Quentin onto his lap. “That’s off limits too.”

“I never cared for epithets anyway,” Quentin stated matter-of-factly before leaning up to capture Shreve’s bottom lip between his own. Shreve deepened the kiss with a hand on the other’s face, until he couldn’t suppress his laughter anymore and had to pull away.

“Epithets? Only you would use a word like epithet in bed,” Shreve chuckled breathlessly while Quentin smiled up at him.

“And you love me for it?”

“Yes, yes I do. In fact, I love everything about you.”

Rather than looking pleased by Shreve’s confirmation, Quentin averted his gaze and stared fixedly at the shadows in the folds of the blankets.

“What is it?” Shreve worried, rubbing up and down his friend’s back.

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“By your standards,” Shreve replied frankly, “that probably means it’s a matter of life or death.”

“Well in that case,” Quentin laughed quietly, “it really is nothing.”

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t think it’s important,” Shreve said. “That doesn’t mean I don’t care. I’d still feel better if you told me what’s bothering you.”

“It’s just . . .” Quentin sighed, unable to finish his thought.

“It’s all right, you can tell me.”

“It’s just - when you said that - I remembered what I confessed to you in the first letter I wrote. When I told you I loved you.”

“Yes,” Shreve responded, “and I think I’ve already made it clear that I probably remember your words just as well as you do.”

“That’s true,” Quentin tried to laugh, but it came out as more of a nervous sigh. “That- that was the first time I’d ever said that to anyone. And the last.”

“All right,” Shreve nodded in understanding, “but I don’t see what’s wrong with you saying that. You have no idea how much I appreciated your declaration of love; if I wasn’t mourning your death at the time, I would have been over the moon with the joy of knowing that you loved me.”

“It wasn’t just words to me, though,” he pulled away from Shreve’s embrace to sit cross-legged
beside him. “You were - are - the only person I’ve ever truly loved. And that made me think about how many times you’ve said that to your lovers.”

“I have had other lovers. But I - I havent - I never told them - you were the only one for me too.”

“Oh really?” Quentin cocked an eyebrow doubtfully. “What about Elizabeth Marlowe then?”

“E-Elizabeth Marlowe?” Shreve stammered, surprised by the mention of the name he had invented.

“Yes, Elizabeth Marlowe,” Quentin crossed his arms defiantly. “Who else? There’s a reason I chose that name, you know.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about that,” Shreve wondered aloud. “I’m surprised you remembered the name after all these years.”

“Yes, well,” Quentin huffed, “when the boy you’re in love with talks about a girl like she hung the moon, you cant help but remember her name. Seriously, you would go on and on about her radiant laugh and her dazzling personality and her spellbinding eyes. Oh God, her eyes were the worst. You wouldn’t shut up about how they changed color in the light: grey and blue and green-”

Shreve burst out in laughter, cutting Quentin’s indignant rant short. Quentin was even more confused than he had been before by this reaction.

“Stop laughing! It’s not funny! You have no idea how much I used to wish that you would talk about me the way you did about Elizabeth Marlowe! Using her name as my alias was just wishful thinking, I suppose.”

“Wait,” Shreve managed through his laughter, tears of mirth escaping from behind his spectacles as he clutched his abdomen and struggled to keep himself from falling out of bed. “Wait a second - this is hilarious!”

Quentin glowered at him, “I knew I shouldn’t have told you.”

“You honestly believed all that?”

Quentin’s glare softened into confusion.

“You thought that I was in love with Elizabeth Marlowe?” Shreve asked incredulously. He knew that his former roommate was notoriously oblivious, but this was an entirely new level.

“Well . . . yes . . . Why wouldn’t I?”

“Jesus, Quentin. You really are daft,” he wiped his tears as he finally stopped laughing. “Elizabeth Marlowe wasn’t real.”

“Umm, yes. Yes, she was. If I remember correctly - which I do - you spent months sulking after she rejected your little ‘proposal’.”

“For God’s sake, you gorgeous idiot. I wasn’t upset about Elizabeth Marlowe turning me down. I was heartbroken after you rejected me. Repeatedly, I might add.”

Quentin tilted his head, obviously perplexed but encouraging Shreve to go on.

“You ran away from me at even the slightest display of affection. I mean, sure, now I know why, but I was depressed for months. I couldn’t figure out what I’d done to upset you until I read your letter. And by then, you were already dead.”
“I’m sorry about that,” Quentin murmured before continuing with clipped determination, “but I still don’t understand where Elizabeth Marlowe fits into all this.”

“Like I said, she was never real. Elizabeth Marlowe was never anything more than an improvised excuse.”

“What do you mean?”

Shreve leaned his head back against the headboard and sighed at his intelligent friend’s cluelessness, “Remember that day in December? The first snow of the year?”

“Yes . . .”

“You were sliding around on the ice while Spoade and I were talking up on the bridge. And you came up and overheard Spoade and me talking about a proposal?”

“Yes,” Quentin replied bitterly. “The one you were planning to give Elizabeth Marlowe.”

“No,” Shreve said as Quentin furrowed his brow, “Well yes, but no, not really. We weren’t talking about me proposing to some girl from Radcliffe. Like I said, that was just an excuse. Spoade meant that I should propose to you.”

“W-What?”

“I had to make sure that you didn’t realize that we had been talking about you. Remember, back then I didn’t know how you felt about me. Elizabeth Marlowe was just someone I made up to cover up how I felt about you.”

“No, no, that can’t be true.” His faltering words were proof that he was evidently still in denial. “You described her so vividly, you wouldn’t stop rambling about her entrancing personality and her incomparable beauty . . . you could only describe a real person with that much detail.”

“Exactly.”

“What?”

“When I pretended to describe Elizabeth Marlowe, I was really talking about you.”

“Y-you were?”

“Yes, Quentin,” Shreve was astounded by how dense his brilliant friend could be. “Jesus, have you never looked in a mirror before? Everything I said about her, every characteristic that I raved about, was just another thing that I loved about you.”

“M-me?” Although Quentin had grown into a confident man over the past few years, he looked every bit the wide-eyed blushing freshman he had been at Harvard. There was a high color brushed across his cheekbones which flushed out his formerly sickly and pale complexion.

“Yes, you,” Shreve replied as he drew his friend’s body close again, kissing the top of his head. “It was always you. Who else could possibly have shimmering glasz eyes that I can’t help but get completely lost in?”

“Elizabeth Marlowe?” Quentin whispered teasingly while he cupped his friend’s face in his hands.

“No, not even Elizabeth Marlowe,” he responded lightly before he was cut off by another passionate kiss. “Only you.”
“Good,” Quentin pulled back and looked at Shreve with lust-blown pupils, his voice low and sensuous. “Because Elizabeth Marlowe would never do this.”

Shreve’s own eyes widened at the implication as he watched his friend bridge the gap between them, greedily trapping his lips in an ardent kiss. Then Quentin began to unbutton Shreve’s shirt, raking his fingertips across every centimeter of naked rosy flesh that he exposed in the process.

*You really have gotten more confident,* Shreve marveled through the fog of his kindled arousal. *Even if you are still a virgin.*

When he finished unbuttoning it, Quentin discarded his friend’s now worthless shirt, momentarily breaking the contact of their lips.

*How did I ever manage to resist you?* he wondered while Quentin batted his eyelashes up at him with a sultry smile. Shreve had to give his younger self credit for managing to control his libido. *Granted, there was that one time, but sharing a room with you could have provided so many more advantages without all that self control. Especially since both of us were suppressing our desire from the very start. I suppose we weren't ready back then, though.*

Quentin shrugged off the overcoat and started to strip off his (well, actually Shreve’s) own shirt with the same bedroom-eyed need. Shreve returned the look with equally dilated eyes, sweeping his gaze across his friend’s lean body. His hips were narrow, tapering into a V-shape, and his skin was so milky that it seemed to glow in the starlight. The scant amount of creamy flesh on his revealed torso was stretched tightly, not defined by musculature but tense: taut from the hollow at the crux of his ribcage all the way down to his navel.

However, despite the rigid tension of his flat stomach, there was also a supple quality to his friend’s upper body. His silhouette was sleek where his gracile thighs and slender hips met. Not padded enough to be plump - there was too little flesh for that - but just gracefully soft. The slightly rounded curves of his figure offset his bony features; the harsh lines of his visible bones contrasted with the soft gentle curve of his lower abdomen. The result was mesmerizing. He looked like a paradox of otherworldly perfection: tight but flexible, slender but curvy, angular but sinuous.

For one of the few times in his life, Shreve was struck speechless.

*You are absolutely stunning,* he marveled in enchantment. *Even more breathtaking than I could have ever imagined. Exquisite and ethereal, bewitching beyond human belief. Too perfect for this world, with a seraphic beauty that mere mortals can only dream of in the star-scattered wonder of night.*

He felt his pants tighten as he took in the sight, the blood in his body surging to the surface. Quentin, encouraged by his former roommate’s conspicuous reaction, turned his eyes downward to Shreve’s prominent erection. With one final sensual glance up at Shreve, Quentin bent down, revealing the bony ridge of his spine and the bruises littering the smooth pale skin of his back.

Despite his burning desire, Shreve couldn’t help but notice the darkness that lay beneath the radiant allure of Quentin’s body. His friend looked too emaciated, covered in darkening bruises and fading scars which were only enhanced by the paleness of his skin. The horizontal slashes on his arms paralleled the grooves of his protruding ribs. Although his face was no longer sickly but blushing a glowing pink, the rest of his body was undeniably damaged.

*This is all wrong,* Shreve thought, fighting his overwhelming lust as Quentin started to undo his straining pants. *What are we doing? You’re not ready for this. You’ve been through too much. Even if you think you want this, you need to give yourself more time.*
"Stop," Shreve said gently, forcing the words out despite what his hormones told him.

"What?" Quentin looked up, his eyes still glowing with ardor but now radiating confusion as well.

"We cant do this," he gasped out the words with difficulty as every impassioned fiber of his being rebelled against their meaning.

"What do you mean?" Quentin moved away slightly and sat fully upright, his mouth open and disbelieving the words he was hearing.

"You have no idea how hard it is for me to say this," Shreve redid his pants. "But we cant."

"What are you talking about? Of course we can."

"No, we need to wait," he tried not to let Quentin see how his eyes drifted towards the jutting scars and ribs. "You might end up regretting it - you've been through too much suffering already. I cant take advantage of that."

"You're not," Quentin replied, clearly sensing Shreve’s scrutiny. His eyes astutely followed Shreve's gaze and judgmentally surveyed his own exposed body. "And I told you, I'm fine. Stop worrying about me."

"I cant," Shreve said quietly. He tried to keep his eyes from flickering down to look at the scars - the physical wounds of his friend's past agony - but he was too concerned about Quentin to prevent it.

"So you love me," Quentin insecurely wrapped his arms around himself to hide his naked upper body from Shreve's view, "But not enough to demonstrate your love physically. What happened to change your mind? D-did I do something wrong?"

"No, no," Shreve hastily denied, reaching out to pull his friend into his arms and hugging him tightly. "No, God no. Trust me, I love you more than ever - emotionally and physically. I just think you need to give yourself time."

"All right," Quentin sighed and surrendered to his friend's embrace, leaning back so that his spine was flush against Shreve's upper body. "How long do I have to wait?"

"That's up to you," Shreve kissed the nape of his neck. "Long enough for you to process what's happened. A few days at least."

"I've waited eight years," Quentin said begrudgingly, "I think I can wait a few more days."

Chapter End Notes

I added a prequel in chapter 1 and 2 which explains how Shreve and Quentin met

Also I hope you can see how their personalities have changed with Shreve becoming more sensitive and Quentin learning to be lighthearted
A consummated marriage (for real)

Chapter Summary

Quentin struggles to control his sexual desire
But it's ok, because he has a plan

Chapter Notes

Quentin's POV
italics are his thoughts

TW for severe body dysmorphia and mentions of past attempted sexual assault and self-harm

But there are also some funny parts
~Epithet means nickname

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“He [Quentin] looking somehow curiously smaller than he actually was because of his actual height and spareness - that quality of delicacy about the bones, articulation, . . . who had that plumpness once and lost it (whether with his consent or not) for that state of virginity which is neither boy's nor girl's”

Absalom, Absalom! (259)

A few more days was taking longer than he had thought.

Much longer.

It had only been three days, and Quentin was already fed up with waiting. It didn't help that they were constantly around each other.

It’s worse than at Harvard, he thought as he lay in Shreve’s bed. Back then, at least I could control it, because I thought that he didn't return my feelings. I could stand it when he walked around shirtless, because I didn't know that he felt the same way. But now, every second we’re around one another is agonizing. Unless he’s gone at work, I have to fight the urge to rip off his clothing and drag him into bed. Sometimes, I succumb to the urge only for him to say, ‘Wait. You need to give yourself more time’. I don't need more time. What I need is for him to stop dismissing me every time I ask him if he’s ready yet. I’ve come to terms with what happened to me; what I can't accept is him turning me down repeatedly while everything he does only tempts me more.

And it was true.

In the morning, he would wake up next to Shreve, who was typically shirtless or even naked and bearing a raging hard-on. His friend stand up to get ready for work, while Quentin lounged in bed
with his most alluring expression, asking something along the lines of, ‘Could I help you with that?’

But Shreve would only smile wryly and decline the offer before heading to the bathroom to relieve
his own problem.

It wasn't so bad when Shreve was at work at the hospital, like he was now. Exceedingly boring and
dull, but bearable. When he came home, though, Quentin would see the fatigue in his eyes and
couldn't help but think of the numerous ways he could assuage it. Most of them involved sex. And he
would offer, only to receive the same restrained smile that accompanied the refusal.

Nights, however, were by far the worst. There was only one bed, and neither of them had any
compunctions about sharing it. They would cuddle and exchange chaste kisses, but that was as far as
Quentin could get before Shreve would tell him to go to sleep. Then they would lie down beside one
another in the starlit darkness until Quentin heard his friend’s breathing grow steady as he drifted off
to sleep. Quentin, on the other hand, would lie on his back, watching the gently rising expanse of
Shreve’s broad back and wondering how much longer it would take.

In a desperate effort to ignite some flames of arousal in his persistently strong-willed friend, he had
taken to walking around the apartment with no clothes on, intentionally flaunting his naked body and
draping himself provocatively across furniture whenever Shreve was around. But thus far, his
tantalizing display had failed to evoke anything beyond gentle kisses and reiterated refusals to go any
farther.

Is there something wrong with me? Quentin wondered as he critically surveyed his nude reflection in
the floor-length mirror. Scarcely anyone had seen him without clothes on before, and he didn't have
much experience with other men’s naked bodies to compare to his own. Is he not attracted to me
because of my imperfections? Is that why he keeps saying no?

On the first night that Quentin had tried to coax him into having sex, Shreve had said that his
physical flaws weren't the problem, far from it, but Quentin had seen the look in his sapphire eyes
through the moonlike spectacles. Shreve had been desperately trying to hide it, but it was clear that
he was repulsed by seeing his friend with his shirt off, exposing his vulnerable skeletal body with its
myriad of scars and bruises.

What other reason could he have? As soon as he saw my scars and my shirtless body, he refused to
satisfy my craving. I'm not good enough for him, am I? Quentin deprecated his own figure,
meticulously examining it from every angle. I dont blame him, though. With his toned muscular
physique, tall and robust and rugged, he isn't used to looking at the gaunt sickly wreckage that is my
own mangled body.

He looked into the mirror forlornly. He would never be impressively tall or intimidatingly brawny.
Where his flatmate’s body was a perfect balance between fat and muscle, his own was too jagged in
some places, too soft in others. Shreve’s rosy flesh covered his bones, but Quentin’s ribs stuck out
like a washboard and his hip bones protruded too far outward. His arms were not thick or hefty but
thin, with slender-boned wrists and delicate fingers.

He couldn't understand how anyone could possibly resist his friend’s strong arms or his well-defined
abdominal muscles. Conversely, his own stomach was flat, but it was squishy to the touch, with a
soft curve to it. The flexibility of its cushioned and limber surface was intensified by the four sharp
corners of his ribs and hip bones. As a whole, Quentin decided that he looked like he had been
haphazardly assembled from broken pieces of debris, with too many contradicting features for one
person.

And then there were the scars. He hated the scars most of all. Even if his angular edges and rounded
contours might have once been potentially interesting (if not conventionally attractive), he had ruined
any hope of creating that compelling effect when he mutilated himself.

*That’s what Shreve really can’t stand to look at,* he thought as he looked at the linear scars and circular bruises adorning his body. *Every time he looks at me, he is reminded of what a destroyed wreck I am. That’s why he thinks that I need more time - because I look like I’ve suffered enough tragedies for a million lifetimes. Even if I feel perfectly fine.*

This final thought jolted him back to reality.

*Oh quit wallowing, Quentin,* he thought to himself, quoting Shreve’s words from so many years ago. *This is what the old Quentin would do. Brood and sulk about something without trying to figure out how to fix it. The new Quentin doesn’t wallow - he takes action. So what can I do to solve this problem? I have to prove to him that I am ready, that I’ve healed despite what the scars tell him.*

He turned his back on the mirror and went to the bedroom to do something about it. Pulling on some of Shreve’s smaller clothes, which still positively hung off of his own thin frame, Quentin suddenly realized what he needed to do. He knew he shouldn’t leave the apartment, that someone might recognize him, but he needed to prove his independence. That he wasn’t just some helpless little Mississippi brat who couldn’t do anything for himself. To show Shreve that he had not only survived, but that he could fend for himself. If he could do that, he could convince Shreve that he had given himself enough time and that he *was* ready.

~•~

The sky overhead was bright with sunshine, and Quentin couldn’t help but reflect its radiance with his own beaming smile. He walked through the streets of Boston with a newfound spring in his step, motivated by his plan. It felt freeing to finally be himself without his feminine disguise, even if he hadn’t done so by choice. Now, he could be himself without worrying about his past coming back to haunt him.

*Shreve won’t be able to say no to me after this,* he thought with hopeful determination. *Not after I show him how I’ve left my painful past behind me.*

On his way to the bakery, he passed by the news stand, not noticing the article with his own face emblazoned on its front cover. He stepped into the bakery, his eyes roaming the shelves for the ingredients he thought would be necessary for baking a cake. When his basket was full with flour, eggs, sugar, and a few other things, he went to the counter to pay for the items.

“That’ll be six dollars,” the clerk said.

Quentin’s eyes widened, looking at the five notes in his hand.

“Six dollars? But it’s only a few things.”

“What can I say?” the man shrugged his shoulders helplessly. “Prices went up after the war.”

“Nevermind then,” Quentin put the flour back on the counter. There might be some lying around the apartment somewhere. “Thank you for your help, anyways.”

“Look,” the clerk said amiably, “You seem like a good enough fellow. I’ll let you have it for five.”

“Really?” Quentin looked up in pleasant surprise. “Oh, thank you so much!”

“Just don’t let my boss find out,” the other man smiled at Quentin’s overjoyed expression and handed him the flour.
Dont worry about that, Quentin thought as he took his basket and started toward the door. I would never say anything. I'm a member of the IWW. There's nothing we hate more than the immoral exploitation of workers by their bosses.

“Excuse me,” the clerk called after him just before he left through the door. “Dont I know you from somewhere?”

“No,” Quentin responded politely but kept his back turned. “No I dont think we’ve ever met. I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

Then he exited the shop, leaving the perplexed clerk behind him. He returned the way he had come, but more slowly, weighed down a little by the full basket and the strange interaction with the man. Because he wasnt walking quite so quickly, he caught sight of a storefront which he hadnt noticed when walking to the bakery, and he decided that this place might be able to help him with the second part of his plan.

It’s all right if Shreve cant look at my disfigured body without being reminded of what I’ve been through, Quentin thought as he entered the shop, taking in the rows of lavish clothing. He doesnt have to see it if he doesnt want to.

Quentin woefully remembered that he had spent all of his money, but that didnt keep him from having a look around. There were lines upon lines of vibrantly colored fabric; the store contained an unimaginable range of different textures and patterns. He trailed his fingers along the racks, perusing the magnificent material in awe, even if such luxuries were far beyond his price limitations. His gaze settled on a long black robe, erotically silken but modest enough to conceal his insecurities.

He held the shimmering midnight-colored dressing gown up against his body, thinking, he couldnt resist me in something as exquisite as this. He wouldnt have to look at my marred body; the rippling waves of ebony fabric would distract him from my scars. And then he would finally give in, touching me not with chaste pecks to my cheek but with burning passionate lust, unable to fight the desire-

“That would look incredible on you. The color complements your hair perfectly, and the silk brings out your eyes.”

His wistful thoughts were disrupted by the approach of the shopkeeper. She couldnt have been any more than five years older than himself, with lustrous umber skin and dark curls piled on top of her head. The woman looked at him with tawny eyes like she genuinely meant what she’d said.

“Oh, no, I couldnt possibly,” Quentin looked away shyly, embarrassed to be caught looking at such an intimate garment. “I- I cant afford-”

“I know who you are, Quentin,” he was cut off by the soft touch of a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see the shopkeeper staring intensely at him, with the warm familiarity of a close friend.

“T-I- I’m sorry, I have to-” he started to leave, but her next words stopped him.

“My apologies - I phrased that wrong. Dont worry, darling. I wont tell anyone who you are. I just want to help you,” she pulled a card from her pocket, identifying her as a fellow member of the IWW. “Marion Beauregard. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Quentin.”
“H-how do you know who I am?” he asked, relieved to know that she was an ally but still confused about how she had recognized him.

“I make sure to keep tabs on all of our members here in Boston; you can never tell the difference between a comrade and a yuppie spy these days. We can never be too careful. Your absence from the IWW these past two years was a bit alarming.”

“Oh,” Quentin said softly, remembering how Carlyle had prevented him from attending IWW gatherings in the past couple of years.

“But it quickly became clear to us that you weren't a mole,” Marion continued. “So, if you’d like, you could join our meetings again?”

“Yes, yes, of course. I’d like nothing more!”

“Glad to hear it,” Marion beamed at him, “The next meeting is on Tuesday . . . tomorrow, actually.”

“All right,” he replied, elated that he had been given the chance to rejoin the cause. He began to say goodbye, “Thank you ever so much - I’ll see you then!”

“Marvelous. And Quentin?”

Marion’s question stopped him as started toward the exit.

“Yes?”

“Free of charge,” she showed him the dressing gown.

“No, no, you really don't need to-”

“Take it,” she insisted, handing it to him. On top was a small card with her name and address on it. “Consider it a gift to a fellow activist.”

“T-Thank you,” he stammered, shocked by how kind this virtual stranger had been to him.

“You’re most welcome. It’d be an injustice to see it on anyone else,” Marion winked. “A special someone is certainly in for a treat tonight.”

Quentin blushed all the way up to the roots of his hair but smiled bashfully at her encouragement.

“How can I ever repay you?” he asked, trying to change the topic.

“Don't worry about it,” she replied. “Shreve won't be able to resist you.”

"H-How do you know his name?"

"I've read your files, remember? They include an extensive list of your family, friends, acquaintances, and, for lack of a better term, romantic interests," she said calmly, gently pushing him toward the door with one hand and waving goodbye with the other. “Now go on and sweep him off his feet!”

Quentin flushed even redder, waving goodbye to Marion as he left the shop. He continued on the path back to Shreve’s apartment, feeling emboldened by his new friend’s support. Caught up in his revitalization, he didn’t see the shadowy figure staring after him from around the corner.

~*~
Quentin furrowed his brow as he looked at the open cookbook on the counter before him. Underneath one of Shreve’s overcoats, he was clad only in the new garment, which was lusciously cool against his bare skin. Baking, on the other hand, made him testy and feverish with frustration.

2 cups of flour? he thought in confusion. He looked from the perplexing cake recipe to what he had already managed to figure out: eggs and sugar mixed together in a bowl. Well, some of the eggs and sugar were in the bowl. The countertop was strewn with sugar granules, and shattered eggshells were scattered across its surface. Considering that he had never cooked before in his life, it was impressive that he had gotten most of the ingredients into the bowl (disregarding the half a dozen eggs which he had accidentally dropped on the floor). Now, the only thing left to add was the flour.

He tried to peel apart the packaging of the flour with his hands, but he couldn’t get it open no matter how hard he tried. Finally, he bit one end of the package between his teeth and yanked in the other direction with his hand. Inevitably, the bag exploded, showering every surface of the small kitchen with dusty powder. The walls were dusted with flour and some had even stuck to the ceiling. Quentin coughed as the white dust fell like dandruff onto his head and read the recipe again.

2 cups? This should work well enough. He picked up a mug which was typically used for drinking tea or coffee. Just as he had done with the sugar, he ladled two heaping mugfuls into the bowl. He stirred the mixture and poured it into a baking pan, which he put into the brick oven before turning around to survey the damage.

I still have two hours until Shreve gets back, he thought, deciding that he could clean up later. Hopefully it doesn’t taste as bad as it looks.

He swept his finger along the rim of the mixing bowl and stuck it into his mouth. He immediately spit it out.

Ugh, that’s disgusting! Well, its flavor definitely isn’t going to redeem what it lacks for in appearance, he was a little disappointed but not really surprised. It was my first try after all. Two hours should give me enough time to make another cake . . .

Quentin was startled by the creak of floorboards outside the apartment door.

Shreve isn’t supposed to come home until 10:00, he wondered in confusion.

He put the batter-dripping spoon back into the bowl (it really wasn’t worth licking) and moved to the doorway to distract his returning flatmate. He deliberately stood in the doorway to block the small kitchen as much as he could with his slight figure, plastering an innocent smile on his face and hiding his messy hands behind his back.

“I’m home!” Shreve called loudly as he opened the door. He stopped short in surprise when he encountered Quentin standing suspiciously right in the doorway.

“Hello, my sweet non-epithet,” he greeted Quentin at a more appropriate volume, using the new nickname which he never ceased to find utterly hilarious.

“Hi,” Quentin smiled wider and tried to cover up the kitchen disaster. “Using ‘non-epithet’ as a nickname really isn’t as funny as you think it is.”

“You say that, but I know you secretly love it when I call you that,” Shreve gave Quentin a dazzling smile which he couldn’t possibly resist, despite the ridiculous nickname. “How was your day . . . Quentin!”

He widened his eyes as he looked at the flour-dusted coat, covering his mouth in mock horror,
“What did you do to my favorite overcoat? The one time you decided to wear clothes, too.”

“Umm . . .” Quentin bit his lips and looked away sheepishly. Diverting his gaze didn’t make it any better though; practically every part of the kitchen was covered in flour, and those that weren’t were littered with spilled sugar and broken eggs.

“Nevermind the overcoat,” Shreve had apparently noticed the mess by this point too, “What did you do to my apartment?”

Quentin knew that Shreve was only joking, but he felt a bit let down that he hadn’t been able to impress his friend like he’d planned.

“I’m just kidding,” Shreve laughed jubilantly, making Quentin look at him again. There were tiny creases of mirth at the corners of his eyes, and his smile was wide, bright with white teeth. “It looks like I missed out on a fun day.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“No? Why not?”

“I wanted to try to make another cake and clean up before you got here,” he mumbled. “Why are you home so early, anyway?”

“I had to get back to see you,” Shreve pecked his cheek lightly, making Quentin blush. “After a long day of surgeries, nothing can lift my spirits as much as spending time with my dearest non-epithet.”

“That name is never going to catch on,” Quentin argued, but he couldn’t stop the corner of his mouth from twitching upward in amusement.

“Oh, it already did, my love- err non-epithet, that is,” Shreve corrected himself in a vain effort to prove his point.

“See what I mean?”

Then there were clouds of smoke wafting up out of the oven, and the two men left the doorway to see what had happened, both already fairly certain of the fate of the already doomed cake.

Shreve’s eyebrows rose as he saw (as well as he could see through the smoke rising from the oven) the full extent of the tornado of damage caused by the disastrous cake, while Quentin quickly moved through the billowing smoke to snatch the scorched dessert from the oven.

“I’ve burnt it, haven’t I?” he asked redundantly, looking at the singed remains of the cake with his arms crossed.

“Do you really need me to answer that for you?” Shreve joked lightly, before seeing the disappointed look in his friend’s face and adding, “Hey, it’s all right. You tried your best, and that’s what matters.”

Quentin nodded slowly, unhappy with how everything had turned out.

“Listen, it’s all right,” Shreve repeated. “Don’t worry about it. You can try again another time.”

There goes my chance at proving my independence, Quentin thought forlornly until he remembered the second part of his plan. He remembered Marion’s words of encouragement, ‘That would look incredible on you,’ and ‘It’d be an injustice to see it on anyone else,’ and, most prominently, ‘A special someone is certainly in for a treat tonight.’ Yes, he is. He just doesn’t know it yet.
“I don’t need to,” his response to Shreve was determined. Then he added in a low breathy voice, “There’s something else on the menu tonight.”

“Oh?” Shreve raised an eyebrow.

“Yes,” he replied, seductively slipping off the overcoat, stepping out of it to reveal the satiny cloth beneath.

His taller, broader flatmate licked his lips subconsciously, and Quentin’s gaze was magnetized to their glistening pink plumpness. He couldn’t stand it anymore and pressed the larger man against the wall, kissing him ravenously. Shreve returned the kiss with equally passionate voracity until he seemed to regain control of himself and broke away.

“Oh, no, Quentin,” he said breathlessly, like his desire was trying to suppress the words. “It’s only been two days.”

“Three, actually. And that’s not enough for you?” Quentin sulked and took a step back.

“It’s not enough for you.”

“How would you know? I’m the one who wants this. The only one, apparently,” he looked away from his friend’s earnest blue eyes and swollen rosy lips, trying not to sound too bitter.

“You know that’s not true.”

“Your words say otherwise,” Quentin pouted.

“You know I can’t resist that look.”

Quentin suppressed a self satisfied smile as he deepened the pout, poking his bottom lip out further. Shreve’s bespectacled gaze flickered to his pouting lips before averting his eyes in an effort to distract himself. Quentin took advantage of this opportunity and grabbed his friend’s well-muscled arm to drag him into the bedroom.

“You’re sure you’re ready?” Shreve had apparently given up resisting his sexual desire as he let himself be pulled along forcefully.

“Please. I’ve been ready for eight years.”

With more strength than he knew he possessed, Quentin seized hold of his burly friend’s shoulders and pushed him down onto the mattress. Too impatient to carefully unbutton Shreve’s shirt this time, he yanked it open, sending the buttons flying across the room.

“That’s my second item of clothing you’ve ruined today,” Shreve teased playfully and pulled Quentin down so that he was lying on top of him.

The smaller man lay there for a second, rising and falling on his friend’s chest. Then Shreve moved to undo the cord of his robe. Quentin immediately sat back up to stop him, crouching on his haunches and feeling his friend’s rigid cock against his own. He let his eyes pour over the reclining man’s naked torso, taking in the contours of rosy flesh, flushed an even deeper crimson than usual with surging lust. Quentin had seen Shreve shirtless on numerous occasions - in fact, too many to count - but observing his strength from such a close proximity allowed him to see the man in a new light. At first glance, he (Shreve) looked impervious to any threat: solidly-built and powerful, like no bullet or blade could harm him.
But that’s not true, Quentin thought, skimming his fingers across the sculpted hollows of Shreve’s torso, causing him to moan in pleasure. It’s not that you’re too strong to be hurt in the first place. It’s resilience: accumulating muscle and brawn after being wounded, trying to keep yourself from being hurt again.

He let his fingertips linger on Shreve’s abdomen, noticing the slight differences in its ruddy appearance since their days at Harvard - the trials of war and pain and loss which had eroded its surface. His body was not quite as sharply contoured as Quentin recalled, through he was still rugged with hard muscle under a thin layer of fat. Just slightly more padded as if to insulate, provide protection from potential threats. His hands followed the pathways of the indentations of Shreve’s abdominals, trailing downward to reach his hips.

“Jesus, Quentin,” Shreve was already gasping at the gentle caress of Quentin’s fingers on his lower abdomen.

Quentin smirked in pride, unclasping the pants which had been stretching to contain Shreve’s erection. He was pleased to find that his hard clock was just as long, thick, and flushed as the rest of his body. With an alluring glance up at the other man through his eyelashes, he took the engorged member in his mouth, sealing his lips around its circumference. He had no prior experience from which to draw from, so he moved his tongue slowly at first, receiving encouraging moans as he did so. He ran his tongue down the length of the shaft and suck at its base, satisfied at how Shreve’s entire body tensed at the touch.

His burgeoning cock leaked, and Quentin was fascinated by its straining pressure, paralleled by the rigidity of his physique, which accentuated his muscles even more. Quentin moved his own body up slightly to take in the tremendous sight, and Shreve took this as an opportunity to pull at the silk robe again. Quentin, with his mouth still sealed around Shreve’s cock, moved his hands to firmly pull the dressing gown tightly about himself.

“Why won’t you take off your clothes?” Shreve asked breathlessly between intensifying gasps but was too absorbed to argue much further. “I- I want to see you- Oh, God, Quentin.”

Quentin ignored the protest, determined to remain clothed as he continued to stroke his cock with assertive passion. Shreve reached his climax, finally releasing the pressure, erupting into Quentin’s mouth with unrestrained vigor. Quentin swallowed with considerable difficulty before removing his lips and standing up from where he had been kneeling.

“All right, what’s wrong?” Shreve partially raised his body into a reclining position, supporting his weight on his elbows, making his glorious abdominal muscles contract even more, Quentin thought in simultaneous admiration and despair.

“You’ve been slinking around naked for days, trying to get me to succumb to my lust,” Shreve continued. “Now, when I finally decide that I can give in to my desire, you won’t even show me so much as an arm.”
Quentin started to pack heatedly back and forth, letting his self-effacing rage take over.

“You really think I want to see your reaction again?” he hissed angrily.

“What?” Shreve seemed confused. “Do you not like looking at my erection? Because that would be pretty hypocritical of you, considering you had your lips around it not two minutes ago?”

“No, no,” Quentin waved his hand in adamant dismissal. He kept pacing vehemently until he stopped in front of Shreve, who was now sitting at the edge of the bed. “Not that reaction.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

Quentin swallowed, choking out the words with a stifled sob.

“This reaction.”

He threw off the dressing gown, letting it cascade to the floor and pool around his feet like a black abyss. He hung his head in shame, anticipating how Shreve would futilely attempt to assuage his aversion to the glaring flaws covering - no, comprising - his revealed body. Unable to bear the heartbreak of seeing the reaction he expected, he kept his eyes fixed on the dark silken void of the discarded garment. He could feel Shreve’s eyes on him, assessing him, raking across his vulnerable flesh. Soon the attention became too much for him; he closed his eyes and broke into sobs that shook his entire frame.

“Oh, Quentin-”

He raised his head to the source of the voice and risked opening his eyes. Through his welling tears, he found Shreve, no longer sitting but standing only centimeters away. Quentin was forced to look past the gleaming surface of the spectacles into the blue depths of Shreve’s eyes. He was surprised to find not barely concealed revulsion but dark, seemingly bottomless, hunger in the expanded pupils of his cerulean eyes.

“Quent-” Shreve moved to touch his downcast face.

“Stop. Please. Just don’t say anything.”

Quentin stepped back right before Shreve’s fingertips could graze his face with concern. He wrapped his arms around himself to hide his jutting ribs and the raised slashes of scars, but his flaccid cock and tender belly were left exposed, vulnerable.

“Quentin-” Shreve tried again, taking a step forward to compensate for this distance that Quentin had moved away. Quentin stayed where he was, but his body seemed to compress in on itself, like it was already tensed and prepared to flee.

“Don’t give me that,” he spat disdainfully, though his eyes were sorrowful and brimming with tears. “I already know what you’re going to say.”

“I don’t think you do,” Shreve whispered gently, softly pressing the palm of his hand into the small of Quentin’s back, just firmly enough to keep him from moving away any farther. “Unless you think that I’m going to tell you that you are the singular most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen?”

Quentin scoffed at Shreve’s imploring words and averted his eyes from his pleading gaze, although he leaned backward a little into the support of his lover’s strong calloused hand.

“You don’t believe me? Jesus, I love you for your intellect, but sometimes you can be so obtuse.
“Haven’t you seen the way I look at you?”

“Yes,” Quentin murmured, backing away from Shreve’s words and into the comfort of his hand. “That’s kind of the problem.”

“What?” Shreve pulled the shaking man closer to himself, the space between them still electric with the tension of Quentin’s crossed protective arms. “I can’t keep my eyes off you. All milky white skin and sultry lips . . . sharp angles contrasting with lush curves. You’re too angelic for this world, too beautiful to be real.”

“Oh,” Quentin breathed, melting back into Shreve’s arms and releasing the tension between them by relaxing his own arms. The action made him remember why his arms had been crossed in the first place, and he contested challengingly, “And what about the scars?”

Shreve’s dilated pupils seemed to draw in the sight of the uncovered flesh which was slashed with scars. He paused for a moment to let Quentin see his enraptured gaze before speaking.

“You scars,” he began in a husky, lust-choked voice, leaving one hand on Quentin’s back to hold him still while he stroked the raised stripes on his slender arms with the other. “I’ll admit, it pains me beyond belief to see the remnants of what you’ve been through. But, so long as you aren’t so haunted by your memories that you feel compelled to harm yourself again, they are just another part of you that makes you completely astounding to behold. I can’t resist you.”

“Really?” Quentin wasn’t crying anymore, but he still struggled to believe the appraising words. “Prove it.”

“There’s nothing I’d rather do.”

More than happy to oblige, Shreve led Quentin by the touch of his hand back to the bed. He didn’t push the thinner man down with unrestrained force like Quentin had done to him; instead, he supported his featherlight weight with both hands to recline him onto the bed. Quentin felt his breathing grow shallow as Shreve lowered his waiflike body, breathing slowly but inhaling deeply at the intimate touch. He (Quentin) watched his flatmate - and now lover - from eyes hooded with desire; he marveled at the light and gentle caress of Shreve’s rough fingertips on his skin: more hesitant than even he - the virgin - had been. Everything about Shreve was bold and brash and impulsive, which was what made the interaction so unusual. But not just unusual - arousing - as Quentin felt his body tingle in response and all of his blood rush to his cock.

_**So this is what I have been waiting for**, _he moaned as Shreve's fingertips whispered across the smooth surface of his stomach, wandering downward, gliding toward his growing erection. The movement was needy but not pushy; Shreve’s bespectacled eyes would lock with his own, as if he (Shreve) was looking - soaking in every detail - to gauge Quentin’s reaction to each motion. He was coaxing, guiding, and urgent all at once, and Quentin felt the tip of his cock begin to leak as he knotted his hands in his lover’s chestnut hair. Shreve ran his hands over the scarred arms and then turned his attention downward to the slashed scars on the sinewy legs.

He touched the supple muscles and skimmed his fingers across the raised lines, trying to memorize their pattern like he was learning Braille. Every slow caress felt like Shreve was worshipping the contours and curves of his (Quentin’s) lithe scarred figure and, more importantly, indulging in Quentin’s undeniably aroused reaction to his exploring touch. It was like Shreve wanted to savor every blushing centimeter of formerly pale skin and cherish every reminiscent angular point or pliant slope, as if he needed to absorb all of it before it vanished into thin air.

“I need you,” Quentin breathed, moaning in pleasure as Shreve took his rigid member into his
mouth, using his tongue to stoke it with the same urgently curious fascination as his hands. With confident but luxurious motions, Shreve expertly caressed the length of the shaft with his tongue, sucking with his swollen lips as he did so. It wasn’t long before Quentin stopped convulsing with ardor as he orgasmed, and Shreve swallowed the release before flitting his long-lashed azure eyes up at Quentin with both uncontrollable passion and appreciative reverence. Both were too breathless to say anything, but Shreve got up and lay down next to his lover’s lust-burning form. They touched one another as their eyes met - only a few centimeters apart - with a longing that was somehow still unsatisfied. Quentin couldn’t stand it any longer and closed the small gap by pressing Shreve’s friction-reddened lips to his own. Shreve couldn’t help but smile as he sucked on Quentin’s bottom lip, pulling apart just long enough to ask,

“Do you believe me now?”

Quentin didn’t need to answer as he captured his lover’s lips again and kissed him deeply, the two of them close and radiating warmth in the otherwise dark and chilly room. The night enclosed them, surrounding them in the assurance of another day, with the stars watching them overhead in approval.

Chapter End Notes

Direct quotes:
Quentin quotes Shreve from Chapter 5- “C’mon, quit that wallowing”

Reference to “though Quentin himself felt perfectly all right” (Absalom, Absalom! 288)
A written confession

Chapter Summary

Shreve’s read enough of Quentin’s letters
Now it’s time for Quentin to read some of his

Chapter Notes

Quentin’s POV
Italics are his thoughts

TW for references to suicide attempt, self-harm, and attempted sexual assault
Mild body dysmorphia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Beyond Vietnam”
April 4, 1967

“As I have walked among the desperate, rejected, and angry young men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action.

But they asked, and rightly so, “What about Vietnam?” They asked if our own nation wasn’t using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government”

~ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“Good morning, my sweet non-epithet.”

Quentin awoke to the sound of the soft whispered words against his ear and a light kiss on his cheek. He peeped one eye open to find Shreve, dressed and ready for work, staring at him in adoration from beside the bed. He blinked a few times, vaguely aware of Shreve pushing a drawer shut and sitting down on the bed beside him.

“Is it that late already?” he groaned, sleepy and disappointed that he hadn’t woken up with enough time to re-enact the events of the previous night before Shreve left to work at the hospital.

“Unfortunately, duty calls,” Shreve laughed at his lover’s groggy voice and kissed him again, leaning in to whisper conspiratorially in Quentin’s ear, “But afterwards, I hope you can treat me to a repeat of last night.”
Quentin smiled shyly as he remembered what they had done and leaned up to kiss Shreve on his lips, “I’d love to.”

“Did I ever tell you how much I love you?” the surgeon breathed between kisses, “Because I just want to make sure that you know.”

“Yes,” Quentin replied, still mostly reclined on the bed, “It pains me to say this, but you should probably get to the hospital before you convince me to make you late.”

“Do I have to?” Shreve was reluctant and didn’t want to break away, but Quentin pushed him gently back up so that he was standing again.

“Trust me, it’s worse for me. At least you can preoccupy yourself with work; all I do is- oh wait! I have an IWW meeting today!”

“The IWW?” A shadow of concern passed over Shreve’s face. “That could be dangerous. Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I’ve missed it so much! And you don’t get to choose what I do.”

“Fair enough. Just don’t get hurt, all right? Meanwhile, I’ll struggle to make it through work . . . ugh I really wish I didn’t have to go.”

“At least you have something to look forward to when you come back.”

Bending down for one final kiss, Shreve winked at his flatmate.

“I most certainly do.”

Then he left slowly; Quentin watched him struggle to take each step towards the door, like there was a force pulling him backward. When he finally forced himself out the door, Quentin decided that he should probably get up too, according to the convincing grumble of his stomach. He left the bedroom with considerably less inertia than the larger man, although it was easier for him because there was no one to drag him back to bed. As he stepped into the kitchen, he was overcome by waves of appreciative love.

*You truly are the best man anyone could ask for,* he thought dreamily as he took in the shining countertops and swept floor. Shreve had evidently taken time before work to clean up ‘The Kitchen Catastrophe’ as Quentin had taken to calling the explosion of the wretched cake. His stomach grumbled again, and his admiration for his lover was replaced by its reminder that he hadn’t eaten since the previous noon (disregarding the fingerfull of raw cake batter which he had promptly spit out). Not daring to use the oven again, he looked around for a breakfast that didn’t require any culinary skill. His hungry gaze settled on a loaf of steaming bread, fresh from the oven. Quentin immediately knew where this had come from.

_What did I ever do to deserve you, my non-epithet?_ he laughed out loud as the stupid term of endearment crossed his mind. The hearty aroma of the bread wafted to his nose. _Since you did all this, I’ll give you the small satisfaction of using that word, but only this once. I suppose I’ll repay you for your unconditional thoughtfulness when you get home._

He smirked at the idea and broke off a hunk of the warm bread, stuffing it into his mouth, though he wished he could have something else in his mouth instead. Deciding that his sexual hunger would be satisfied later, he turned back to the bedroom to get himself for the IWW meeting. As he headed to the room, he caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the mirror. Although he usually made a habit of eating regularly, his collar bones and ribs were as prominent as ever, casting dark shadows on his
pale flesh. His lower belly stuck out a bit between his prominent hip bones, like it was at least some indication that he wasn't completely emaciated. Scrutinizing the slight swell of it, he couldn't help but compare it to Shreve's ruggedly toned lower abdomen. Shreve's body seemed more balanced than his own, thick and muscular and covered in rosy flesh, lacking the harsh unsettling juxtaposition of his own jutting bones and supple curves. Then, inevitably, his thoughts were pushed to last night: what Shreve had said and what he had done - proven to him - and the pang of self-consciousness subsided.

Still lacking any clothes of his own aside from the erotic dressing gown, he pulled on some of his flatmate's more fitted garments. He knew that they weren't tailored to fit his willowy frame; rather than feeling insecure, he thought the ill-fitted outfit was more amusing than anything else.

*What would Mother and Father think if they saw me now?* he laughed as he remembered how his Mother had always instructed Dilsey to dress him in well-cut, expensive clothes. Even at Harvard, he had taken pride in his polished appearance, which couldn't have been more different from the way his reflection looked now.

Aside from his glossy hair and bright eyes, he looked, quite frankly, like a vagabond. The too-long trousers bunched around his ankles, and he had cinched the belt to the tightest notch to prevent the rest of their too-wide length from joining the extra fabric at his feet. The shirt was also much too large, with sleeves that extended past his wrists. He rolled up the cuffs, threw on the overcoat (no longer covered in flour; apparently Shreve had taken care of that as well) and decided that this was as good as it was going to get.

He pulled out the small card which Marion had given him yesterday, with her name, occupation, and address printed on it, and looked to the other side where she had scrawled a second address. The street name and number were titled with the note:

> Remember, every Tuesday. Now you know where to find us. I would love to see you there.

~•~

Quentin stood outside of the ramshackle building, his fist poised above the knocker. As he was used to with his introverted demeanor, he felt a familiar rush of nerves and anxiety at not knowing what - or who - was waiting for him inside. Pushing the irrational fear to the back of his mind, he rapped his knuckles against the door, softly but without hesitation. After a few nerve-wracking moments, he was greeted by a bright smile and welcoming eyes.

"Good morning!" the caramel-skinned man exclaimed cheerfully. "Glad you could make it to our party!"

"Oh," Quentin furrowed his brow in confusion and pulled out Marion's card. It was the same address as the building, but maybe she had written it incorrectly? "I'm sorry, I think I have the wrong address."

The man peered at the card, evidently recognizing Marion's name with wide eyes, and spoke again.

"No, you're in the right place," he assured Quentin before winking at him. "It's a party you're here for, right?"

"Umm . . . right," Quentin replied slowly, catching the man's meaning as he was ushered inside.

When the door was closed, the dark-haired host of the fictional party dropped the overly-cheerful act
George's expression suddenly turned dreamy, his dark eyes glazed with far-off longing, "We all know the incomparable Marion; she's absolutely marvelous. One of our best. A friend of hers is a friend of ours." Then he snapped back to reality, and his gaze focused again. "Oh, and I'm George Buckwalter, pleased to meet you."

"Quentin Compson," he took George's extended hand, "I'm sorry that I was so clueless; I didn't realize that we had to be so secretive about being in the IWW."

"That's quite all right," George responded as he led Quentin down the hallway. "And it's awful how wary we've had to become in the past few years, with the business tycoons and the tyrannical government after us all the time."

Quentin nodded in agreement as they stepped into the small but cozy living room. He started to reply, something about how the IWW hadn't been so under-wraps two years ago, but his breath was taken away by the scene in the room before him. He had never felt so at home in his life, other than during the past couple of nights he had spent lying next to Shreve. The atmosphere was congenial, with pleasant chatter and faces of all colors and ages which encouraged his new arrival. With twenty-eight years as a quiet, reserved, and introspective young man, he'd always felt like an outsider in social situations, but now he felt like he was accepted, like he belonged. He spotted Marion's golden eyes and beaming smile, and she apparently recognized him too as she patted the empty spot on the sofa beside her. Quentin thanked George quietly before walking to sit down next to his new friend.

"I knew you would come!" she exclaimed and wrapped her arms around him in greeting. "I just know you'll love it! We're still waiting on a few others before we start."

"Everyone here seems so nice," he commented, noting how most of the other IWW members had smiled at him and greeted him even though they didn't know him at all.

"We have to stick together," Marion explained, glancing away to look at the man who had led Quentin inside. "George told you already, I'm sure. These days, it's always so risky being a member that we need to rely on one another. But, as you can see, that doesn't prevent us from welcoming newcomers, like yourself."

"I was part of the IWW before, you know," he argued teasingly.

"I know. I was the one keeping track of you, remember?" Marion's eyes crinkled as she delighted in how the shy man felt comfortable enough in her presence to joke around with her. "Oh, I forgot to ask! How did last night go?"

Quentin watched her crimson-lipped smile turn into a suggestive smirk as she raised a manicured eyebrow.

"Better than expected," he was shy and demure again. "Thank you, by the way. You really did give me the confidence I needed."

"You're welcome. But you really didn't need my encouragement; you have plenty to be confident in. With your looks, I'm sure he couldn't resist you, especially in that robe," she paused to look him up and down in puzzlement, perplexed by the ensemble of ill-fitting clothes. "Speaking of which, are
you really so poor that you cant afford any more flattering clothes? God, this country is so horrendous. That's capitalism for you, I suppose. The Wall Street scoundrels and their cronies have more wealth than they could ever need, while those of us at the bottom can scarcely make enough money to buy food - let alone clothes. Seriously though, I'd be glad to give you something from my shop if you need it."

"Thank you, Marion," Quentin smiled and returned to playful joking, "But I hardly think anything your shop has to offer would be appropriate outside the bedroom."

"You make a fair point," Marion laughed vibrantly. "Although you shouldn't be so modest. I don't think the people of Boston would complain if they got to see you walking around in some of my more risqué garments."

Quentin blushed up to his hairline as he imagined her description, picturing himself promenading through the bustling streets of Cambridge on Shreve's arm, dressed in only the finest of Marion's intimate fabrics. Once his face had cooled down a little, he laughed.

"However appealing that might sound," he whispered in her ear, "I think that's a sight reserved for the confines of my bedroom."

"I suppose it's our loss, then," she whispered back. They both laughed, and Quentin didn't miss how her eyes flickered to George with the same pining look he had seen in the man's eyes.

"Is there something you want to tell me about George?" he smirked just like she had, laughing harder at the way she glanced at him in astonishment, apparently believing that no one would notice the way she stared at the group's leader.

"W-What? How did you know?"

"I won't tell him if you don't want me to," he smiled coyly, "I don't think he's noticed, but he definitely looks at you the same way. And, as for how I knew, all I had to do was look at you two. Unlike you, I don't need to rely on IWW files to figure out who you've got your eye on."

"I didn't think it was that obvious," she tried not to look at the dark-haired man welcoming guests to the room, but her eyes kept drifting back to him. Quentin knew this look all too well. He often caught himself doing the same thing with Shreve.

"It's obvious, believe me."

"Promise not to tell him?" she glanced at George, who was shaking hands with the last remaining members who had trickled into the room.

"I told you, I won't," he promised "But you should tell him yourself. Maybe with the help of some of your shop's garments."

"I will if you will."

"I already did, Marion - it's your turn."

Marion and Quentin both burst out laughing, but stopped when they realized that it was the only sound in the now quiet room. The room was silent except for the echo of their laughter, and they exchanged a mildly guilty look. Quentin elbowed Marion beside him as George Buckwalter moved to the front of the room, earning the rapt focus of all of the people in the room. Quentin could see why his friend was attracted to the man. His stance was confident and authoritative, with a straight spine, but he was simultaneously familiar, smiling at his audience like he knew each of them
personally (which, with the exception of Quentin, he probably did).

"Good afternoon comrades, old friends and new acquaintances alike," George began. Although he was standing at the center of everyone's attention, he seemed to be able to personally connect with each member of the audience merely by looking at them with his deep amber eyes. It felt like he was talking to you, and only you. "I'd like to welcome everyone here today who has taken the time and effort to join us to discuss issues which, as socialists, are to the forefront of our concerns. As I'm sure you are already aware, the end of the war has not signified the end of our struggle. Though no longer sacrificing our lives abroad, we are still forced to endure conditions at home which are just as capable of wounding and killing us."

Quentin nodded in agreement, noticing how the others around him did the same, especially Marion who looked absolutely spellbound.

"Every day, the working class fights with the obstacles which the capitalist pigs mercilessly throw in our way. They tried to assuage our wrathful discontent by ending the war, but did that stop us from demanding the rights we deserve?"

The room answered with a powerfully resounding, "No!"

"They tried to placate us with promises of better jobs, but every day our men and women are turned away or even fired for factors beyond our control. Will we remain complacent as they fail to follow through on their promises of a better life?"

"No!" the audience replied again.

"And those of us who have jobs," George continued, his eyes blazing, "Must withstand conditions which are every bit as grueling as the gunfire and poisonous as the chemical warfare in the trenches. Fourteen hour shifts in inhumane factories with no breaks, living on the streets with wages that fail to support us. And meanwhile, the businessmen and their sycophants grow richer and richer by exploiting not only our labor but that of all poor and oppressed people around the world. Will we allow this injustice to continue by sitting back and doing nothing?"

"No!" Quentin said in time with the rest of the audience, his eyes smoldering with rage.

"I thought that's what you would say," George smiled with a lighter tone, receiving a ripple of laughter in response. "If you are determined to rid not only yourselves but our globally oppressed brothers and sister worldwide of the chains of inequality and bloodshed, as I know you are, please demonstrate your solidarity at the Ford Motors factory on Saturday. The workers are planning a general strike and I'm sure the support of their fellow woking people will help us show the elite and their pawns that we will not put up with their hypocritical iniquities for any longer! Join us, and together - hand in hand - we will become an example of how the united masses are more powerful than anything they can throw at us!"

The people shouted in approval, their voices rich with passionate indignation and outraged conviction.

"They can send out their police to stop our collective cry, and we will not back down! They can club us, maul us with dogs, beat us to the ground, and still we will not be defeated! They can imprison us for speaking out and even murder us, yet still we will not be silenced! Connected by out mutual humanity and our vision of a better world, we will never be stopped! They can wound us and kill us, but no matter how many of our righteous soldiers are lost in battle, our call for justice will echo around the earth, sparking fires of revolutions in the minds and hearts of every man, woman, and child! This is the future; it is a future which no policeman's nightstick or assassin's gun can prevent,
no more than they can keep the tide from coming in and the run from rising!"

The audience applauded, shaking the room with fiery determination and burning hope.

"And rise it will! The sun will rise on a new world: a world without wars wrought by greed, a word where no country is plundered for its resources by violence, and a world where every person had the chance for a life filled with happiness and possibility! This is our future; it is a future which we will shape with our own hands!"

The room was positively vibrating, like it would burst into flames at any second from the sparks that each individual member was radiating.

"So," George finished in a softly captivating voice, "I'll see you on Saturday."

Quentin was awestruck, enraged but brimming with hope too. He looked at Marion on his right and he could tell that she felt the same way (if not more so), judging by her eyes, which were ever more gold-flecked than usual and her chin, which was set in determination. He couldnt tell if this was because of her political convictions or her romantic resolve, but he figured it was probably both. In fact, it was clear that the entire room felt the same exact fires of coinciding indignation and hope, as if it elf overtake them in a roaring bonfire, which would set the whole world ablaze for a new beginning.

~•~

It was eight o'clock. Quentin glanced down from the clock on Shreve's wall to the doorway to his - no, their - bedroom. Although he had spent the better part of the day at the IWW meeting and the rest of it chatting at dinner with Marion, George, and a few other members, he couldnt wait for Shreve to come home.

Only two more hours . . . he thought, trying to ward off his impatience. It didnt work though; the empty doorway to the bedroom taunted him, reminding him that he would have to wait until it would be occupied by more than one body. I might as well get prepared for when he finally gets here, if only to keep my mind from thinking about how slowly the time passes when he’s not here.

He went into the room with the intention of making the bedroom look as romantically tantalizing as possible: maybe a few candles or flowers if he could find some. But as he walked into the room to search for anything he could use, he couldnt drag his focus from the slightly open drawer of Shreve’s nightstand. He remembered hearing his flatmate closing it this morning; it definitely hadnt been open last night. He knew that he shouldnt look - that whatever it contained was private and none of his business - but he had the nagging impulse which told him to open it. His skin pricked with the need to know; when he couldnt bear the sensation any longer, he gave in to his curiosity and opened the drawer.

Inside lay a tattered notebook, its surface no larger than Quentin’s ourspread hand, which looked like it might have survived a tornado. The cover was worn and battered, with faded stains that could have been years old. He picked it up with delicate, trembling hands and flipped through the water stained page. The first page was torn almost in half, but Quentin could make out the vigorous scrawl of Shreve’s handwriting:

21 September 1909

1909? Quentin thought. That’s nearly ten years ago - back when we were in college. Then he continued to read.
Today was my first day at Harvard and it was not everything I expected it to be. The students here are all just a bunch of overprivileged conceited brats. Well, actually, maybe not all of them.

From the moment I laid eyes on him, I knew he was different. Special. He looked just as lost as I felt, scared and silent and somehow haunted. He looked like someone I could relate to in all of this unfamiliarity. But I ruined any chance of getting him to think of me in the same way.

Instinctively I could feel that he wasn't one of them, but something about him unnerved me. I couldn't understand what it was about him that bothered me so much, so like the total idiot I am-

That's true, Quentin laughed. At least you admitted it to yourself at one point.

-I called him out in front of everyone. I just couldn't stand how aloof and withdrawn he was, all quiet and brooding, with slender limbs and plump silent lips. So I yelled at him, said he prostituted himself to a bunch of rich old men to get here. In front of everyone.

But -get this, that's not even the worst part. Irony plays a cruel, cruel game. Turns out, he's my roommate. Quentin Compson. He wouldn't even talk to me when he found out; I don't blame him after how I acted, honestly. He just kept on glaring at me with these strange fascinating eyes. Actually, everything about him is strange, really.

Quentin stopped reading, insulted by the description. I'm strange? You're the one who screamed insults at me for absolutely no reason! He was a little annoyed at nineteen-year-old Shreve but kept reading.

When I finally got him to talk to me - he didn't say much; I don't think he's forgiven me yet - I found out that he's from Mississippi. The Deep South, I know. But it was obvious that he hated nothing more than he hated the place where he was born (even me). I'm starting to think that's why he's brooding all the time. Hopefully, I can get him to forgive me.

Quentin flipped through a few more pages, satisfied that freshman Shreve had at least felt bad about calling him out. Obviously he had felt bad enough that Quentin had quickly forgiven him.

30 November 1909

What is the name of the bane of my existence? That's a rhetorical question; I know the answer. Quentin Compson. The Third. Yes, there are three of them. I can only imagine what the first two were like, but I'm certain that they couldn't possibly be even half as infuriating as the third.

Infuriating? First strange, and now infuriating? Quentin was more than a little vexed by past-Shreve's choice of words. Wow Shreve, really. I'm flattered.

Infuriating is one way of putting it. Moody, brooding, and temperament would also work. But also intelligent. Funny too, or he likes to think so.

I am funny, Quentin thought indignantly. It's not my fault that certain troglodytes don't understand my refined sense of humor.

-He can actually be funny, but mostly I just laugh at his strange jokes to make him smile. I'd laugh at anything to make him smile. When he smiles, he is dazzling.

Yes, gorgeous. You heard me right. And that’s what infuriates me most of all. A boy shouldn’t be gorgeous. Handsome, maybe, but not blindingly gorgeous. But somehow, he is.

I am reminded of it every time he looks up from tresses of ebony hair with his dark-lashed grey eyes. His eyes aren’t just grey though; they’re a kaleidoscope of emerald green and crystal blue and shining silver, the colors changing with the weather. Gorgeous doesn’t even begin to describe it. For some reason, infuriating does.

Why is he so infuriating? Yesterday I asked myself that same question and couldn’t answer it. But today, I figured out why.

Today, I realized that I am in love with Quentin Compson. The Third. The fucking Third. Breathtaking looks and infuriating personality and all.

Quentin looked back at the date. November 30. If he remembered correctly, he hadn’t had the slightest suspicion that Shreve might return his feelings back then, let alone love him. Then again, he was probably too preoccupied with ogling Shreve’s bare torso to notice.

It happened during class today. Well, that’s when I realized it, at least. Professor Henrikson was late to class, so naturally (like any other scholarly and dedicated student), I went to the front of the classroom to impersonate the old man. I mimicked his droning voice and stooping posture perfectly, making everyone laugh. Well, not everyone.

When I surveyed the audience, there was one face that wasn’t even smiling. His face was downcast and sullen and not laughing at all. And I couldn’t stand it, so - much to everyone else’s disappointment - I went back and sat down next to him.

His face immediately brightened when he saw that I had returned to his side; his pout morphed into a smile that lit up the entire room. And that’s when I realized it.

When everyone except him was laughing, the room was dark, but as soon as I could make him shine again (I’m proud to say that I think I might be the only one who can do that to him), the entire room was glowing. The infuriating part is that I will never be able to tell him any of this. I can’t tell him how I always look to him to see what he thinks, what he is feeling, because that’s all I care about. I can never tell him how the room lights up when he enters.

I certainly can never tell him I love him. But however infuriating all of this might be, I do. I do love him. And something tells me that, no matter what, I always will.

He stared in shock at the open notebook. This was more than eight years ago. Shreve had loved him for more than eight years. Of course, he himself had known he was in love with Shreve for just as long, if not longer, but he was still struck silent in amazement. He paged to the next entry that caught his attention, dated a couple of weeks later.

15 December 1909

Today, I made a discovery that changed my life. Well, Spoade helped me, actually, but I’m not giving him any credit because I think he did more harm than good.

Anyway, I think that there might be a chance that Quentin feels the same way. I won’t delude myself into saying that I know for sure, but there is a chance.
What makes me say all this? Not only is he infuriating to love, but today I saw him get just as infuriated as he makes me. When I lied and told him I was planning to ask a girl from Radcliffe to the Winter Ball, his demeanor instantly became frosty and he shut me out completely. It's not enough proof, but it's a start.

The entry ended there, but the last stokes of the pen were harsh, like Shreve had wanted to add more but had stopped himself. Quentin flipped through some more pages. Whereas the handwriting he has just read was crisp and decisive, the script was now almost unrecognizable and barely legible: scrawled like it had been written furiously.

4 February 1910

I'm certain he doesn't love me. How foolish I was to think - even for one hopeful second - that he did. Why else did he run away from me when I touched him? He was lying in bed, panting and shaking in what I evidently mistook for arousal, so I lay down next to him. The next thing I know, he was saying, "Why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin?" So I tried to touch him - help him - but then he was fleeing the room, leaving me rejected and alone. Shrevlin McCannon, you insipid fool, what have you done this time?

It very nearly broke Quentin's heart to read how his own actions had affected his lover. But this still wasn't going to be the hardest thing for him to read. He knew which entry he needed to read next, and he could already feel the guilt welling up inside him, threatening to overflow. Reading it would give him closure, no matter how hard it would be. With nervous trembling hands, he paged through the journal to find the correct date.

3 June 1910

The page was more water stained than the others, dented and wrinkled into ridges, and the short inscription was carved with letters which were even more jagged than the last.

He loved me after all.

But I will never be able to say it to him. I don't think I can write in here anymore. I don't even know if I can go on living.

Not without him.

This is what I did to him. I might not have killed myself, but I killed him. I killed him and let him die and went on living my new life. Quentin's chin trembled as he felt tears fall onto the page, joining the dried ones shed by his lover which had wrinkled the paper. His flooding eyes moved to the adjacent page, written in the same rushed and hasty scrawl but dated almost exactly five years later.

2 June 1915

My Dearest, Quentin,

You stunning, wily, infuriating man. I'm more infuriated with you than ever before. It's ironic, because I also love you more than ever in this moment.

You tricked me, you cunning bewitching swindler. You clever gorgeous thief - you stole from me the one thing I ever loved: yourself. I wonder what you would say if you saw me now; I'm laughing and panting and sobbing because for these entire past five years you were alive. You'd probably ask why it took me so long to open the letter, to figure out what you had really done.
But none of that matters anymore. You are alive - you might have deceived me, but you are alive and that’s all that matters - and somewhere in the world you must be wondering what happened to me. And I’m determined to find you. Not only to find you, but finally tell you what was in my heart all along. That you infuriate me beyond belief, but I love you nonetheless.

Love,

Shreve

It did not surprise Quentin that Shreve had reacted this way after learning of his faked suicide. It was just like him, in fact. Passionate and overflowing with uncontrollable emotion: sadness and fury and love. The rest of the diary entries were titled with the same heading, each addressed to him.

22 April 1918

Quentin, my darling,

So we are reunited at long last. I cannot say that we have been reunited under the circumstances I had hoped for, but - in this moment - everything is all right. To look at you right now, serene in a peaceful slumber in my bed, one would never know what you’ve been through. One would never know how much you have endured by looking at your face: ethereal and shining in the starlight. But I do.

At least, I know most of it. I know that you were betrayed in the worst way by a man whom you apparently trusted. That goddamn fucking bastard! I should have killed him while I had the chance! He kept saying that he got everything he wanted from you, and I still dont know what that means. Did he rape you? He certainly tried. I cant say for sure, but I need to know.

I do know that he revealed your true identity to all of the guests at Dr Codman’s party, destroying the new life which you had built for yourself. I also know that you somehow used your cleverness to escape his grasp and lead me to you, only to fall into the clutches of your good-for-nothing redneck brother. But now you’re with me. Even though you’re with me now - finally - there’s still so much that I dont know. I dont know why your arms and legs are covered in fading scars, or what led you to harm yourself. I dont even know everything that Carlyle did to you this evening. I’m certain of one thing, though. I love you.

Whatever it is that happened to you - scarred you - I will help you. Even if it takes months or years or the rest of our lives. Because you’re worth it. You’re worth all of the pain and not-knowing, because I love you and I will do everything in my power to show it to you. No matter what.

Quentin wiped another tear from his cheek. He couldnt tell if he was crying because of his sorrow about how much pain he had caused his lover or because of his elation that Shreve was so unconditionally dedicated to helping him start his life for the third time.

I’ve never thought of it like that, he laughed quietly as he brushed away another tear, but now I really am Quentin Compson the Third. Not the haunted Quentin Compson from Mississippi or Quentin Compson disguised as Elizabeth Marlowe, but just Quentin Compson as himself. And Shreve helped me see that this is all I ever needed to be.

23 April 1918
Quentin Compson, you seductive, beautiful man,

I simply cannot resist you. Somehow I managed to say that I could, but all of my instincts were choking back the words.

I've said it before: your beauty is jaw-dropping, and it never ceases to amaze me. Now that I've seen your lithe half-naked body flushes, I can't help but imagine how your slender legs would feel around my waist, how your plump lips would kiss down the length of my flesh, how your leaking cock would taste in my mouth.

I've always been fascinated by you, and now that you are finally beside me, my curiosity to explore the uncharted realms of your body is more overwhelming than ever.

From beneath your clothes, I could always tell that your body was thin and graceful, no matter how clumsy you actually are-

*Hey!* Quentin huffed aloud at the description. *I'm not that clumsy!* Then he thought about the six eggs he had broken yesterday and the rest of 'The Kitchen Catastrophe' and decided that Shreve's assessment was probably right.

-but I never could have imagined how stunning you are in the flesh.

Even through I know I have to wait, I want to savor every centimeter of you. It's no longer enough to feel your Cupid's bow lips thrashing against my own, although a week ago a chaste peck from those lips was more than I could have wished for. But now that you're here, lying beside me after I told you we needed to wait, I feel more drawn to you than ever before.

I want to run my fingers across your soft skin that glows in the starlight, moving past the smooth silhouettes to caress the raised scars, not out of concern this time but unrestrained lust. I want to watch your body tremble not with fear but with arousal at my touch, and I want to see the pupils of your indescribable eyes widen as they lock with my own.

I want to explore the grooves of the contours of your body, your visible ribs and clavicle and hip bones, just as I want to feel the softer curves of your figure. But however much I long to touch and feel and cherish your luscious ethereal beauty, I know that I can't. At least, not yet.

Because what I want most of all isn't just to pleasure your body with my touch. I want to give you the confidence to do the same to me, to explore my body just as I yearn to venture into yours. And I know that, in order to do that, I - we - need to wait. I need to wait until you have had time to realize what you are capable of and how much you have been able to overcome. And until then, my love, my non-epithet (that would make a wonderful nickname, wouldn't you agree?), I have to quell my desire and wait. And when you are ready, I will be ready too.

Quentin tried to close his gaping mouth, but it fell open again. He'd had no idea how hard it had been for Shreve to wait. He had simply assumed that his lover's repressed desire was the result of some latent disgust at his own mutilated body. Apparently, this assumption couldn't have been further from the truth. He moved on to the most recent entry, which was left uncompleted.

25 April 1918
To the incomparable love of my life,

We had waited long enough. Far too long, in my opinion, and I’m sure you would say the same. Even though I have to leave for work now, I would subject myself to a thousand reprimands if it meant spending another precious minute with you. If you so much as suggested a repeat of last night, I would lose all of my will to resist, work be damned.

Another note: I’m starting to think that Spoade’s ideas weren’t as outrageous as I first thought, though he’d never let me live it down if I admitted how I

Then the writing stopped.

*That must have been when he woke me up,* Quentin thought.

He uncrossed his legs and stood up to put the notebook back in the drawer, but the creak of the door stopped him.

*Is it that late already?* he wondered as his question was answered by the recognizable pattern of Shreve’s footsteps. *Wait - he’s back. That means I can finally-

"Quentin, are you home?" his flatmate called with his usual cheerful - and extraordinarily loud - greeting. "I’ve been waiting all day to-"

Shreve poked his head into the room and the rest of his sentence was cut off by laughter.

"Jesus, is that what you’ve been wearing?" he chuckled as he walked closer to examine Quentin’s ridiculous ramshackle outfit. "What did the IWW say when you showed up looking like that? No wonder you were walking around naked!"

"No, that wasn’t the reason," Quentin defended his fashion choice with a smile and then continued to joke, "And what’s so bad about my outfit? I think it might be the start of a new trend."

"N-Nothing’s wrong with it," Shreve tried to stop laughing as he kissed Quentin on the cheek. "Well, at least, nothing’s wrong with those clothes on you. You could be wearing a potato sack for all I care and you would still be the most gorgeous man imaginable."

Quentin preened a little, mimicking a model pose. He kissed Shreve; he couldn’t resist adding, "And infuriating too?"

Shreve laughed before his turquoise blue eyes narrowed as he saw the journal lying open on the bed.

"Have you been reading my diary?" he tried to feign anger, but the corners of his eyes and the upward slant of his mouth betrayed his playfulness. "That’s supposed to be private, you know."

"I-I didn’t mean to," Quentin stammered, not quite catching on to the surgeon’s sarcastic tone. "It, um, was sort of - well, the drawer was-"

"It’s perfectly fine," Shreve assured him with another kiss. "Most of that was written to you anyway. Do you finally understand why I was refusing to have sex."

"I love you so much," Quentin interrupted him with a needy embrace, his arms pulling Shreve tight against his own body. Then he wrapped his legs (still clad in the oversized pants) around his lover’s hips so that the stronger man was fully supporting his weight. "I have to say, this isn’t exactly the ambiance I had hoped for, but after reading everything you wrote, I feel like I love you more than
"You know," Shreve said as he lowered the other man down onto the bed, "That's the first time you've said that to me. In person, at least. And God, if it doesn't make me love you even more."

"Well, no one's stopping you now," Quentin laughed breathlessly as he pulled the taller man down on top of him, "Except maybe these clothes."

"Of course, the clothes. How could I forget?" Shreve laughed too as he easily pulled the shirt over Quentin's head, "I might have to add 'fashion icon' to your repertoire of nicknames, my beloved non-epithet."

"Hilarious," the prostrate and now shirtless man deadpanned, but he couldn't suppress his smile as he ripped off Shreve's shirt.

"I'm not kidding," though Shreve obviously was; his eyes glimmered with both levity and lust as he undid the belt of Quentin's (well, really his) pants, "I mean, pants that are three sizes too large are just as flattering as that robe you had on last night."

"Well you don't seem to care," Quentin played along and pretended to defend the outfit now on the floor as he removed Shreve's pants.

"No, I don't," Shreve pulled off Quentin's pants in turn. "And you know why that is?"

"Hmm?"

"It's because I prefer you naked."

They both fell silent, breathing heavily in unison as they looked at one another's panting naked bodies. After a minute of staring - taking each other in - Shreve spoke.

"So... umm... we never really talked about-"

"Shh," Quentin pressed a slim finger to Shreve's rosy, kiss-swollen mouth to stop his stumbling lips. "I know what I want."

"Oh?" Shreve ran his tongue down the length of the slender finger.

"Yes," he breathed in a low whisper as he leaned up to whisper in his lover's ear, "I want you inside me."

Shreve, for once, didn't say anything, but the twinge of his straining erection spoke for itself. Quentin raised an eyebrow and pulled him down on top of him as he lowered himself back onto the mattress. He spread his legs wide and watched color bloom across his lover's muscular body in response. HE wrapped his arms around the back of Shreve's neck as he watched his pupils dilate even further behind the moonlike spectacles.

"It's all right," he whispered as he positioned his lover's hand. "I'm ready."

Then he felt strong fingers inside of him and his verbal encouragement gave way to breathy moans.

So this is what it feels like to make love, he thought dreamily as Shreve slipped another finger inside. If I hadn't run away from his touch all those years ago at Harvard, I could have experienced the physical manifestation of our love - gentle and sensitive, encouraging and curious, passionate and urgent, all at once. But it's so much better now. So much better now that each of us knows how the
Are you ready?" Shreve asked. Quentin could see how the other man's erection was harder than ever and already leaking at the tip.

"Yes."

Then he felt Shreve's length inside of him, and he couldn't help how his hips thrusted upward in response, while his head tilted backward in ecstasy.

"God, Quentin, you're so tight," Shreve remarked between gasps. Quentin, although dizzy with passion, had to point out the redundancy of that statement.

"Twenty-eight year-old virgin, remember?"

He pulled Shreve down further, deeper. They were both passing in near-orgasm when he remembered something he had read in the diary.

I want to give you the confidence to do the same to me, to explore my body just as I yearn to venture into yours.

With his arms and legs still entwined around Shreve's torso, he flipped their positions so that he was looking down at his lover's flushed cheeks and indigo, almost navy, eyes. Eyes which widened in shock at first and then fluttered closed with heavy lids, weighed down by straining arousal. Quentin thrust down further until both were breathing faster and faster.

"Quentin, I'm going to-"

"I know, me too-"

They climaxed almost simultaneously, drawing in shuddering breaths from the starlit night air. Exhausted, Quentin flopped down to lie beside his lover and watched their chests rise and fall in unison. Lying sprawled out on the bed, neither seemed to be able to find the words to express how they felt. It was as if the night, the almost complete darkness glowing with passion and only illuminated by glittering stars, had consumed anything they could possibly say.

"That was-" Shreve started, trailing his fingers down his lover's abdomen.

"I know."

"I didn't expect you to-"

"Neither did I. But I read your diary, remember?"

"How could I forget? Does 'Detective Compson' belong in your extensive list of nicknames?"

"No, you gorgeous fool," Quentin leaned over to kiss Shreve. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"And Shreve?"

"Yes? Is there something I can do for my astoundingly sexy non-epithet?"

"I want to go to Canada," Quentin sighed, imagining the rugged snow-capped mountains like his
lover's muscles and the crystal clear alpine lakes the color of Shreve's eyes.

"All right," Shreve supported himself on his arms and pulled Quentin halfway on top of him. "I'm sorry, but I can't say the same about Mississippi."

"Good," Quentin kissed Shreve once more, then just lay on his chest, moving up and down as they both breathed. "Because I'm never going back there."

"Let's go to Canada, then," Shreve said. "Alberta is absolutely breathtaking in the summer, though I can't say that any sight compares to seeing you."

"I'll be with you," Quentin pointed out. "And I could say the same about you. Also, Shreve?"

"Mmm hmm?"

"I think I need to get some clothes before we go."

"Do you really need to?" Shreve smirked playfully. "I think that silk dressing gown would work perfectly. Or better yet, no clothes at all."

"I think that's a sight reserved for only you."

"And Jesus, if I'm not grateful for that."

Chapter End Notes

The rest of MLK's speech can be found at https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam
A Canadian proposal

Chapter Summary

Spoade was right all along :)

A.K.A. the strangest proposal ever

Chapter Notes

Shreve’s POV
italics are his thoughts

the middle part is in the POV of an Original Character

then it goes back to Shreve

“And now,’ Shreve said, ‘we’re going to talk about love.’ But he didn’t need to see that either, any
more than he had needed to specify which he he meant by he, because neither of them had been
thinking about anything else”

_Absalom, Absalom!_ (253)

Yoho National Park, Alberta, Canada

“Canada is even more incredible than I thought it would be!”

“That’s the fourth time you’ve said that today,” Shreve pointed out as they hiked up the switchbacks
of the trail, “Seventeeth time this trip.”

“Why does it not surprise me that you’re keeping track?” Quentin kept looking around at the wooded
trail in spellbound wonder. “Seventeen, huh? Is it really that many? I dont think I’ve said that exact
phrase seventeen times already.”

“Trust me, you have,” Shreve teased lovingly, “Well, sometimes you replace incredible with
all basically mean the same thing.”

“And I could use all of them to describe you,” Quentin turned around from where he was walking
ahead to smile sweetly back at him.

“Cute. But you’re not talking about me. You’re talking about Canada. You didnt say any of that
when you saw me for the first time,” Shreve joked. “I bet you didnt even think it.”

“No,” Quentin admitted as he ascended the slope, “The first thing I thought when I saw you was
how I thought your eyes were the color of alpine lakes.”
“You’ll see for yourself soon enough. We’ll be at Lake O’Hara in less than a kilometer,” Shreve assured him. He knew what the lakes looked like, and he was flattered by the comparison. Then he continued to tease his lover, “You do realize that your first thought about me doesn’t help your argument, don’t you? You were comparing my eyes to a geographical feature of Canada. Do you have some sort of obsession with Canada that I should know about?”

“No, I’m just obsessed with strapping Canadians who have a penchant for arguing with me,” Quentin teased back. “Even when they know I’m right. Would hearing my second thought make you feel better?”

“As long as it’s not comparing me to Canada.”

“Well, the second thing I thought was, ‘Who is that arrogant loudmouth know-it-all who just yelled at me, calling me a courtesan in front of the entire freshman class?’”

“I was awfully sorry about that, though. And you forgave me,” Shreve argued. “Also, it wasn’t just the whole freshman class. Spoade was there too.”

“Of course,” he reminisced as he led the way up the path. “How could I forget about Spoade? What do you think he would say if he saw us today?”

“I’d reckon he’d be happy because we’re together, but he’d be more happy that he was right all along.”

“He really was. Even though we wouldn’t listen to him,” Quentin said before they fell silent to the rhythm of their hiking footsteps. Shreve kept walking behind Quentin, stunned by how all of Spoade’s mocking comments had turned out to be eerily accurate.

*He really was right all along,* he thought as he fingered the ring in its box in his pocket. *When I was nineteen, I thought his idea of a proposal was absolutely ludicrous, but now that I’m going to . . . I’m going to. I’m going to propose. I’m going to propose to Quentin at Lake O’Hara. Oh my God, I am crazy! What was I thinking? No wonder all of Spoade’s plans always sounded so ridiculous - because they were! It’s not like we can get married! We can even hold hands in public, for God’s sake! What the hell was I thinking? . . . but the look on his face would be completely worth it. Even if all I could promise was to spend the rest of our lives together-

“I can see it!” Quentin interrupted with glee. “Oh, Shreve, the view is even more enchanting than I could have imagined!”

*That makes eighteen. But enchanting is a new word, I’ll give you that,* Shreve smiled at his lover’s enthusiasm, himself enjoying an entirely different view as Quentin hiked the final few steps up to Lake O’Hara.

Far from his own pants, which had been much too baggy on his thin flatmate, the new pants accentuated the curves of his pert ass, particularly as they tightened when he walked uphill. He was almost just as captivated by Quentin’s love for Canada (the teasing was just that: nothing but lighthearted banter), because it reminded him of that December morning nearly nine years ago. The day when he had seen his introverted sullen roommate lose his haunted brooding expression, replacing it with enchanted fascination with the snow. Quentin was perhaps even more enthralled now, tugging Shreve along by the arm to show him the majestic mountains and turquoise lake.

“Oh, it’s simply magnificent, wouldn’t you agree, Shreve?”

“Yes, it really is,” he agreed without really listening, preoccupied with trying to work up the courage
to ask his question. His mind was already whirling with nerves when he noticed another hiker vomiting by the shoreline. Quentin, who was still gawking at the lake and the mountains, obviously hadn't noticed the other hiker, but Shreve only saw the stranger - the flaw in his plan.

Great, he thought sarcastically. This is just wonderful. I was already worried about what I'm going to do; the last thing I needed was another thing to worry about. We aren't alone for our proposal, and our unwanted companion just happens to be in the process of regurgitating the entire contents of his stomach. This couldn't be more fitting.

"C'mon, let's go," he encouraged Quentin to keep on hiking. He couldn't propose with another person within sight, let alone one who was polluting the pristine environment with his vomit. "Lake Oesa is only a few kilometers up the trail."

"But we just got here! This is the first glacial lake I've seen in my entire life!"

"And now we're going to climb up to the second one," Shreve tried to conceal how terribly his plan had been thwarted. "It won't take long; we've already made it this far. Now let's keep going!"

Quentin crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes.

"Shreve, you're acting weird. What's going on?"

"Nothing. It's nothing; don't worry about it. Let's get going."

"Can't we stay at least a little longer?" Quentin pleaded with wide eyes, which were not only silvery as usual but also flecked with the blue colors of the lake.

Shreve knew he couldn't say no to that look.

"All right. But five minutes - not a second longer."

Quentin was already sprinting to the shore of Lake O'Hara when he called back, "And I'm going to make the most of them!"

Shreve watched the man run like an overjoyed child to the edge of the water, his spindly legs pumping as fast as they could carry him. He turned the ring again in his pocket.

Quentin knelt down and splashed his face with the water. He gasped dramatically at the cold water and turned back to his nervous flatmate with an expression of exaggerated anguish. With locks of damp hair dripping onto his shocked face, he looked like a bedraggled cat.

"That's freezing!"

"It's glacial melt water. It's supposed to be," Shreve joked as he laughed at his lover's soaked face. "And maybe next time you should test the water before splashing it all over yourself!"

"What a know-it-all," Quentin scoffed and put his hand into the aquamarine lake again, wincing a little at its chilly temperature. "Frigid water isn't going to deter me from loving Canada, if that was your plan."

"Oh no! My plans to keep you from replacing me with Canada are ruined!" Shreve proclaimed in a tone of mock horror. "What ever shall I do!?!?"

"Jealousy doesn't look good on you," Quentin joked, pretending to take Shreve seriously. "You'll just have to accept a polygamous relationship. If you want me, you'll have to learn how to share me
with Canada. Take me with you to Canada when you visit. Every. Single. Time.”

Shreve laughed at Quentin’s pretend ultimatum.

“You really do love it here, dont you?”

His words seemed to remind Quentin that he only had a few minutes before they left; he went back to looking at the beautiful landscape in awestruck wonder.

However much he liked teasing his lover about his naïve and childlike fascination with nature, Shreve enjoyed seeing how Quentin was able to relax. Between his own busy schedule at the hospital and Quentin attending IWW meetings when he wasn’t at protests or strikes, they barely had any time to spend together, let alone relax. The midnight hours in which they were together were not exactly relaxing. Their restless nights were anything but relaxing. Exhilarating, invigorating, but definitely not relaxing.

Shreve was also concerned about how his flatmate’s participation in socialist-led demonstrations would affect his safety. Being bombarded by policemen armed with nightsticks, guns, and tear gas was dangerous enough; being known around Boston as the boy who pretended to commit suicide to escape his past was another risk altogether.

Although most people couldn’t place the widely publicized name ‘Quentin Compson’ to his face, garnering attention with IWW activism certainly wasn’t going to detract reporter interest. But here (in Canada, Shreve begrudgingly admitted), they didn’t have to worry about any of that.

Shreve did have something else to worry about, though, and standing here wasn’t going to do anything to help solve his problem.

“Quentin! C’mon, it’s time to go!”

“Yes,” he lied. He had no idea how long it had been.

“You’re lying,” Quentin crossed his arms and walked back toward Shreve. “I can always tell, you know. But if we really have to leave, we can go. You lead this time.”

“All right,” he responded. “Are you sure you don’t want to be the first one to see the lake?”

“I’m sure,” he smirked as he gestured for Shreve to start hiking. “There are other views I can enjoy from behind.”

“Is that so?” Shreve raised an eyebrow and started up the trail, thinking, _Maybe this proposal wasn’t such a stupid idea after all._

“Yes,” he heard his flatmate call from behind him. “I’ve got a great view from here; there are so many amazing things to look at! . . . like these rocks, for example.”

“Oh wow, I’m flattered. Should ‘Comedian of the Year’ be included among your many nicknames?”

“It was funny, admit it. And I’ll accept ‘Comedian of the Year’ as a new epithet. At least it’s better than ‘non-epithet’.”

“Umm, I don’t think so,” Shreve defended his favorite nickname and kept on joking. “And you know I was being facetious about the ‘Comedian of the Year’ thing, right? It’s called sarcasm. You’re
“I’m hilarious, and you know it,” Quentin bragged.

“Then prove it: come up with a nickname for me that’s better than ‘non-epithet’. I bet you can’t.”

“I know I can. Just give me some time to think.”

“Sure. Entertain yourself with how terrible all of the nicknames you come up with will be.”

Apparently Quentin hadn’t heard the last sarcastic remark; Shreve could already hear him mumbling to himself behind him. Apparently he was trying out different phrases under his breath.

While you occupy yourself with figuring out what my nickname should be, he thought, unaware of how he had quickened his pace as he tramped up the hill, I’ll try to come to terms with how insane I am for thinking that a proposal would be a good idea in the first place. The lake where I was planning to propose to you was already visited by a vomiting hiker. That must be some sort of sign, right? I’m such an idiot for thinking that any of this would work out. I mean, who in their right mind proposes to someone they know they can never marry, and then continues with their plan after a horrifying problem arises? I doubt even Spoade would do it, no matter how much he liked to talk about it in theory. Yet, for some unfathomable reason, I’m going to do it, even though you might say no. No, you probably will say no. Oh God, what the hell was I thinking? There’s no way you would-

“Shreve!” he heard a breathless voice shout from behind him.

Shreve managed to abandon his whirlpool of pessimistic thoughts for long enough to come up with a witty retort.

“I take that to mean that you’re forfeiting this competition! If you haven’t come up with anything better than ‘Shreve’ this whole time—”

“Wait up!”

Shreve turned around to find Quentin at least twenty meters behind him, panting and trudging uphill as fast as he could.

“Sorry,” he waited for Quentin to catch up, “I didn’t realize that you had gotten so far behind me.”

“Oh, I didn’t ‘get so far behind you’,” Quentin huffed irritably as he finally reached the spot where Shreve was waiting for him. “I had nothing to do with how ridiculously fast you were hiking! You’re the one who was running like there was a bear chasing after you! You were practically sprinting up the trail! Are all Canadians like this? I mean, how am I supposed to come up with a suitable epithet when I can’t even breathe!”

“You can just say nickname instead of epithet, you know,” Shreve smiled, planting a kiss on his cheek. “That’s where the whole ‘non-epithet’ thing came from in the first place. But seriously. I am sorry. I think I just got so lost in thought that I didn’t realize how fast I was going.”

“What could you have possibly been thinking about to make you hike like that?”

“Well, umm . . .”

“Oh, I know!” Quentin narrowed his eyes and grinned mockingly, like he had just discovered an enormous secret. “This is all part of some grand scheme to make me hate Canada! Do you really think that if you tire me out on this seemingly endless hike, you’re going to convince me not to leave
“Well, it’s not going to work! I love it here!”

“Even when you ‘can’t even breathe’?” Shreve teased him with a grin. “If you’re having that much trouble, I could carry you up to Lake Oesa.”

“And let you bask in the glory of proving your superiority to Canada? Never!” Quentin joked with an exaggerated cross of his arms.

“I’m being serious. I could do it - I’ve got at least 14 kilos and 10 centimeters on you.”

“Oh wow,” Quentin deadpanned, then proceeded in his best over-the-top Canadian accent, “My name’s Shreve and I’m so tall and strong and handsome. Oh, and did I mention? I have this strange complex where I constantly need to prove my superiority to Canada. I’m fine. Get over yourself.”

“You can’t be having that much trouble breathing if you can say all that.”

“You’re the one who offered to carry me,” Quentin teased. “And the problem isn’t that I’m weak. The problem is that you’re hiking faster than a car just to prove to me how great you are. There’s an easier solution to you carrying me - I’ll lead and set a reasonable pace, and you’ll just have to be satisfied with that.”

Quentin winked at Shreve to let him know that he was joking, turned around dramatically, and started slowly trekking toward the lake. After only a few seconds of walking, he turned back around to call out.

“And don’t expect your epith- nickname to be very favorable after all this!”

“Not with you in this mood,” Shreve joked, receiving a feigned scowl in response. “How did I ever make the mistake of once thinking that you were shy?”

“Because I am,” the not-so-quiet man kept on hiking ahead. “I’m only talking right now because I feel the need to speak out when you’re acting all strange and worried. You know I would never actually abandon you for Canada, right?”

“I know,” Shreve started up the trail behind him. “That’s not what’s worrying me. You’re the one who came up with the ridiculous theory that I’m jealous of Canada.”

“Well, whatever’s bothering you, you can tell me about it, if you think that will help,” Quentin was a little more serious now. “You’ve been acting so unlike yourself all day - this whole trip, even - and despite all the teasing, I want to help. However much I enjoy bothering you, I still love you. More than Canada. You know that, right?”

“Yes, I do,” Shreve grinned even though Quentin couldn’t see him. “I love you, too. Even when you do nothing but complain.”

“I have the right to complain! We got to a gorgeous lake, but then you insisted that we keep on hiking after only spending five minutes there. For all I know, it might not have even been five minutes. And this hike goes on and on forever . . .”

Quentin kept on whining, apparently more than a little annoyed with Shreve’s uncharacteristic
behavior and the long hike, but Shreve wasn’t listening; he was too submerged in the ripples of his own thoughts.

Oh God, he thought, opening and closing the ring box in his pocket. What was I thinking? By the time we get to Lake Oesa, he won’t have any words left in him to even tell me ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. And if he hasn’t completely exhausted himself after his rant (which is about as endless as this hike), what if he does say ‘No’? I don’t think I would be able to look him in the eye if he did, let alone walk the many kilometers down from the lake in absolute silence. I think it would actually crush me to hear it from his lips. Jesus, what the hell am I doing? Think of how horribly awkward it would be if he turned me down. What if he laughs at me? Oh God, I think that would be the worst thing he could possibly do. And he probably will. Seriously, I must be crazy for doing this, and surely he will think the same when he-

Quentin let out a gasp, interrupting Shreve’s anxious thoughts.

“Oh, Shreve! It’s even more breathtaking here than I thought it would be!”

Shreve didn’t even have it in him to point out that this was the nineteenth time he had said that.

“It is absolutely breathtaking!” Quentin gushed. “Literally! Even though I can barely breathe, this is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen! Thank you so much for taking me here! You really are the best!”

Shreve had just crested the hill to see Lake Oesa in all of its glimmering splendor; he was nearly knocked back down the hill when his lover barreled into him with a gigantic hug.

“I’m sorry that I ever complained! It was worth every second of that exhausting hike! Oh, I love you so much right now!”

Shreve brightened a little at that.

“More than Canada?”

“More than a million Canadas!”

Quentin kissed him with even more enthusiasm than his words suggested. Shreve was relieved and felt a little dizzy from his exhilarating nerves in the thin air.

“Good,” he put Quentin down so that they were facing one another; now he was a little less nervous than he had been before, “because I need to ask you something.”

“Oh, you want to hear your epithet? I’ve got a few contenders if you’d like to hear them?”

“No, that’s not what it’s about.”

“Then what is it? Is this why you’ve been acting so weird and nervous all the time?”

“I just wanted to make sure everything was perfect before I said this.”

“Well, ask away, because it already is perfect.”

“Because of the lake?”

“No,” Quentin twined an arm around Shreve’s waist and moved so that their faces were almost touching as he whispered, “because I’m here with you.”
Quentin was looking at him so intensely, like there was nothing else in the world that deserved his attention. Shreve decided that there would be no better time to ask.

“Look,” it wasn’t only the low pressure of the alpine air making his heart race, “I need to ask you something. Can we be serious for a minute?”

“Yes,” Quentin answered; then he broke their stare to look out at the lake, “but can I go look at the lake first?”

_I should just get it over with_, Shreve thought, but all he said was, “Sure. Go ahead.”

With a fleeting glance at Shreve and his subdued mannerisms, Quentin turned away to look at the crystal clear surface of Lake Oesa, its depths shimmering with flickers of emerald, turquoise, and azure blue water. Shreve took this distraction as an opportunity for him to fully commit to his plan.

_There’s no going back now_, he thought as he got down on one knee and pulled the box out of his pocket. He waited for Quentin to inevitably look back at him with some raving comment about how incredible the lake was. As expected, it didn’t take long.

“Shreve! I decided what your epithet should be-” Quentin spun around to face his kneeling lover. When he noticed Shreve’s position and his pleading eyed, he let out an even larger gasp than when he had first seen the lake, his breath evaporating into the cool alpine air.

“Quentin, I-”

“Wait.”

Shreve watched nervously as Quentin’s expression morphed from shock into fascinated observation; then he clasped his hands behind his back and casually walked in a circle around his kneeling form. Shreve watched apprehensively until early could no longer see Quentin, who was standing so that he was facing Shreve’s back and the lake.

“Now turn around.”

_What the hell are you doing, Quentin?_ Shreve wasn’t nervous anymore; all of his anxiety had channelled into confusion. He shuffled 180 degrees on his knees until his back was to Lake Oesa, and he was forced to look at Quentin’s oddly surveying face. He looked down, trying not to think about what the reason for his lover’s strange behavior was, thinking, _don’t you know what I’m trying to do here?_

“Look at me,” Quentin said.

Shreve, completely bewildered by what was going through his lover’s mind, slowly raised his eyes to meet his flatmate’s gaze, which was assessing him with intense focus.

“Hmm . . . so I was right,” Quentin smiled wistfully.

“Umm Quentin?”

“Yes?” came the dreamy reply.

“What are you doing?”

“Seeing if I was right,” he looked at Shreve with an expression of far-off wonder which was strikingly similar to how he had been looking at the Canadian wilderness. “I was.”
“Right about what? What are you talking about?”

“Your eyes. I always imagined that they were the precise color of glacial lakes. And now I can see that they are.”

“Oh . . . thanks,” he smiled, wondering why he had been so worried. Of course Quentin would be thinking about something like that. “Now, back to where I left off.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, Quentin. You kind of left me hanging when you went off on your little tangent about my eyes.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” Shreve chuckled at his eccentric lover, who apparently had been too distracted by his eyes to remember the proposal. “Now, I’m sure you already know what I’m going to ask you, but will . . . well, um . . . will, you-”

“No.”

“No?” Shreve was horrified. He hadn’t even been able to ask his question, and Quentin had already turned him down. He tried to conceal his despondency with stammering words, “Umm, t-that’s- that’s all r-right. C-can I ask why?”

“No. Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I meant that I have to say something first.”

“Oh, um, g-go ahead.”

Quentin extended his hand for Shreve to take. Still perplexed, Shreve took it with trembling fingers and stood up. Quentin was silent for a moment, just staring at him with unnerving fiery intensity until he finally broke the silence.

“Shreve, my love, my Oesa eyes,” he smiled as he said the newly invented nickname. “It’s more flattering than ‘non-epithet’, wouldn’t you agree? I didn’t prepare this, so bear with me. I don’t know where I’d be without you. I certainly wouldn’t be here, in the most amazing place I’ve ever been, with the most amazing man I’ve ever met, if not for you. To put it simply, you changed my life. And I know - trust me, I do - I know you’re waiting for me to give you an answer, but I just need to tell you this. I need to say this first, because a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ would never be enough to describe the way that I feel about you.”

He took another breath and laughed shakily as he finished, “That’s all. You can ask me now.”

“Wow,” Shreve exhaled a breath he didn’t even know he’d been holding in, shaking with relief and catharsis and euphoria. “I’m not entirely sure how to follow that up. You said everything I wanted to tell you. Except you got one thing wrong. I didn’t save you. You saved yourself. You are strong. You
never needed anyone to save your life; all you needed was a reason for living. And that, Quentin Compson, is why I need to ask you - will you marry me?"

Shreve remained standing, held in place by Quentin’s arms, and opened the small box in his hand to reveal the slender silver band within. Quentin wasn’t looking at the box though; his gaze was still fixed on Shreve’s eyes as he let out a breathy reply.

“Yes,” he kissed Shreve without sparing a second glance at the ring, parting their lips just enough so that their breaths merged in the crisp air. “Yes, of course I will.”

Shreve relaxed into his lover’s arms, leaning into his touch as he pressed their lips together with the lightheaded relief of acceptance. When they finally pulled apart, he looked back down at the ignored ring in his hand and then up into the silvery grey of Quentin’s eyes.

“I hate to interrupt,” he started and held the ring up, watching how the shining surface captured the rippling color of the lake, “but would you at least put the ring on?”

“Oh, I almost forgot about it,” Quentin laughed a little and let Shreve slide the wedding band into his ring finger, "you distracted me, I think. You have a habit of doing that to me."

"Hmm, I can think of a better way to distract you," Shreve murmured seductively as he pulled their bodies flush against one another and attacked his lover’s (fiancée now, he thought exultantly) lips with deep kisses.

"Not here," Quentin whispered back, flirtatiously sliding Shreve’s hand down until he was cupping his ass, "but back at the hotel . . ."

Andrew Wright usually prided himself on his even temper, but he had just about had it with dealing with this hotel guest. The man had been pestering him for the past twenty minutes, apparently unable to understand that he had no right to know the whereabouts of the hotel’s other customers.

"Look, for the last time, I’m not allowed to show you the record of our other guests," Andrew sighed exasperatedly at the tall imposing man, wishing the guy would understand that there was nothing he could do. "My manager makes the rules; all I do is follow them. If you truly need to know which room they’re in, you’re welcome to take it up with him."

"As lovely as that sounds, it’s so much nicer talking to you," the man said smoothly, but Andrew wasn’t fooled by the false flattery. By this point, the man’s formerly ingratiating smile had worn as thin as his (Andrew’s) own patience. "I told you; they are my friends. They won’t mind if you tell me where they’re staying."

"Do you have any way for me to verify that?" Andrew challenged and crossed his arms with a quirk of his eyebrow. "And if they know you, why didn’t they tell you which room they’re in? Surely you must know them well enough to ask."

"Obviously it slipped their minds," the man wasn’t used to not getting his way; he was having more and more trouble concealing his impatience. He undoubtedly had trouble taking ‘No’ for an answer, judging by how he spit out the next words through gritted teeth. "All you need to give me is a number. Just one number, and I’ll be out of your hair."

"Must I remind you for the fourteenth time that it is against hotel policy?" Andrew wasn’t one to give in so easily. "Either try to find your supposed friends or go talk to my boss about this."
"Fine," the impertinent guest huffed and started to prowl away before stopping to snap out a brusque (and clearly forced) courtesy. The man's politeness was insincere and oily with sarcastic undertones. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Wyatt."

"It's Wright, actually," Andrew barely managed not to roll his eyes. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have other guests to attend to."

Andrew sighed in relief as the insolent man skulked away and looked at the returning guests who had just entered the hotel. Recognition dawned on him, and he decided that it would be courteous to relieve his manager of having to deal with the obsequious man.

"Excuse me, sir?" he called after the guest who had just left to talk to his boss. "Your friends just walked in! You could talk to them now, if that would be easier."

The tall, unpleasant man turned his head with a scowl, glancing first at Andrew at the clerk's desk and then moving his gaze to the other guests entering the door. Instead of appearing pleased to see his friends, an expression of insidious satisfaction passed over his features before he turned around again and proceeded out of sight.

How strange, Andrew thought as he furrowed his brow, he must have been lying about being their friend. Not that it comes as any surprise; he was obviously up to no good. I suppose it was a clever choice not to let him know their room number, despite how annoyingly insistent he was. I wonder what he wanted with them, anyway? They don't seem like overly important people, probably just tourists here on vacation. Hopefully they get to enjoy the rest of their trip without any disturbances from suspiciously prying men.

"Welcome back!" Andrew greeted the two returning guests as they approached his desk. He was so relieved to finally deal with some reasonable clients that he didn't even need to pretend to be cheerful. "How was your second day in Calgary?"

"Oh, simply marvelous!" the smaller of the two men gushed. "We visited the National Park and hiked up to Lake O'Hara and Lake Oesa! You wouldn't believe the color of them - Oesa especially! I've never seen anything like it! Oh, and-"

"Quentin," the taller man gently interrupted his companion with a smile and a nudge to his ribs, "Mr. Wright lives here. I'm sure he's seen the lakes before."

"I have," Andrew grinned, "but it is absolutely thrilling when you see them for the first time. If I'm being honest, I still get a little awestruck whenever I go there."

His reply was met with two smiles. The shorter man looked triumphant at Andrew's response and shot his companion a look that said, 'See? I was right. Even the locals can't help but admire the beauty of this place.' The larger man apparently understood the silent statement, rolling his eyes affectionately as he spoke.

"Canada is a wonderful place, isn't it? Um, could we have our room key, please?"

"Of course," Andrew turned around and suddenly remembered the strange interaction from earlier. He handed them the key and decided to let them know what had happened, just to be safe. "I don't mean to worry you, but I figured I should tell you something."

Both men glanced at one another, perplexed and slightly apprehensive. "What happened?" the smaller man's voice was quieter, more subdued than before.
"Oh, I'm sure it isn't anything that you should worry about," he assured them with a gracious look, "but there was someone here looking for you. He said he was a friend of yours and wanted to know which room you were staying in?"

Fortunately, neither of them looked perturbed. They even exchanged a cheeky look that Andrew couldn't help but notice seemed more than just friendly.

"Thank you," the taller man laughed a little and took the key. "Like you said, we're not worried about it."

"If you'll excuse us," the other man tugged on his companion's muscular arm, "We should get going. Thanks again, Mr. Wright."

"You're welcome," he replied, glad that the couple wasn't as worried by the strange visitor as he had been.

Andrew smirked knowingly as he watched the thin man eagerly drag the studier man away. There was only one prospect that would make them run off to their room like that. Sure, they might have to pretend to be friends or relatives to the public eye, but they weren't doing a very good job of hiding it. Naturally, what the pair did in the confines of their bedroom wasn't any of Andrew's business, but he was concerned about how people who were less open-minded than himself might react. Shrugging off his worry, he decided that it wasn't his place to advise them, although he hoped that their lack of caution wouldn't catch up with them.

~•~

Shreve flopped down on the bed beside Quentin, both still panting in the radiating heat of the afterglow.

to be continued :) 

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