

## A Separate Peace, Chapters 4-7

### Chapter 4:

Gene admires Finny; he resents Finny. And the night at the beach illustrates Finny's lack of concern for authority (they stay out all night; rather than rush back immediately in the morning, he goes for another swim; he has lost their money, so they make it back just in time for Gene's trig test). It is the first test he fails. Images that open Chp 4 are of grey sombre skies, not typical of what we think of dawn on a summer's morning. Gene refers to it as dead-like, calls Finny in his sleep the same. He alludes to Finny as Lazarus like.

And so, the misconception Gene has about Finny begins to foster: he believes Finny acted deliberately, setting out to sabotage any success he would have had with that test. And although Finny acknowledges what Gene wants; to be the best in their class, Gene will not initially admit this, and when he does, Finny replies matter-of-factly: "What chance you've got anyway, with Chet Douglass around?" It is not lack of support, nor insult; it is Finny's direct assessment of how things stand.

Finny challenges Gene, saying he works too hard. Finny recognizes that Gene not only want good marks, he wants top marks; he wants to be valedictorian. Finny doesn't think he can, but he doesn't say it as a put down. He says it as a matter of fact, but what this does is compel Gene to compete for the best marks. Finny has no desire himself to be valedictorian but Gene doesn't get this. When Finny says, "I'll kill myself with jealousy," Gene takes him literally. Remember the flaws we see in others are likely more a reflection of self. Thus, Gene makes a huge error in judgment. He thinks Finny is out to undermine him, that Finny wants to be best at everything.. He thinks he and Finny as equal in enmity, that Finny is as cold and ruthless as Gene would be in order to win. He thinks that Everything Finny includes him in is meant to distract him from his academic goal. And in realizing this, he feels better, as if he has seen the under current of Finny's plot. He is dead wrong in all of this thinking, so the question to consider is what compels Gene to feel this way?

(from the south, not old money, not nearly as wealthy as Finny, no family links to the school, not athletic star, an outsider).

Gene, however, is now swept in the 'wave' of a powerful force beyond his conscious thought: jealousy. He thinks Finny is a competitor, not friend; that the rules apply beyond Blitzball of no allies. "My brain exploded. He minded, despised the possibility that I might be the head of the school."

Now he refers to him as Phineas, creating distance in their relationship by way of the formal name; he does not articulate any of this to Finny. He turns to studying and excelling in all subjects and soon outpaces Chet Douglass for Gene coldly surveys what he needs to win whereas he considers Douglass' passion for learning, "weakness."

Gene now considers he could be better than Finny; he is a good athlete and a great scholar; he could be number one. It is a competitive shift formed from insecurity, jealousy and misconceptions. But he is conflicted, finding himself suspicious of Finny's *treachery*, yet feeling affection for him.

Gene becomes a calculated student, strategic rather than curious and engaged. His detachment is seen as an advantage and he begins to surpass Chet Douglas. Gene actually sees himself surpassing Finny too, in that he is the best student and a pretty good athlete. What amazes Gene is how well they get along. Why? Because Gene is the only one thinking this way; Finny is innocently oblivious to Gene's line of thinking.

Summer passes and it is now August and exams are approaching. Gene continues to be paranoid about Finny and careful not to let his friendly mask slip. Culminates when Finny announces that Leper is going to make the jump. Gene considers this another waste of time, an attempt of Finny to sabotage Gene's academic effort. It is only when Gene gets angry about this that Finny realizes how much it means to Gene and he tells him not to, that it is "only a game." That it is more important to take what one is good at and do the very best. For Finny that is athletics and how this can turn into his war effort; now he realizes that Gene does have to study but that Gene can excel in academics.

Summer leads to autumn and exams, and while Gene pursues his studies, he won't miss any of the meetings/jumps: "I didn't want Finny to understand me as I understood him."

### **Heavily ironic line, in retrospect.**

The first part of the book ends with the inciting incident, the evening of Leper's supposed leap. It is late August and near exams, and Gene finally lets slip to Finny how marks matter. It comes as a surprise to Finny, for he considers Gene to be incredibly smart and it never dawned on him that Gene had to work for mark, so Finny tells him to stay back, that he will go alone to watch Leper leap. Conflicted again, unable to be open and honest and unwilling to separate himself from Finny, Gene does not; he resentfully follows Finny to the tree: "We followed our gigantic shadows across the campus."

And yet, Gene goes. And in going sets into motion events he cannot control. He gets that Finny has not motive, no plot to undermine him; so in this too Finny is better than Gene. "Now I knew that there never was and never could have been any rivalry between us, I was not the same quality as he." And this truth makes him feel even worse, even more afraid, and not of the war or jumping but of the dark side of himself. In that sense, he is like Macbeth, the darkness within compelling him to act in a way of personal ambition that is ultimately a downfall.

Finny proposes a double jump, something they have not yet tried. As always, Finny leads. They will be only ones to jump and now Finny proposes they jump simultaneously: so Gene follows and then the branch jostles, and Finny spins around with a look of curiosity, and Finny falls. He is further along the branch than Gene. Gene jounces the branch. Finny turns and looks at him, quizzically. And hits the ground. Gene responds with a clean jump without any fear.

## **Chapter Five:**

Post fall, Finny is taken to the school infirmary where surgery is performed on his shattered leg. When he is allowed visitors, Gene is the one he asks for. Meanwhile Gene has been waiting for/hoping that someone will confront him about the accident; he would prefer people to treat him suspiciously so he could build up some kind of defense, but no one does. When Dr. Stanhope tells him that Finny wants to see him, Gene figures that Finny wants to challenge him privately rather than cause a public scene, indicative of Finny's innate decency that Gene is just beginning to understand.

In the days in between. Gene does something very odd: Gene puts on Finny's clothes, including the pink shirt. What are we to make of this action? He sees not himself when he looks in the mirror; he sees Phineas. It seems so clear to him, unlike the confusion of his own emotions.

He learns from Dr. Stanhope that Finny will recover enough to walk but that sports are finished. Gene cries at the news; Dr. Stanhope scolds him gently for this reaction, as Gene is the one Finny wants to see.

On medication, Finny does not appear his shining confident self, yet he is aware enough to note that Gene looks sicker than he is. Gene tries to tell him the truth, but he panics or gets defensive and challenges Finny as to what happened in the tree. Finny says he just fell, that he turned to reach out to Gene and now Gene is defensive, saying Finny's intent was to drag him down, too.

Gene keeps pressing Finny to see what he knows, and Finny talks about a feeling he had, but a feeling is not the truth is it and Finny won't act on a feeling, so he does not share this with Gene. Rather, he apologizes for having felt it.

Gene once again recognizes the inherent goodness of Finny and feels compelled to tell him the truth, but before he can, the doctor cuts his visit short and with no further visits allowed, Finny is sent home to Boston to recuperate.

End of September the Winter Session begins. En route from his home in the south, Gene takes an alternate route in Boston and makes his way to Finny's home. Being in Finny's home makes Gene even more uncomfortable, even less an equal than in the impersonal setting of Devon. So Gene brings up the accident and admits he jostled the limb. He owns up to it over and over again, but Finny cannot bear to hear it, telling Gene if he keeps it up,

he will kill him, to which Gene replies Finny cannot even get up. The confrontation exhausts Finny; it takes something from him and Gene realizes that telling the truth was of no benefit, so he backpedals for Finny's sake, claiming exhaustion, the long hours of travel as a way of pulling back from the truth, ending the visit with a lie, that he will, in no way, start following rules.

## **Chapter Six:**

Gene returns to Devon; the peace of the summer has been disturbed as if by autumn winds. The student body is back to full enrollment of 700 students; now the focus is routine and tradition, the unthinking behaviors that keep people in check; thus there is a sharp contrast of the freedom of the past summer with the establishment once again of the Winter Session. People on power resume their authority; thus, Leper has been displaced to a room in an old building on the back of campus and his room, across from Gene's (and Finny's, when he returns) is now occupied by one of the student power-brokers, Brinker Hadley.

Gene makes mention of the two rivers that run through the campus, the Devon, the pure river, the river that the tree overlooks, and the Naguamsett, a dirty river, what Gene calls ugly. Juxtapose the two, one is pure; one is not, and it is on the Naguamsett that Gene is in manager of the senior crew team and where he is confronted by Quackenbush, a senior student, notable for his brooding anger and not much more, to the effect that people are unaware of his first name (Cliff).

Manager is a role intended for those who physically cannot play sports. Quackenbush looks at Gene to see if he has some kind of injury, but what hurts Gene comes from within. Their exchange is aggressive, as if Quackenbush senses something dislikable about Gene. Quackenbush calls him "a maimed son of a bitch". And Gene strikes back, as much, if not more so, for Finny, although there is an irony to that. After all, it was Gene who "maimed" Finny. They are both pitched into the Naguamsett; the dirty, impure river. Gene's defense is an odd one; on the one hand, he claims it is for Finny, but on the other, senses it is for himself. So, who is the injured one; who is the maimed? Think of it in comparison to Teiresias and Oedipus and the concept of blindness; who physically is; who really is.

On the way back to dorm he is then confronted by a returning teacher, Mr. Ludsbury. He scolds Gene for the laxness of the summer session, how the rules had been broken, rules that Finny would have scoffed at. Ludsbury tells Gene there is a long distance call for him (they would be rare and usually resultant of an emergency). It's Finny, who makes mention of Gene's visit, that he had been "crazy" when he visited.

When Finny learns that Gene has not tried out for any sports, he is outraged. He challenges Gene's excuse of being too busy for sports; if he can't play sports, then Gene will play for him. Gene reacts with a sense of elation, that he is becoming a part of Finny.

## **Chapter Seven**

We are now introduced to Brinker. He is one of those leaders who Gene recognizes as the hub of the school. Brinker is an insinuator, implying that Gene made it happen: Finny's absence, the room to himself. He unnerves Gene who reacts by saying, "the truth will out" and you could consider it foreshadowing as well as a cliché.

They head to the Butt Room, at Gene's suggestion, more to get out of the room and the intensity of Brinker's speculation, Gene is introduced as "prisoner" and Brinker does not let up on the insinuations about the accident. Gene feels his way out of the interrogation; plays it up as it were deliberate, but even as he spins a nonsensical story, he cannot bring himself to admit what happened, and that moment, the space between exaggerated humor and reality. He turns the attention on a younger student and sets him up to be mocked, relying on cruelty to take the attention off himself. It's his way of escape.

They settle into the routine of the fall, and then there is the onset of winter (comes early this year). Heavy snowfall leads to 200 students clearing the snow from the rail line, but Leper is not one of them, preferring to be out in the natural world, touring skiing, (cross country, slow paced, in isolation rather than in a social setting). He is in search of a beaver dam. Leper is an oddity, easy to make fun of, but Gene considers himself beyond that, a friend.

The others make fun of Leper for finding the beaver dam, for showing no interest in the war. Brinker is disgusted; the war is passing them by and he is stuck at Devon with the likes of Leper (pacifist) and Quackenbush (not planning to enlist). Brinker decides he will enlist the next day. Gene decides to do the same; to have a fresh start, to close the door on what has happened. It would be deadly, as he notes, but a more rational deadly than the rivalrous nature of Devon. The peace he had felt over the summer seems "chipped away" by the war; why not face it and get on with his life, to make the decision for himself rather than be forced into it...destiny rather than fate.

Or so he thinks.