

Chapter 18: Eighteen

The chapter opens with Finn coaxing the protagonist out of bed after three days of grief following her mother's death. Despite being in quarantine, Finn insists they take a walk, bending the rules to help her heal. The protagonist reflects on her absence from the alternate reality of the Galápagos, which she had previously escaped to during her COVID illness, and questions why it didn't reappear during her grief. This absence leaves her unsettled, hinting at a deeper existential uncertainty about her place in the world.

As they walk through Manhattan, the protagonist observes the stark contrast between the city's usual vibrancy and its current subdued state during the pandemic. The streets are quieter, interactions are cautious, and the "new normal" feels fragile and uncertain. She wonders aloud if life will ever return to its pre-pandemic state, prompting Finn to reflect on how trauma leaves lasting scars, both physical and emotional. His analogy to surgery underscores the inevitability of change, even in recovery.

In Carl Schurz Park, Finn surprises the protagonist with a marriage proposal, expressing his desire to move forward together despite the chaos around them. He envisions a future filled with shared dreams—children, a home, and stability. The protagonist, however, hesitates, distracted by a sudden question about why Finn abandoned his childhood dream of becoming a magician. This moment reveals a disconnect between them, as Finn's practical nature clashes with her newfound introspection about authenticity and purpose.

The chapter culminates in the protagonist rejecting Finn's proposal, realizing she no longer aligns with the life they once planned. She acknowledges Finn's goodness but admits he isn't right for her, emphasizing that life cannot be rigidly planned. Her decision symbolizes a desire to embrace change and redefine her reality, even if it

means letting go of stability. The chapter ends with Finn heartbroken and confused, while the protagonist feels a sense of liberation, poised to forge her own path.

