

SYNOPSIS

Salamanca (Sal) Tree Heddle, a thirteen-year-old is having a journey from Ohio to Idaho with her eccentric grandparents to visit her mother. Along the way, Salamanca, or Sal, tells her grandparents the story of her best friend, Phoebe Winterbottom, whose mother, like Sal's, unexpectedly decides to leave home. Sal meets Phoebe when Sal and her father leave their farm in Bybanks, Kentucky, to Euclid, Ohio, where Margaret Cadaver, whom Sal's father befriended after her mother's death, lives. Phoebe is a high-strung, prim, and wildly imaginative girl. She feels certain that some sinister connection exists between the morbidly-named Mrs. Cadaver, who is her next-door neighbor, the mysterious notes that keep appearing on her family's doorstep, and the strange boy, whom Phoebe dubs the lunatic, who appears at the house one day.

Sal intersperses Phoebe's story with memories of her mother, who was a loving, spontaneous, and gentle woman who could not shake off a deep sense of inadequacy next to her selfless husband. Phoebe's mother shares this sense of alienation. Her family routinely ignores her, and though she works assiduously as a mother and wife, she wonders at the smallness of her life. By this point in Sal's tale, she and her grandparents have reached South Dakota. They stop to swim in the Missouri River, where a snake bites Gram's leg. Sal and her grandfather rush Gram to the hospital, and although Gram recovers by the next morning, her health begins to falter. One day, Phoebe's mother disappears. Phoebe feels certain she has been kidnapped and begins an obsessive investigation for clues. Sal then retells the story of her own mother's disappearance. Sal, playing a good distance

from the house, had fallen from the tree and broken her leg. Her mother, who was pregnant, carried Sal home and rushed her to the hospital. Later, she went into an early labor, lost the baby, and nearly lost her life. Overwhelmed with sadness, she insisted on taking a trip by herself to visit a cousin in Lewiston, Idaho. Sal and her grandparents are following the path Sal's mother took on her trip to Idaho.

Sal and her grandparents have reached Coeur D'Alene in northern Idaho, but Gramps and Sal must rush Gram, who is gravely ill, to a hospital. Gramps will not leave her side, but knowing that Sal feels she must visit her mother's grave on her birthday, which is the next day, allows Sal to drive down the steep, tortuous roads on her own. Sal makes the perilous drive in the dead of night, and finally stops at an outlook on a steep, switch backed road where her mother's bus, more than a year prior, had tumbled off the road. Sal climbs down to inspect the wrecked, abandoned bus. When she returns to the car, a sheriff stands ready to arrest her, but when he hears her story, he drives Sal to her mother's grave and later back to Coeur d'Alene. Sal, already overwhelmed by tragedy, discovers that her grandmother has died. Sal and her father later return to their farm in Bybanks, Kentucky and begin trying to rebuild their lives their without her mother. Sal, who has made peace with her mother's tragic death, looks forward to each day on the farm and to the upcoming visit of all her friends from Euclid, Ohio.