***Chapter 1***

***Summary and Analysis***

***Summary:***

Brian is on a bush plane flying to the Canadian oil fields to spend the summer with his father. Brian’s parents have recently gotten a divorce, a divorce caused by a secret that only Brian and his mother know, though Brian’s mother does not know Brian is aware of it. Brian is angry with his mother, but he struggles to be polite to her. Therefore, when she gave him a hatchet before he left and asked him to put it on his belt, Brian did even though it was somewhat embarrassing.

On the plane, the pilot shows Brian how to use the controls, even allowing him to fly briefly. A short time later, the pilot becomes ill. Brian does not know what to do, so he does nothing. Unfortunately, the pilot has a final excruciating pain that causes him to jerk and in turn jerk the controls of the plane and move them off course. The pilot then becomes silent.

Thirteen-year old Brian Robeson, the sole passenger on a small plane from Hampton, New York to the north woods of Canada, boards the aircraft excited at the notion of flying in a single-engine plane. After the novelty of the experience passes, Brian returns to his thoughts of his parents' recent divorce. Brian recalls the fights between his parents and his hatred for the lawyers who attempt to cheerfully explain to him how the divorce will affect his life. What Brian calls "The Secret" also enters his consciousness, and at this point we do not know to what "The Secret" refers. Brian feels the burn of tears come to his eyes, but does not cry, making certain to guard his eyes from the pilot, whose name Brian cannot exactly remember. He suspects it is Jim or Jake, a man in his mid-forties who has been virtually silent during the ride. Seeing Brian marvel at the complexity of the control panel in front of him, the pilot offers him a chance to fly the plane himself. Initially reluctant, Brian declines the offer. Upon the pilot's insistence, he takes the wheel and for a few minutes has complete control of the plane.

The pilot remarks on some pain in his shoulder as Brian once again recalls the details of the divorce. Brian's father knows that his mother wants a divorce, but his father has no idea why nor does he favor the split. The court has decided that Brian will live with his mother during the school year and with his father during the summer. The plane jerks, awakening Brian from his thoughts. He notices the smell of body gas in the plane and assumes the pilot had a stomachache. He also seems to be experiencing increasing pains in his shoulder and arm. The divorce one month behind him, Brian is heading north to visit his father and to bring him some special equipment from New York. A mechanical engineer, his father has perfected a new drill bit for oil drilling. Brian recalls the long ride from the city to Hampton to meet the plane, during which Brian's mother had tried to convince him to tell her what was wrong, but he felt he could not tell her that he knew "the secret." When they had arrived in Hampton, his mother gave him a hatchet to use in the woods during the summer. Sensing that his mother felt particularly vulnerable, Brian had humored her by attaching the hatchet to his belt, where remained for the duration of the plane ride. Returning to the present to see the pilot jerk in his seat, Brian suddenly realizes the gravity of the situation. A jolt of pain barring his efforts to use the radio, the pilot jerks and flails in his seat while it becomes apparent to Brian that he is having a heart attack. Once the attack has ended and a frightening silence emerges, it takes many tense seconds for Brian to actually grasp what had happened. Seeing the whites of his eyes, Brian tries to comprehend the pilot's likely death, and to determine what action he must take, alone in a plane thousands of feet in the air.

When the novel opens, 13-year-old Brian Robertson is in a Cessna 406, a small plane, flying from New York to Canada to see his father. His father is a mechanical engineer who has created an improved drill bit for oil drilling and works in the Canadian oilfields. His parents have just divorced. As part of the new custody agreement between his parents, Brian is going to spend the summer with his father. Brian thinks about the divorce, mentioning a "Secret," fights, and a "big split." On their way to the airport, his mother tries to get him to talk about the divorce, but Brian remains silent. His mother gives him a gift, a hatchet to wear on his belt, but Brian finds it "hokey."

Brian is alone in the plane except for the pilot, a man in his mid-40s named "Jim" or "Jake"; Brian is not really sure. When they leave from the small airport, the pilot barely speaks to Brian. However, as the flight continues, the man becomes more friendly. He lets Brian take the copilot's controls and shows him the basics of guiding the plane. After they've been in the air for some time, Brian begins to smell the pilot passing gas. The pilot is physically uncomfortable, and Brian thinks the man might have an upset stomach. He starts rubbing his chest, then spasms dramatically as he has a heart attack. He either passes out or dies. Brian is left in the plane alone with the unconscious pilot.

***Analysis:***

The plane trip in [Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Hatchet/chapter-1-summary/) acts as a bridge between the divorce and Brian's time in the Canadian wilderness, suggesting a connection between the trials Brian faces at home and those he will face in the wilderness. In this first chapter, [Paulsen](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Hatchet/author/)establishes two important themes that will develop throughout the novel. The first is the theme of change. His parents' divorce has deeply disturbed Brian; he thinks of divorce as "an ugly, breaking word." It is forcing him to leave the familiar environment of home. He is already in a fragile mindset when the pilot's heart attack precipitates a crisis.

At 13, Brian understandably lacks a sense of autonomy to process traumas effectively. He knows how he feels and experiences, but not what he can do to change his circumstances. For example, he notices the smell in the cabin and the pilot's discomfort but says nothing about either observation. This chapter provides a baseline so readers can understand how Brian's isolation in the wilderness will change him. The Brian who gets on the plane in Chapter 1 differs considerably from the resilient person Brian will become by the novel's end.

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part***

***Summary Part 1:***

Thirteen-year-old [Brian Robeson](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-robeson) sits in a small bush plane, looking out the window into a blurry green wilderness. The only other person is the plane is the [pilot](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/pilot), a quiet middle-aged man. The two do not talk over the roar of the plane’s engine.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Brian’s quiet reliance on the pilot demonstrates his unquestioning trust in his own safety; it does not at first occur to him to gain independent control over what happens to him. The blurry green view of the wilderness below also introduces the idea that the natural world is initially abstract to Brian, lacking the meaning that it will gain later on.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Brian](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-robeson) is initially excited about the new experience of flying in the plane, but he soon becomes distracted thinking about the circumstances that led to the flight. His thoughts begin with the single word “divorce,” which he reflects on unhappily, remembering the fights and legal battles that his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-s-mother) and [father](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-s-father) have been going through. Brian also thinks about something that he has not told anyone, something he knows about his mother that he refers to internally as the “Secret.” Brian begins to cry, hoping that the [pilot](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/pilot) won’t notice.

***Analysis Part 2:***

The despair of his parents’ divorce overwhelms Brian in this moment, showing his initially simplistic way of dealing with adversity. The divorce, in Brian’s mind, is all bad, a force of destruction without any potential for growth. This passage also introduces Brian’s preoccupation with words, in this case “divorce,” and suggests the power that language will have to shape his reality.

***Summary Part 3:***

[Brian](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-robeson) looks over at the [pilot](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/pilot) and notices how attuned he is to the plane, almost as if he is an extension of the machine. The pilot notices Brian’s attention and tells him about the plane, asking if he’s ever flown in one before. When Brian says that it’s his first time in any kind of plane, the pilot encourages him to take the controls and steer for a few moments. Brian enjoys learning the controls and is surprised to find that steering is easy. The pilot tells Brian that “all of flying is easy. Just takes learning. Like everything else.”

***Analysis Part 3:***

Brian’s conclusion that taking control of the plane is “easy” underscores his immature relationship to the idea of independence. To him, the control seems complete and simple, but this idea is shattered shortly thereafter when the plane crashes. Additionally, the pilot’s words that everything “just takes learning” foreshadows the conclusions that Brian eventually draws about the lessons hidden within adversity.

***Summary Part 4:***

The [pilot](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/pilot) turns his attention back to flying, and [Brian](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-robeson) is again alone with his painful memories of the divorce. Brian reflects that his [father](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-s-father) doesn’t know what he knows about his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-s-mother) and reveals that he will now have to live with his father during the summer and his mother during the school year. Brian feels the plane lurch as he is thinking and notices the pilot rubbing his arm, appearing to be in pain. He smells flatulence and assumes that the pilot “must have stomach troubles.”

***Analysis Part 4:***

Brian’s insistent preoccupation with the pain of the divorce again highlights how self-absorbed he is at the novel’s start. Because he cannot see past the despair that this challenge causes him, he fails to notice even the severity of the pilot’s distress and so is unprepared when the situation worsens.

***Summary Part 5:***

[Brian](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-robeson) thinks about what it will be like to spend the summer with his [father](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-s-father) in the Canadian oil fields, where the plane is headed. He reflects that the flight isn’t so bad after all, but notices that the smell in the plane is getting worse, and the [pilot](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/pilot) looks increasingly unwell. Still distracted, Brian remembers driving to the airport outside New York City with his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-s-mother). He recalls that she wanted to talk to him about his feelings about the divorce, but he remained silent. When Brian didn't answer, his mother presented him with a present for his trip, a new [hatchet](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/symbols/hatchet) with a belt loop. He felt guilty for hurting his mother, so he attached the hatchet to his belt, even though he thought it looked silly.

***Analysis Part 5:***

Brian continues to withdraw into his own unhappiness, still oblivious to the danger of the pilot’s illness. His memory of his mother introduces the crucial symbol of the hatchet, which plants the seed of his eventual independence even as he remains without personal agency in the moment. Notably, it is his relationship with his mother—a sense of connection—that provides him with the means he will need to take care of himself, hinting at Paulsen’s larger argument about the ties between independence and connection.

***Summary Part 6:***

[Brian](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/brian-robeson) realizes that the [pilot](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/hatchet/characters/pilot)’s pain is getting worse. The pilot tries to talk, but is in too much pain to communicate clearly. Brian watches as the pilot attempts to radio for help but is then hit by a new wave of pain. Brian realizes that the pilot is having a heart attack and watches helplessly as the pilot thrashes in agony, knocking the plane’s controls as he does so. Brian struggles to comprehend what he is seeing, watching as the pilot falls still. Frozen with horror, Brian slowly realizes that the pilot is either dead or in a coma, leaving him alone in a small plane thousands of feet above the remote northern wilderness.

***Analysis Part 6:***

At the moment of the pilot’s heart attack, Brian’s situation suddenly intensifies from the pain of the divorce to much greater life-or-death stakes. This new danger paralyzes Brian, showing how unprepared he is to handle real adversity. The speed of this change also dispels the illusion of Brian’s sense of “easy” control over the plane on his own, providing an early example of the futility of the idea of independence.