Life of Pi

by

Yann Martel 2001

The BestNotes Study Guide by D. L. Cassie

LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The story is initially set in India in the late 1990's. The author has traveled to Pondicherry, a coastal town in the former French territory of India, which joined Independent India in 1954. The territory of Pondicherry still has many French citizens, as well as an unusually wide variety of churches/places of worship. The author then travels to Canada to interview Pi Patel, the narrator of the story, but little of the actual story is set there, save the author's observations of the adult Pi's home.

Pi grew up in Pondicherry in the mid-1970's, but the setting for the greater part of his story is the Pacific Ocean, specifically along the equatorial counter-current which runs east to west along the equator. The last pages are set in Mexico where Pi recovers from his 227 day ordeal at sea.

CHARACTER LIST

Major Characters

Piscine Molitor Patel (Pi)

Pi is the main character/protagonist of the story. He is a teenage Indian boy, son of a zookeeper. He practices three religions, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. His faith and knowledge of animal psychology help him survive 227 days at sea in a lifeboat with a 450 pound Bengal tiger.

Richard Parker

He is the Bengal tiger that becomes Pi's nemesis as well as his reason for living. The tiger ended up with a human name as the result of a clerical error where the name of the tiger, Thirsty, and the name of his captor, Richard Parker, were accidentally reversed.

Minor Characters

The Author

Though it would seem unusual to include the author as a character, in Life of Pi, the author is more than a narrator. He interacts with the adult Pi as well as describes Pi's home, family, cooking, etc. The character of the author adds authenticity to the story by reminding the reader periodically that the narration coming from Pi is the result of an interview process, not just the spinning of a tale.

Francis Adirubasamy

He is a close friend of the Patel family and a former competitive swimmer. He teaches Pi to swim. Pi refers to him as Mamaji, *mama* meaning uncle and *ji* indicating respect and affection. He is also the man who refers the author to Pi for the "story that will make you believe in God."

Pi's Father (Santosh Patel)

Pi's father is the owner/keeper of the Pondicherry Zoo. He teaches Pi the finer points of animal care and control, along with respect for the animals' strength. He dies in the shipwreck.

Pi's Mother (Gita Patel)

Pi's mother is loving and nurturing, especially in the area of education. She reads widely and shares her books with Pi. She dies in the shipwreck, or, she may have had the role of the orangutan in Pi's second story.

Ravi

He is Pi's older brother who loves to tease Pi. Unlike Pi, he is popular and athletic. Nonetheless, the brothers are close. He dies in the shipwreck.

Mr. Satish Kumar

He is an excellent biology teacher who finds nature to be an illustration of the logic of science. He is an atheist, and through him Pi learns to accept atheists as believers – but of another faith. This Mr. Kumar inspires Pi to study zoology in college.

Mr. Satish Kumar

Ironically, this man of faith has the same name as the atheist science teacher. He is a shopkeeper in the Muslim section of town. He is also a Sufi, a Muslim mystic. Pi feels that Mr. Kumar's shop/home is a sacred place and learns to practice Islam there. This Mr. Kumar inspires Pi to study religion in college.

Father Martin

He is the Catholic priest who exemplifies Christ's love to Pi. He meets with Pi several times, each time explaining that Jesus Christ lived the way He did because of love. Father Martin unknowingly catalyzes Pi's acceptance of multiple faiths.

Mr. Tomohiro Okamoto

He is the senior representative from the Japanese Ministry of Transport. He and Mr. Chiba question Pi in Mexico about the sinking of the Tsimtsum and about Pi's incredible survival story. He is reluctant to believe the story.

Mr. Atsuro Chiba

He is the junior representative from the Japanese Ministry Of Transportation who accompanies Mr. Okamoto to Mexico. He sees deeper meaning in Pi's story, but goes along with whatever Mr. Okamoto says.

CONFLICT

Protagonist

The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. He or she must usually overcome some opposing force. The protagonist in this story, Pi, is also the narrator. Therefore the reader gains understanding through Pi's point of view. He is a young man who is confident about his knowledge of zoology, but eager to learn more. He respects and appreciates the beauty of Hinduism, the religion he was born into, but is still striving to find his connection with God. Pi has not done anything to cause his life-threatening situation.

Antagonist

The antagonist of a story is the force that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. The antagonist does not always have to be a single character or even a character at all.

On the surface, it would appear that the antagonists here are Richard Parker and Nature. Pi's hardships at sea begin with the threat presented by the tiger, and progress to surviving starvation and the elements. However, the real conflict is an internal struggle. Pi must maintain his faith in order to survive, but he must compromise his beliefs in order to live. For example, he includes prayer in his daily routine at sea, but he must kill and forego vegetarianism to stay alive. Pi Patel is a seeker of knowledge and a seeker of God. He is striving to choose "the better story" for his life.

Climax

The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. The climax in this story comes in Part Three of the book. The reader has known all along that Pi survived his ordeal because it is he who is narrating the story. So none of the drama at sea is truly climactic. The twist at the end, when Pi reluctantly offers a second story devoid of animals and devoid of faith, brings the climax. Pi allows Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba to believe the second story if they choose, but presses them to confess which story they think is better.

Outcome

The outcome, resolution, or denouement of this is that both men admit the first story is better. This reaffirms Pi's own beliefs (even though the men may or may not really believe the story). Mr. Okamoto chooses to include the first story in his official report. However, the ultimate outcome is left to the reader because which story is actually true is never firmly established.

SHORT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The Author's Note, preceding Chapter 1, explains that the author has traveled to India, restless and in need of inspiration for a story. At a coffeehouse in Pondicherry, an elderly man named Francis Adirubasamy strikes up a conversation with the author saying, "I have a story that will make you believe in God." He refers the author to Piscine Molitor Patel who lives in Toronto, Canada. The novel then begins in Piscine's voice.

Piscine is an ardent teenager growing up in Pondicherry, an area of southern India that was once part of French India. The family, consisting of Piscine, his parents, and his playfully irritating older brother, Ravi, is happy. His life is rich with unique and wonderful educational opportunities. His father runs the Pondicherry Zoo where Piscine learns the psychology and husbandry of animals. (One such lesson in the workings of the natural world comes when Piscine's father explicitly demonstrates for Piscine and Ravi how a starving Bengal tiger reacts to a goat being introduced into its pen.) Piscine's mother reads widely and has an extensive assortment of books and literature which Piscine is encouraged to explore. In addition, Piscine's thirst for knowledge is nurtured by good schools and excellent teachers, in particular his atheist science teacher, Mr. Kumar, who inspired Piscine to study zoology.

Piscine is named after a famous swimming pool in France. A good friend of the family, Francis Adirubasamy, had been a champion competitive swimmer and touts the glory of the Piscine (pool) Molitor in Paris and thereby influences the parents' choice of the name. Schoolmates tease Piscine (pronounced Pea - seen) calling him "pissing." In response to this verbal bullying, when Piscine enters the next level of school he rushes up to the blackboard during roll and announces his full name, underlining the first syllable, instructing all to know him as "Pi." He proceeds to illustrate his new name with the mathematical explanation of the Greek letter pi, the "letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated tin roof." The name catches on and Pi is thrilled.

Along with his search for knowledge, Pi is also in search of God. He grew up Hindu, but at age 14, he meets Jesus Christ via a Catholic priest named Father Martin. He asks to be baptized. Soon after, he meets another Mr. Kumar, this one a devoutly practicing Muslim, and converts to Islam as well. Pi happily practices all three religions simultaneously, even asks his father to buy him a prayer rug so he can face Mecca to pray. Once, upon a chance meeting at the zoo, the priest (Catholic), the pandit (Hindu), the imam (Muslim), and Pi's parents discover Pi's triple religious affiliation and argue that Pi must choose one. Pi responds, embarrassed, that he just wants to love God.

As the adult Pi narrates his story, he includes seemingly random, but informative discussions of religion, zoology, and Indian culture. During the interview process, the author also interjects his own observations about Pi, his home, and even his cooking.

Despite the abundance of wonder in Pi's India, there is political unrest. At 16, Pi does not fully understand the politics, but he knows that it is Mrs. Gandhi's actions that cause his father to decide to close the zoo and relocate to a better life in Canada. The zoo animals are sold, mostly to zoos in America, packed up, and loaded onto a freighter called the Tsimtsum, to travel to Winnipeg, Canada with the family. However, midway across the Pacific, the ship sinks.

Pi is the only survivor, in a lifeboat with a hyena and a zebra with a broken leg. He sees another survivor, Richard Parker, swimming frantically. Pi calls to him and throws him a lifebuoy. Full of panic and despair over losing his family, Pi encourages Richard Parker to swim to the lifeboat. Richard Parker finally makes it and jumps in to the boat. Pi comes to his senses and realizes that he has just invited Richard Parker, a 450 pound Bengal tiger into the lifeboat. Pi "turned around, stepped over the zebra and threw [him]self overboard."

Now even more frightened of the black depths of the ocean and the triangular fins nearby, Pi wedges an oar under the tarpaulin at the bow of the boat and pulls himself out of the water. He decides that he might possibly survive if the tiger stays under the tarpaulin and he stays quiet and still on top. So he inches up the oar and reboards the boat.

A short distance away, Pi sees Orange Juice, a female orangutan, drifting toward the boat on a raft of netted bananas. When she nears, she climbs on board. What follows is a week of terror as Pi watches the gruesome food chain play out. The hyena eats the zebra, alive. Then after repeated screaming matches and mutual batting, the hyena finally eats the orangutan. Richard Parker eats the hyena.

The majority of the rest of the story is about Pi's 227 days at sea. He soon realizes that his only hope for survival is to tame Richard Parker. Oars and lifejackets are tied together to make a raft that will float, tethered, behind the lifeboat. This is Pi's "safe zone." Drawing on his knowledge of animal behavior, Pi convinces Richard Parker that he is the alpha male. He uses the whistles from the life jackets as his tamer's whip and "treats" from the ocean as behavior rewards. He marks his territory, his half of the lifeboat, with urine and vomit. Though he is still in fear of the tiger, Pi keeps Richard Parker at bay by keeping him supplied with food and fresh water until he feels safe enough to spend time on the lifeboat, not just on the raft.

Over time, Pi develops a deepening bond with Richard Parker. A sort of zookeeper/animal relationship maintains the truce. But more than that, Richard Parker becomes Pi's reason for living. The formerly vegetarian Pi learns to kill and eat anything he can, and shares his catch with the tiger. He includes prayer in his daily routine and often marvels at the splendor of nature. However, as months drag on Pi's and the tiger's health deteriorate. They both lose their vision temporarily. Incredibly, while blind, Pi drifts into the lifeboat of another blind castaway. At first Pi thinks he is hallucinating about a conversation with the tiger, but then realizes it is indeed another man. The two men talk about food at length. Not knowing about Richard Parker, the other castaway boards Pi's boat with the intent of killing and eating Pi. Dramatically, the tiger's killer instinct saves Pi as well as provides Richard Parker with a meal. Pi is distraught over the other man's death and cries so hard that his tears actually help to clean out his eyes and partially restore his vision.

In cycles of hope and despair, it soon seems that the possibility of survival is lost. Barely alive, Pi and the tiger drift into a floating island that seems to be made of knotted masses of algae. Richard Parker climbs off of the boat onto the island. Pi samples the algae as food. The two stay on the island and regain their strength, returning to the boat at night. Pi discovers thousands of meerkats living on the island, as well as freshwater ponds. At night, the meerkats take to the trees. On attempting to stay in the trees one night with the meerkats, Pi discovers to his horror that the algae that makes up the island secretes acid at night that will digest anything left on its surface. Pi finds human teeth within the algae and concludes that it is a carnivorous island that may have even digested a previous castaway who died there. Alarmed, Pi returns to life adrift on the boat, which has become a butchery, a circus ring, and a place of prayer.

When they reach land (Mexico), Pi is exhausted and weak. Richard Parker simply gets out of the lifeboat and disappears into the jungle. Officials representing the shipping company of the Tsimtsum come to Mexico to question the recovering Pi. They find Pi's story of his 227 days at sea too implausible to believe. Pi counters their incredulity with facts and reason, but the investigators are still doubtful. So Pi tells them a completely different story, a story that includes in the lifeboat Pi's mother, a sailor with a broken leg, and a French cook.

The second story has murder and cannibalism, but no animals and no floating island. One investigator notes the parallels between the people and the animals of the two stories, but the other dismisses them. They seem satisfied. Pi says to the men, "In both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer," to illustrate that there is no factual difference in the outcomes of the two stories. He then asks the men which story they prefer. They admit to preferring the story with the animals, the better story. "And so it goes with God," is Pi's

response. The better story is what ends up in the men's report.

THEMES

The Better Story

The predominant theme is the concept of the "better story", in other words, the importance of telling a good story. Life itself is a story and one can choose his own story. The "better story" is the more imaginative one and, according to Pi, the one God would choose as well. One must have faith in something beyond bare logic.

Science and Religion

A minor theme is the reconciliation of science and religion as ways to understand the world. Pi meshes the two in order to survive 227 days on the lifeboat. He ends up majoring in both zoology and religious studies.

Religious Syncretism

Another minor theme is the syncretism, or union of the seemingly opposing principals, of religions. As different as Pi's three religions are, they all involve a personal relationship with God. They are blended into Pi's own unique spirituality and remain with him as an adult.

MOOD

The novel is divided into three parts and the mood changes as one part transitions to the next. In Part One, the mood is wondrous, full of the embarrassments and marvels of childhood. It changes to a spiritual mood as Pi gets older, discovers multiple ways to know God, and prepares for the journey to Canada. Part Two deepens the spiritual mood, but as time goes on and Pi's situation becomes more and more life-threatening, the mood changes to desperation. In Part Three the desperation remains as Pi tries intently to get the Japanese representatives to believe his story. The desperation turns to satisfaction when Pi is finally able to make his point.

Yann Martel - BIOGRAPHY

Yann Martel is a Canadian author who was born in Spain on June 25th, 1963. His parents were there while Martel's father was on a scholarship to complete his doctorate. Martel's family traveled a lot because his father was a teacher and a diplomat. Martel therefore grew up in Alaska, British Columbia, Costa Rica, France, Ontario, and Mexico.

He attended Trinity College School in Port Hope, Ontario from 1979 to his graduation two years later. He continued on and studied philosophy at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. While beginning his writing career, Martel took various jobs such as tree planting, dish washing, and working as a security guard. He has been living off his writing since the age of 27. Yann Martel currently lives in Montreal. In addition to writing, he practices yoga and volunteers at a palliative care unit.

As an adult, Martel has traveled to Iran, Turkey and India. To write *Life of Pi*, he spent six months in India visiting zoos, temples, mosques, and churches. He interviewed the director of the Trivandrum Zoo. To create his main character, Pi, Martel immersed himself in the Indian culture. He then returned to Canada to research Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, as well as animal psychology and disaster/castaway stories. The subsequent writing of Life of Pi took two more years.

Works by Yann Martel include:

The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatio (short stories, 1993)

Self (novel, 1996)

Life of Pi (novel, 2001)

Life of Pi won the Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction 2001, the Man Booker Prize 2002, CBC Radio's Canada Reads competition 2003, and the French version won the 2004 Le Combat de Livres.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Summary

The author is in India attempting to write a novel. He is displeased with his progress, as his current story lacks passion. It hasn't a spark of life, so he mails his notes off to a fictitious address in Siberia.

While in a coffeehouse in Pondicherry, he is conversing with an elderly man named Francis Adirubasamy. The man offers a story "that will make you believe in God." The author is skeptical at first, assuming the man is some sort of fundamentalist or evangelist. The man says the author must get the true account from the person who lived it – a man named Patel, in Canada. The author goes to Canada, finds Patel, and gets his story. The story is told in Patel's voice.

Notes

The Author's Note begins autobiographically, explaining Martel's trip to India and his restlessness as he searches for a story. However, the Author's Note is more than an "Introduction," "Acknowledgement," or "Foreword" to the book. It sets the reader up for actually believing the story. It establishes the setting as a real place. The formerly French territory in south India where Pondicherry is located, of course, exists. Even the coffee house in Pondicherry exists, across the road from the Trivandrum Zoo. The "Pondicherry Zoo" does not exist, but the Botanical Gardens do. The author introduces Francis Adirubasamy as a real person, and even goes so far as to include the characters of Mr. Patel, Mr. Adirubasamy, and Mr. Okamoto in the acknowledgements. The characters are mentioned right beside the non-fictitious Canada Council for the Arts which granted support for Martel's writing of Life of Pi in 1997. Mixing actuality and invention prepares the reader for the "better story" so that we do not "sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality" or "end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams."

PART ONE - Toronto and Pondicherry

CHAPTER 1

Summary

A gloomy, unknown narrator presents himself, explaining that he has majored in both religious studies and zoology at the University of Toronto - his religious studies thesis being about the cosmogony theory of Isaac Luria, and his zoology thesis about the thyroid gland of the three-toed sloth. He then describes the nature and habits of the sloth in detail. Though he was recognized for his intelligence and ability in the zoology department, he personally did not separate science and religion, "such a beautiful example of the miracle of life, reminded me of God." He mentions the goddess Lakshmi, hinting that he may be of the Hindu faith.

He describes how he loves Canada, but misses India. He also misses Richard Parker (though the reader does not yet know exactly who Richard Parker is). He continues, disjointedly, about his experience in the hospital in Mexico and his embarrassment at an Indian restaurant in Canada.

Notes

Chapter 1 sets the pace and motif of the novel. The reader will often be sidetracked by digressions into the nature and habits of animals and their relationship with humans. These descriptions were well researched by Martel and can be considered accurate science. The main character will also often digress into religious remarks, but they will not always come from the Hindu faith.

The topics for the theses are significant. The "thyroid gland of the three-toed sloth" sounds methodologically scientific, but the narrator chose the sloth because of its soothing, spiritually calming nature. The doctrines of Isaac Luria's cosmogony are based on the Old Testament and Zohar (Kabbalist text), but the concepts closely correspond to the Big Bang Theory which was validated by science hundred of years after Luria. This coexistence of faith and science is the motif of the novel.

Lastly, the narrator's list of the top five places to visit presages the particulars that the reader will be learning about Pi's life. The list includes Oxford, representing intellectual/scientific interests, Mecca, the holiest city for Muslims, Varanasi, the holiest city for Hindus, Jerusalem, the holiest city for Christians, and Paris, the city of magnificent swimming pools.

CHAPTER 2

Summary

Patel lives in Scarborough. He is a small, dark man of about forty. He speaks quickly and goes into his story.

Notes

This is a brief interjection by the author giving the narrator's physical appearance and location. It let's the reader know that the previous chapter was the beginning of the author's interview with the man in Canada referred to in the Author's Note. These interjections support the reality of the story.

CHAPTER 3

Summary

The narrator (Patel) talks about Francis Adirubasamy who is a close family friend. Patel calls him Mamaji (dear uncle). Mamaji was a champion competitive swimmer and tries to teach Patel's parents and older brother, Ravi to swim. The family is unskilled and unenthusiastic, except for Patel himself, who is thrilled with both swimming and pleasing his "uncle."

In addition to teaching swimming, Mamaji loves to talk about swimming and about the incredible swimming pools in Paris. Patel's father loves to hear of them. Mamaji gloriously praises one pool in particular, the Piscine Molitor. So taken is Patel's father with the dreamlike image of that pool, that his son becomes its namesake. We finally learn the narrator's name: Piscine Molitor Patel.

Notes

India did have an Olympic swimmer in 1928, named Mulji. He may have been Martel's model for Mamaji. It will become significant later in the story that Piscine is the only family member that can swim. The word *piscine* (pronounced pee-seen) means pool in French. However, the word *piscine* (pronounced pie-seen) means fish-like in English. This is an interesting play on the word in light of what is in store for Piscine in Part 2 of the novel.

CHAPTER 4

Summary

Piscine gives a charming description of The Pondicherry Zoo, and explains how his father, a former hotelier, came to be its founder, owner, and director. Keeping a zoo is humorously compared to keeping a hotel, the zoo guests being unhygienic, sexually open, and never leaving tips.

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CHAPTER 7

Summary

Pi gives an account of a meeting he has with Mr. Satish Kumar, his Communist, atheist, favorite, biology teacher. Mr. Kumar is visiting the zoo, delighting in the perfect order of nature. Pi explains why there are goats in the rhino enclosure – they are social animals and need the company. Mr. Kumar discusses the value of...

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CHAPTERS 9, 10, 11

Summary

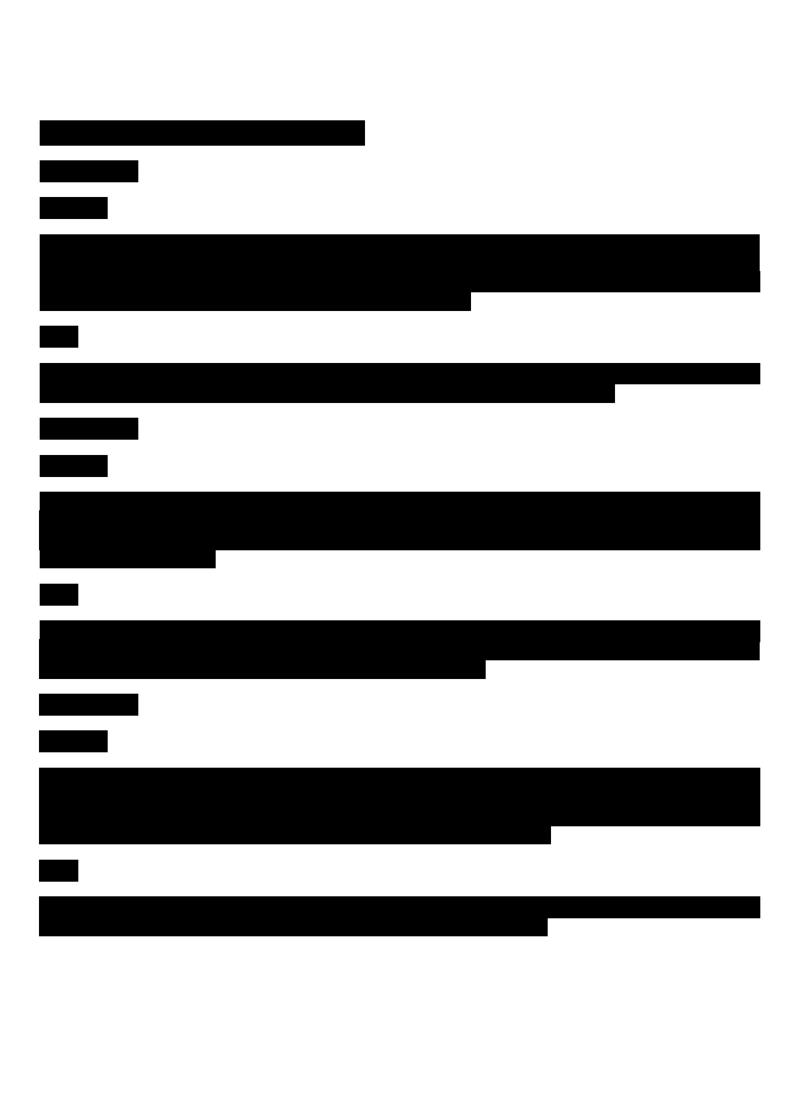
Pi shares insight into the art and science of zookeeping. In Chapter 9 he defines the concept of flight distance – the distance an animal wants to keep from an enemy...

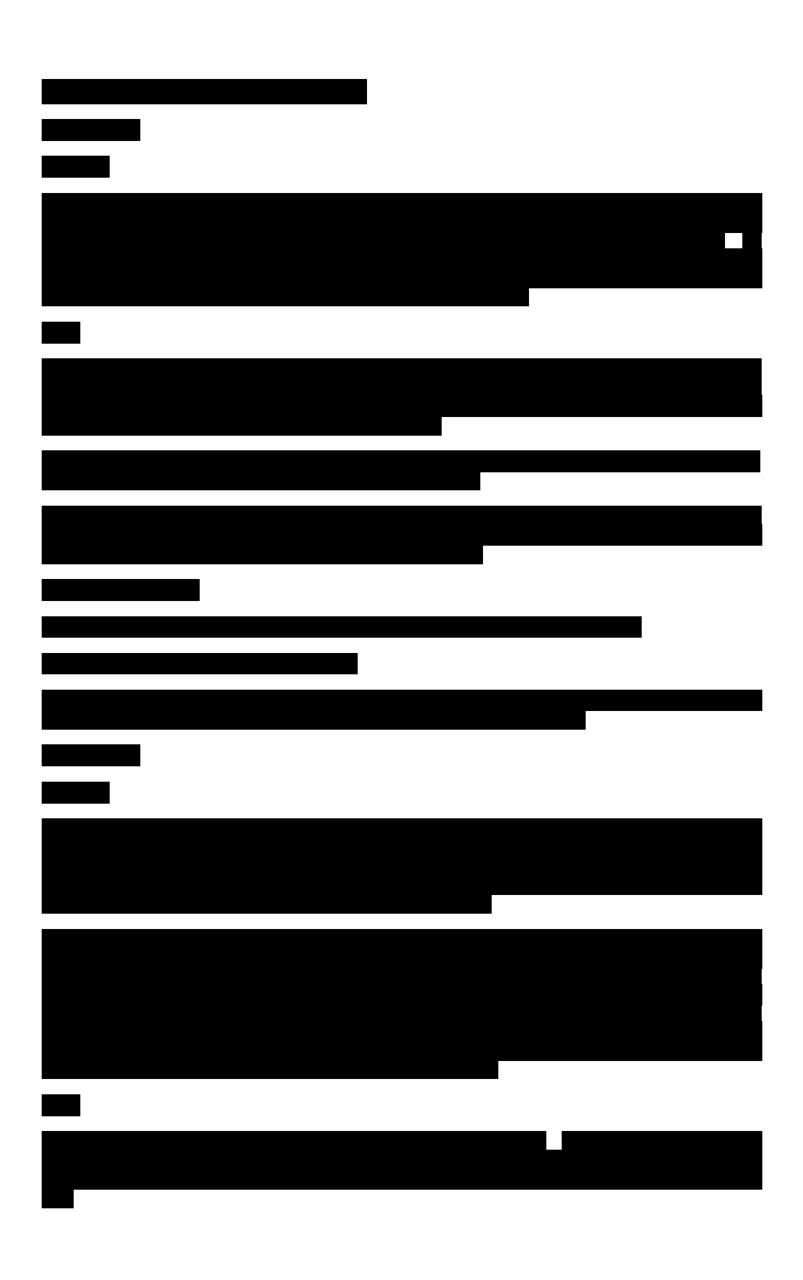
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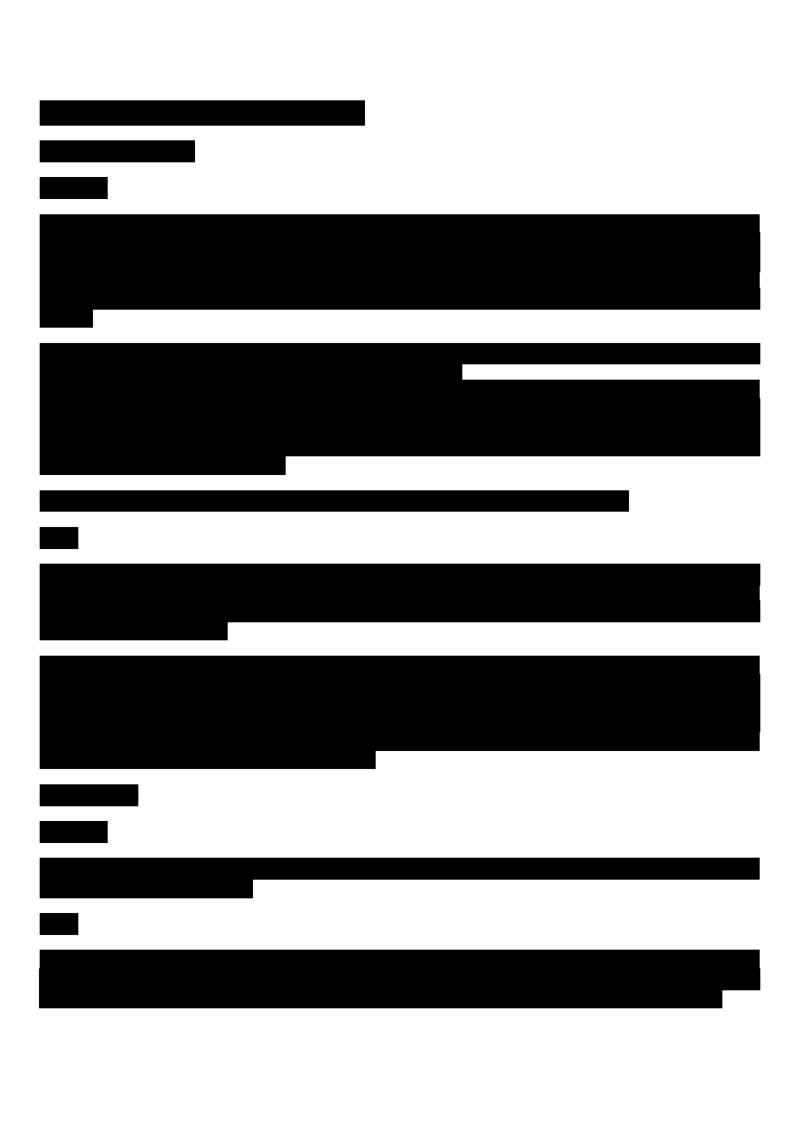
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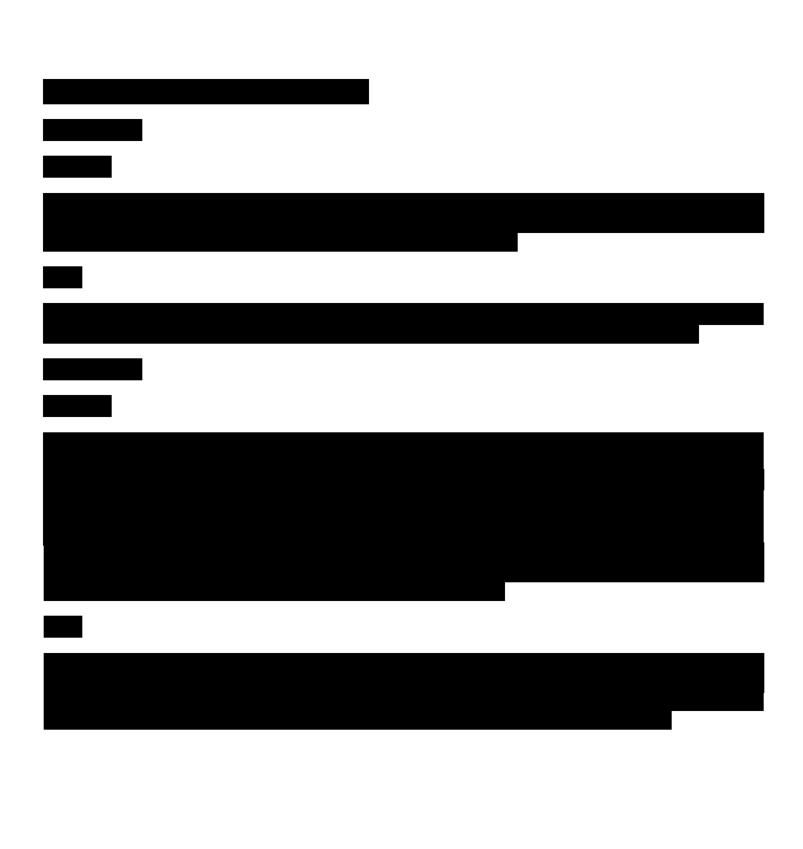
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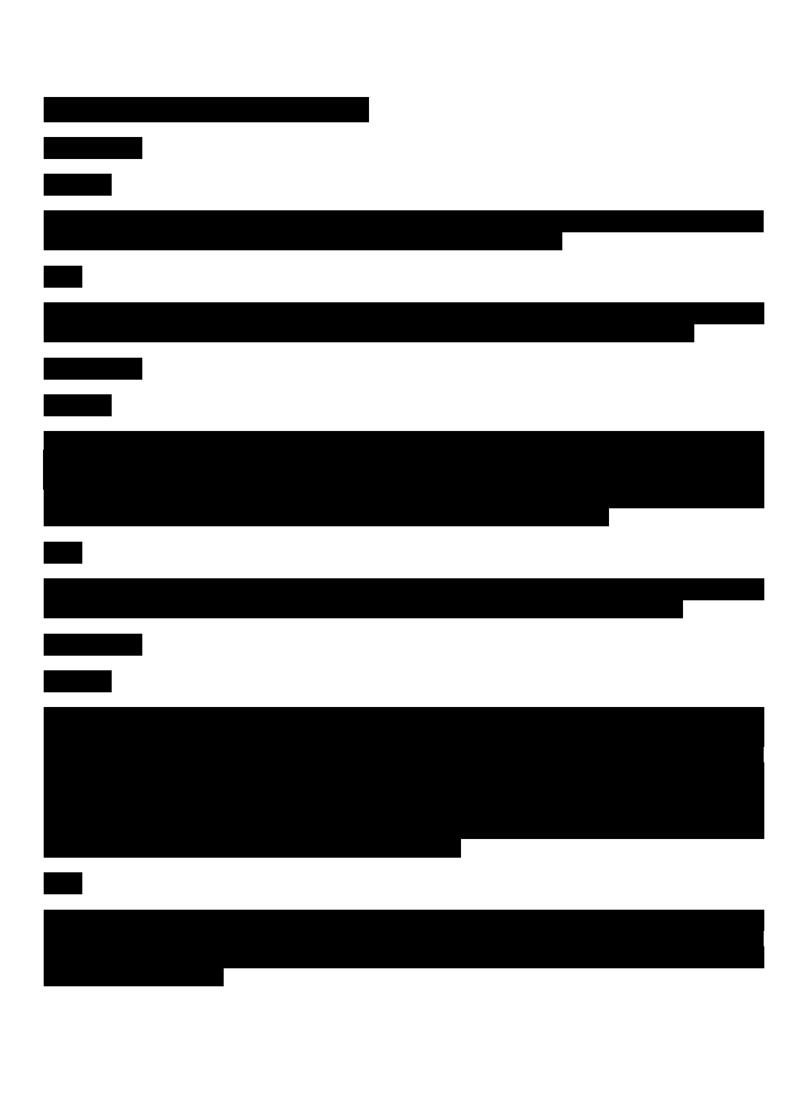
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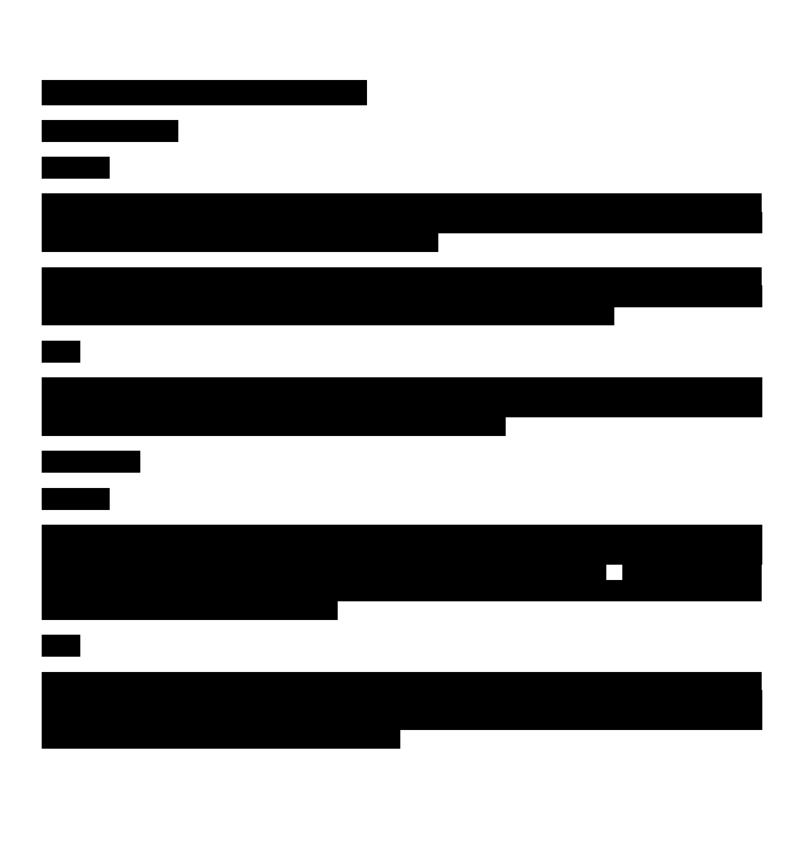


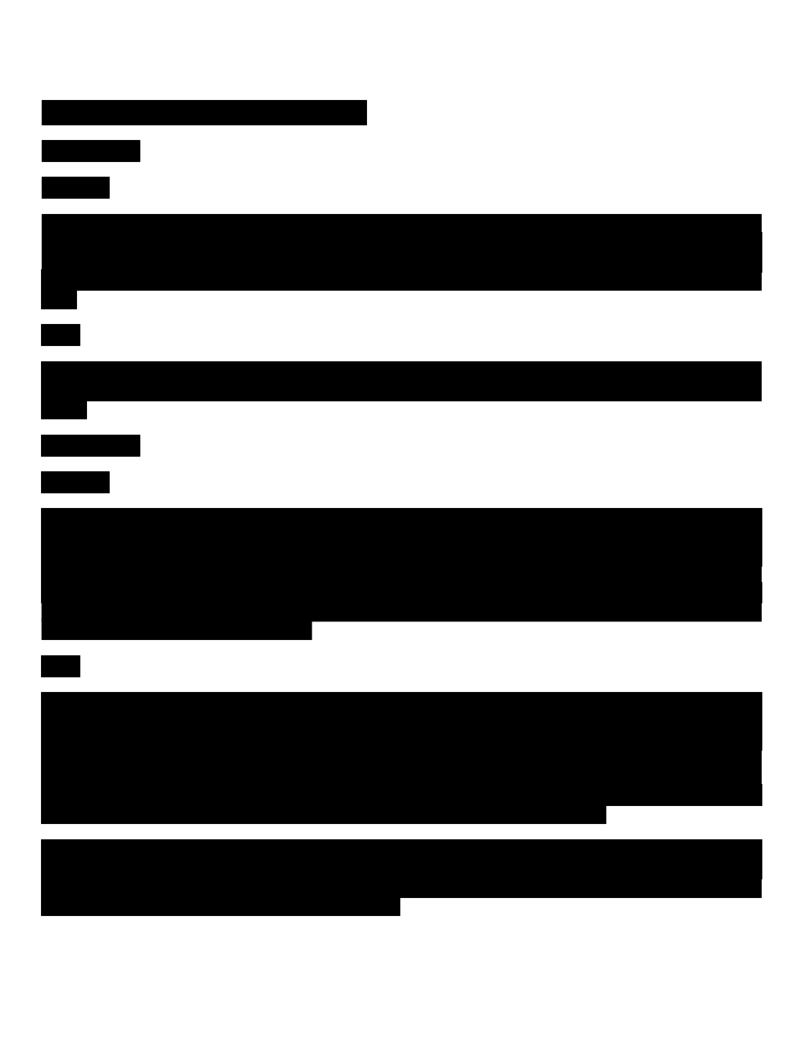


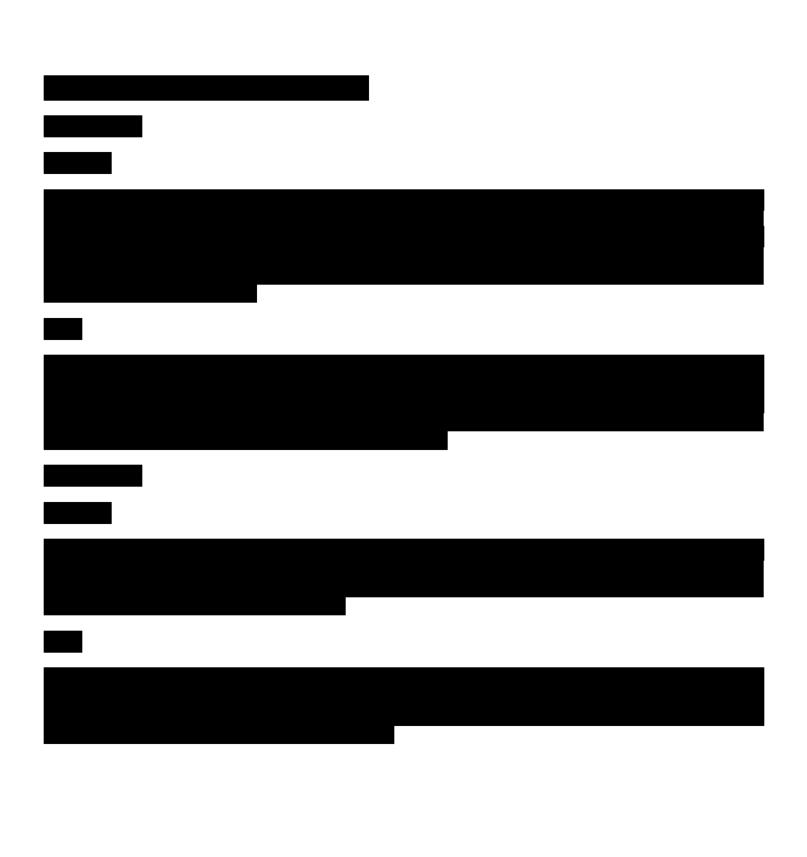


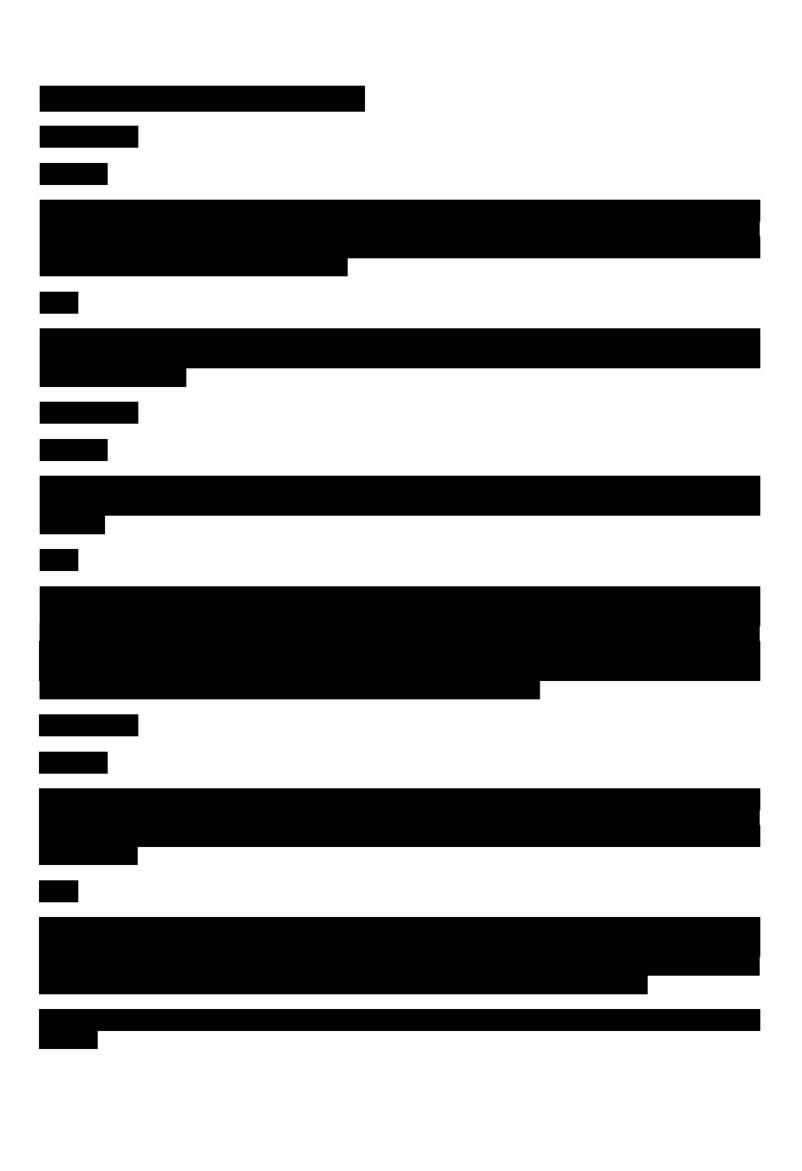












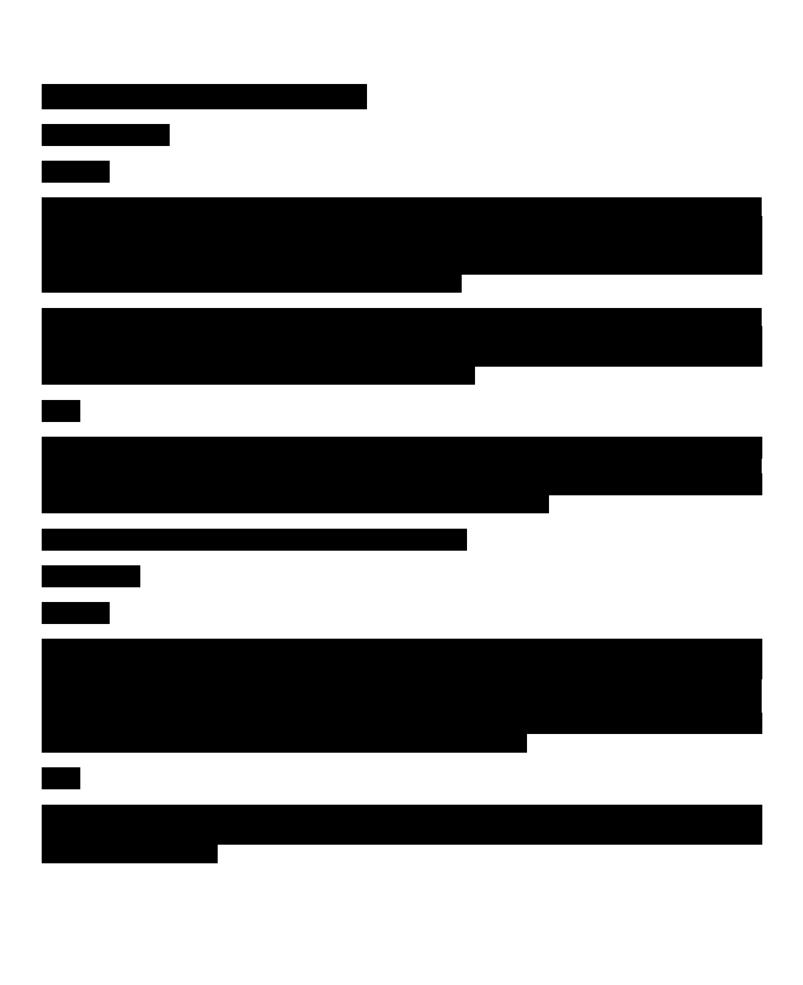
PART TWO - The Pacific Ocean

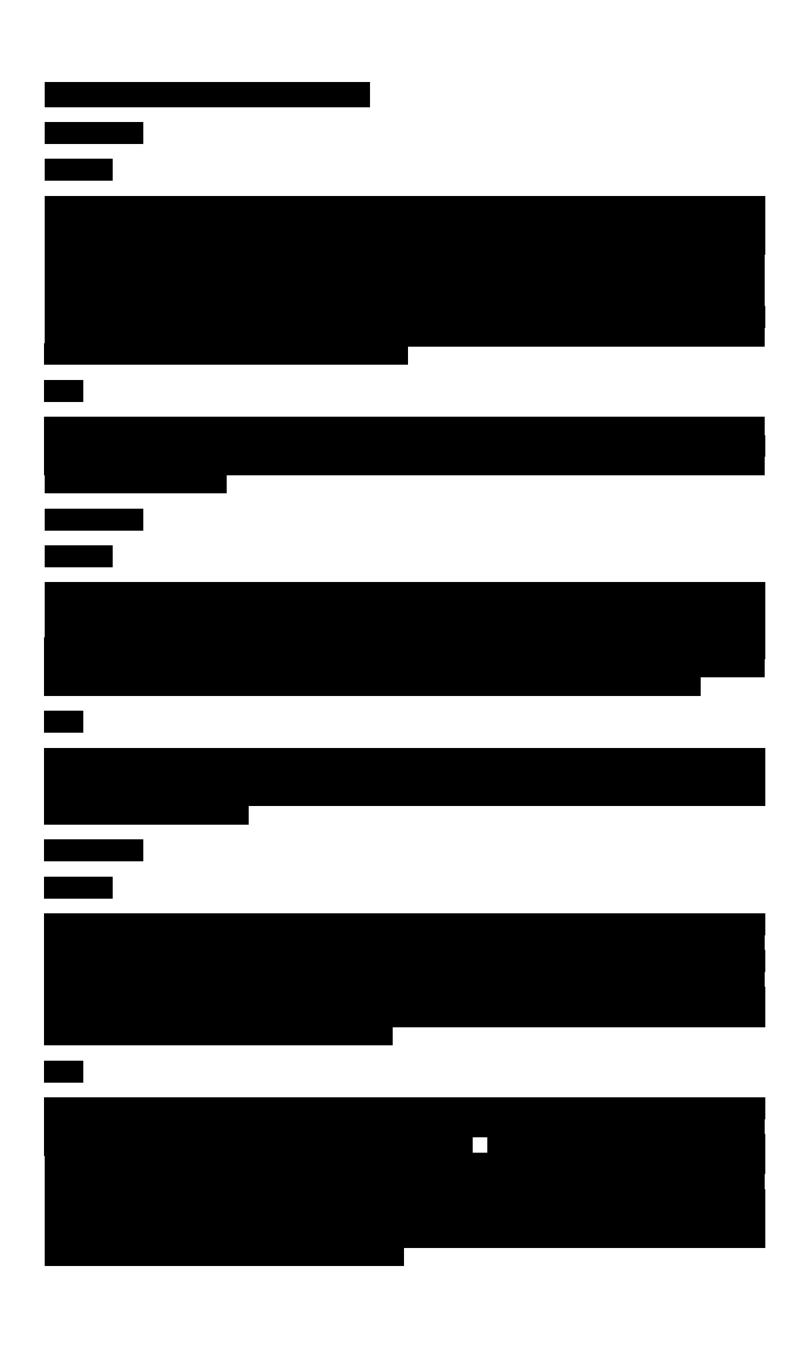
CHAPTER 37

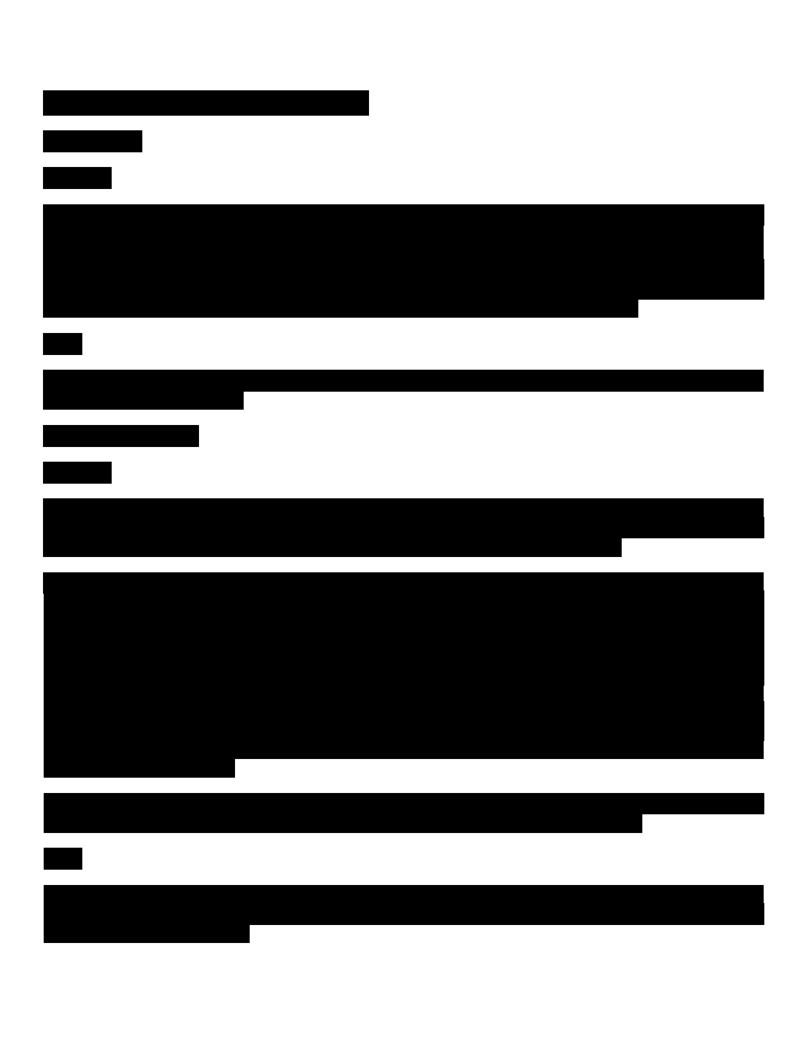
Summary

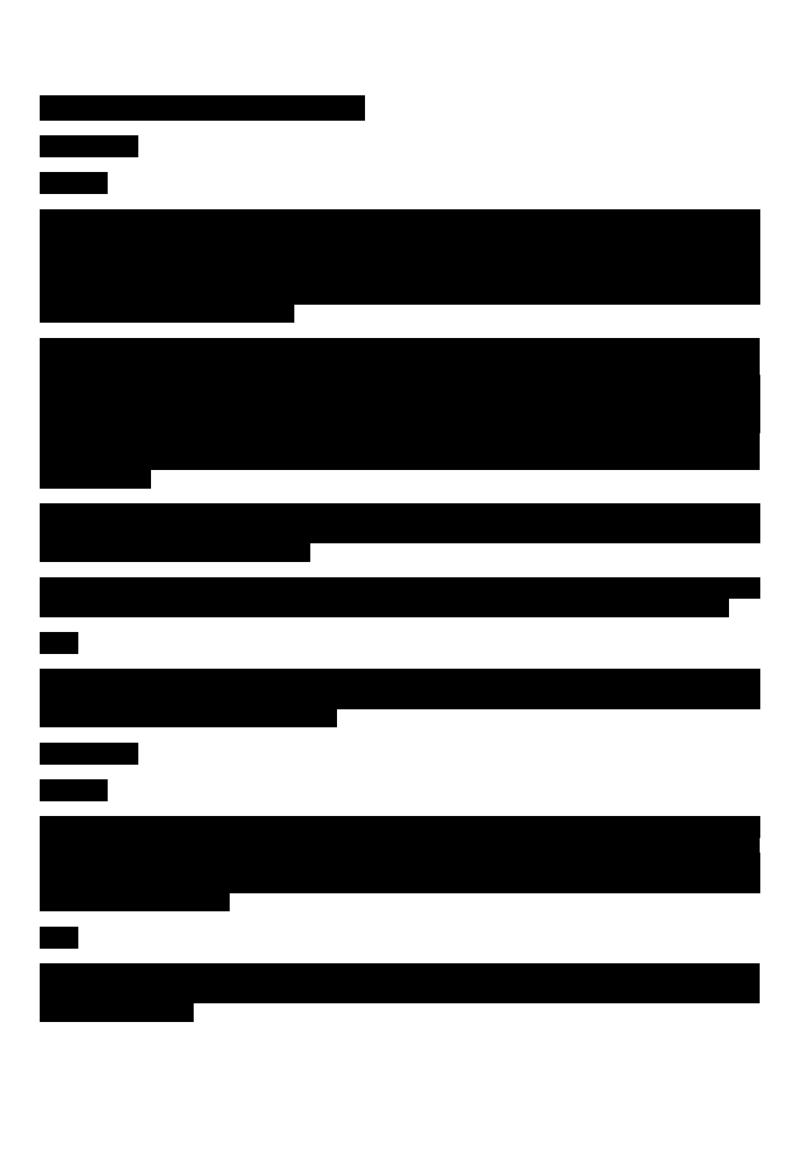
The ship sinks and Pi is in a lifeboat with a broken-legged zebra. Vishnu," a	He exclaims,	"Jesus, Mary,	Muhammad and
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CHAPTER 38 - 39 Summary			
Pi describes the first days of the voyage.			

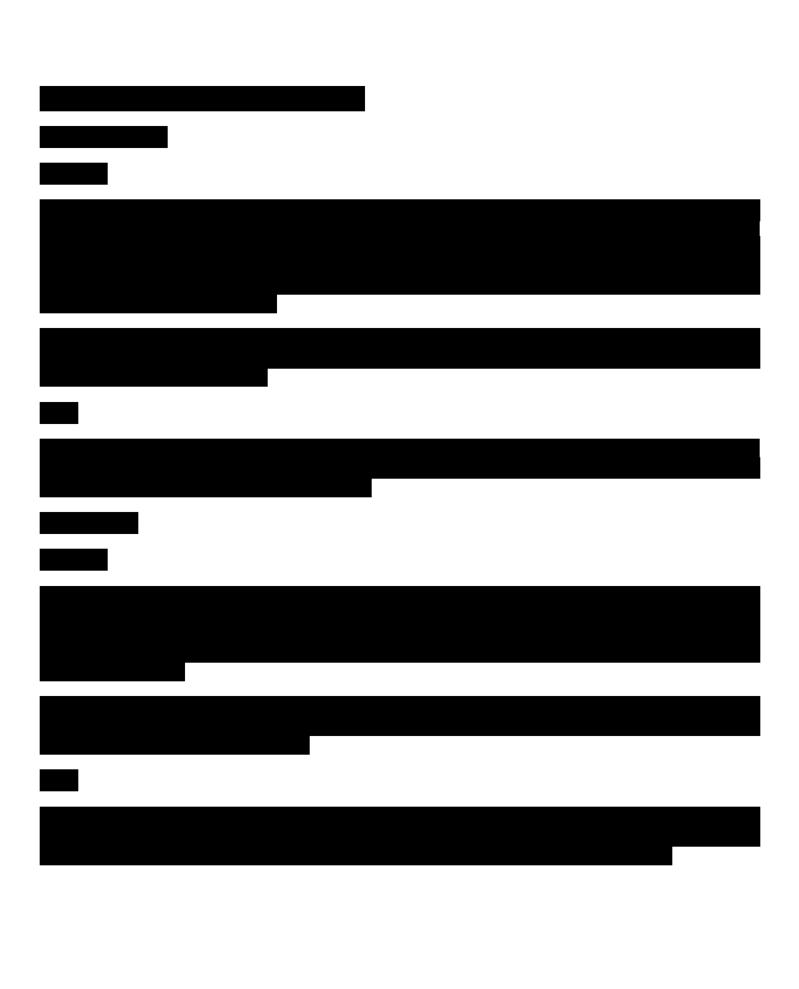
CHAPTER 40

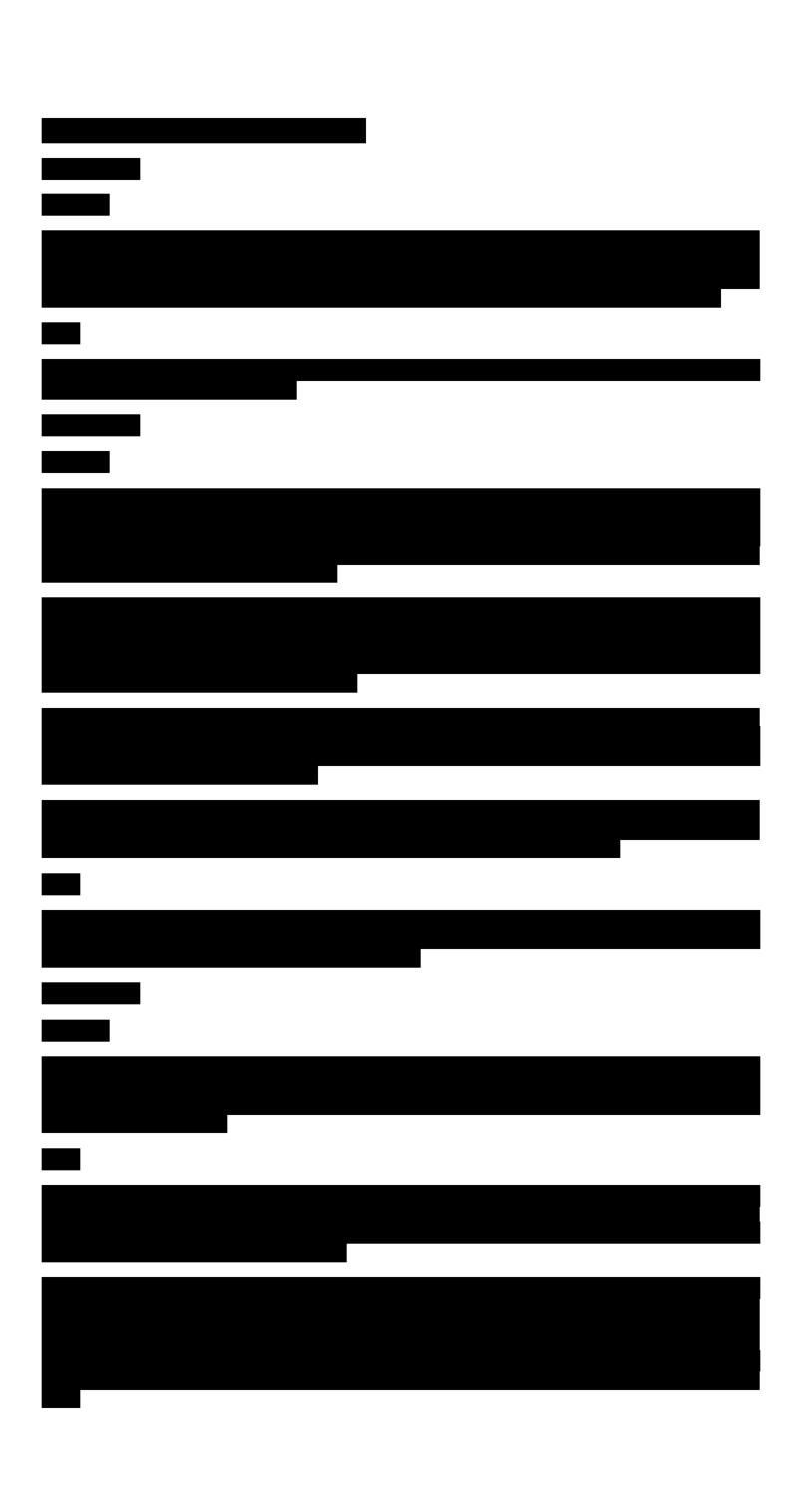


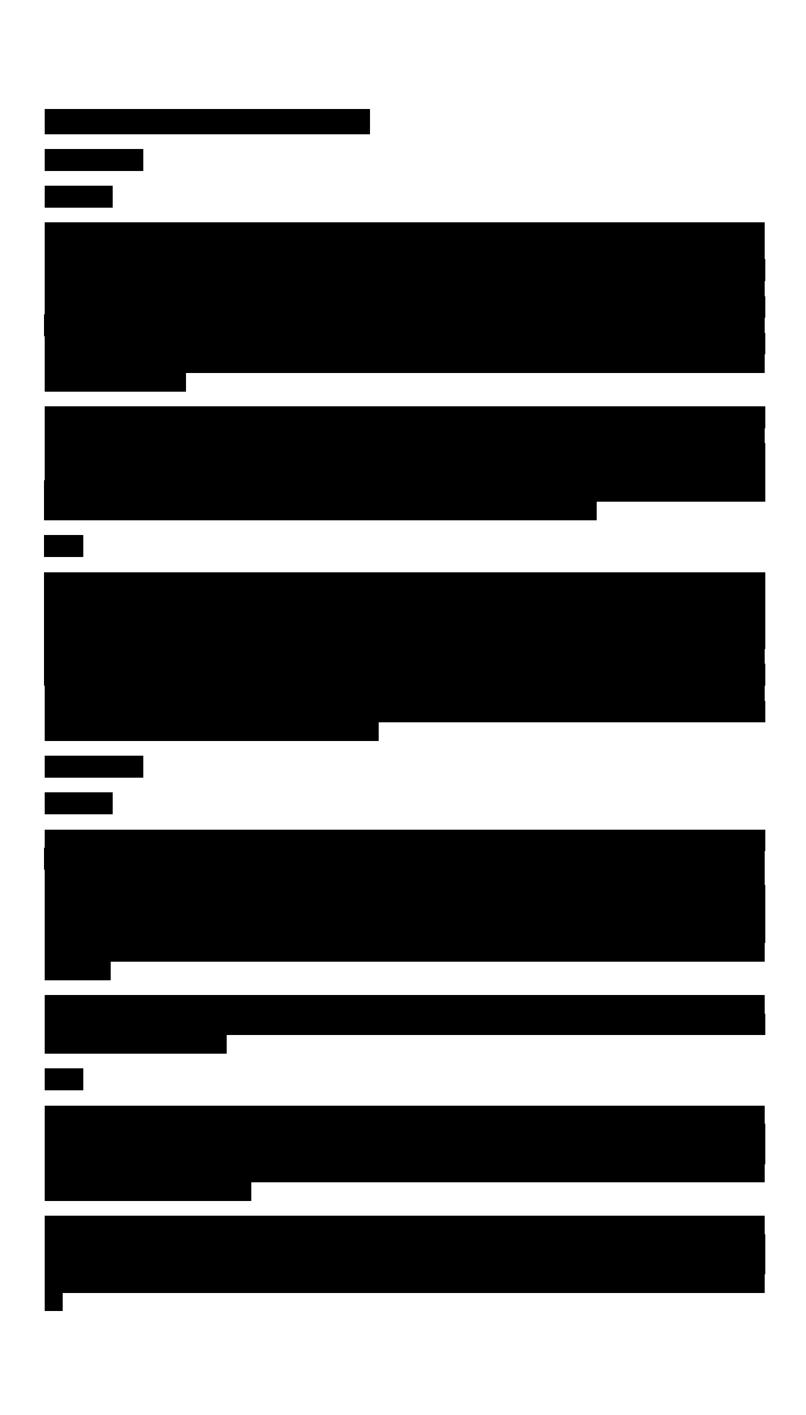




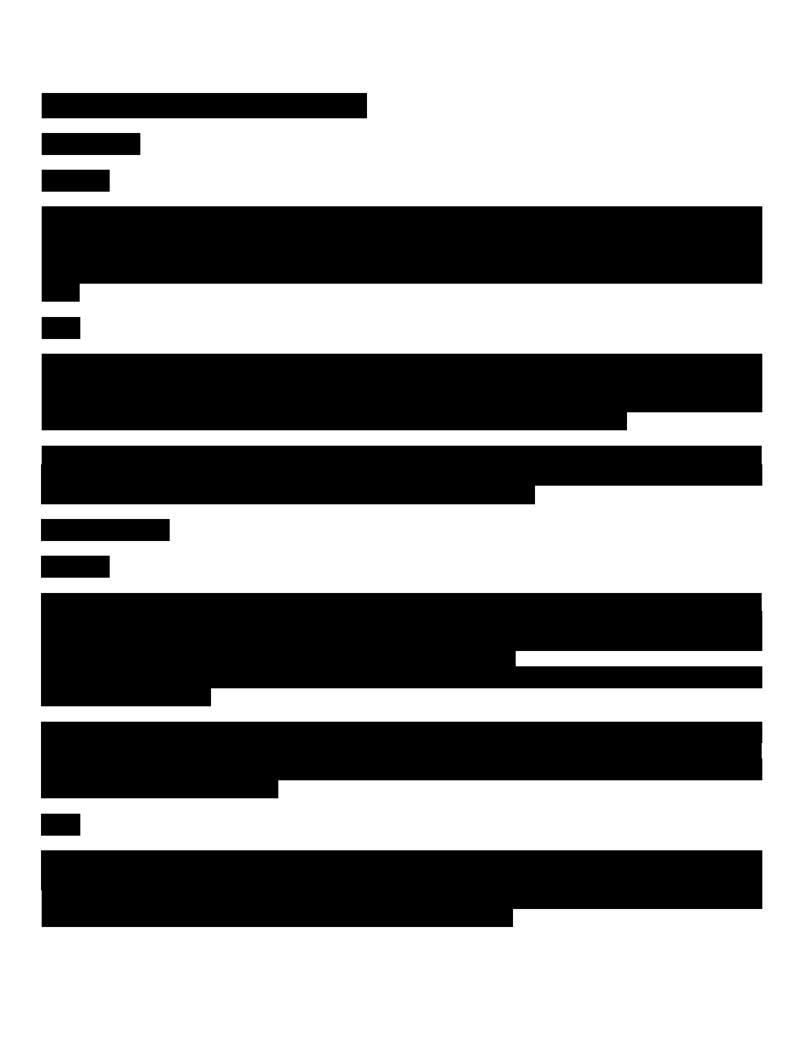


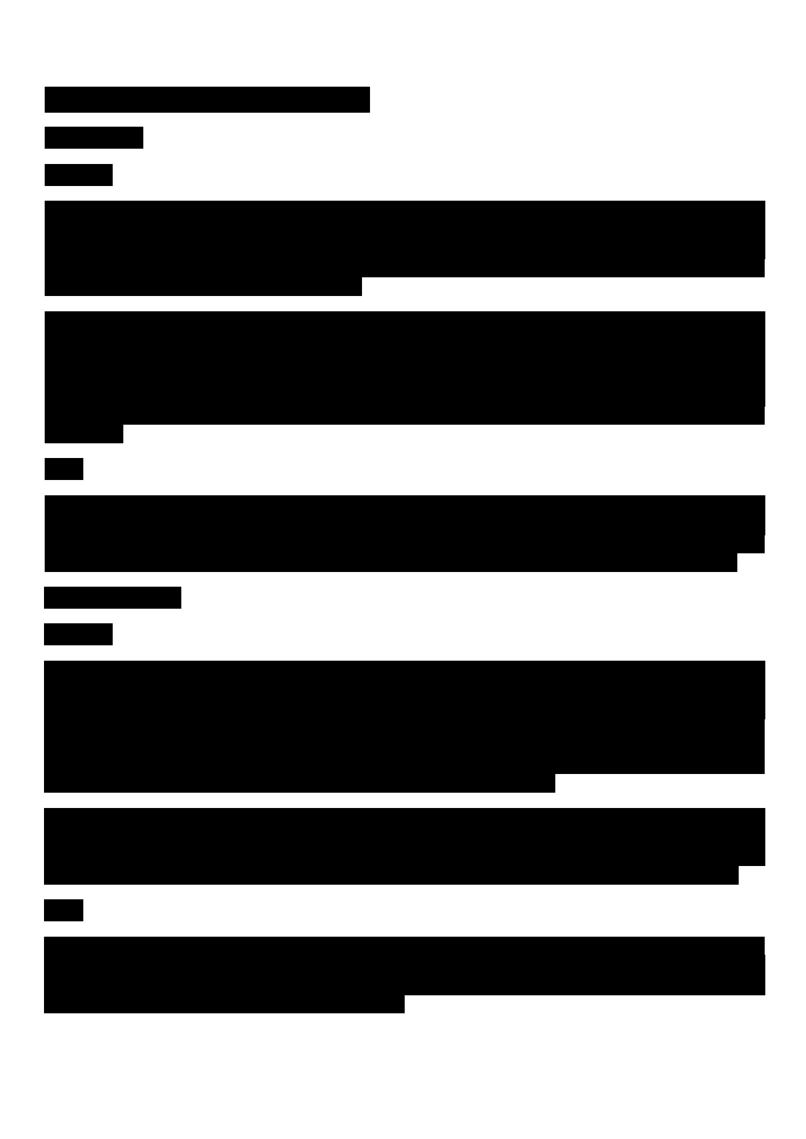


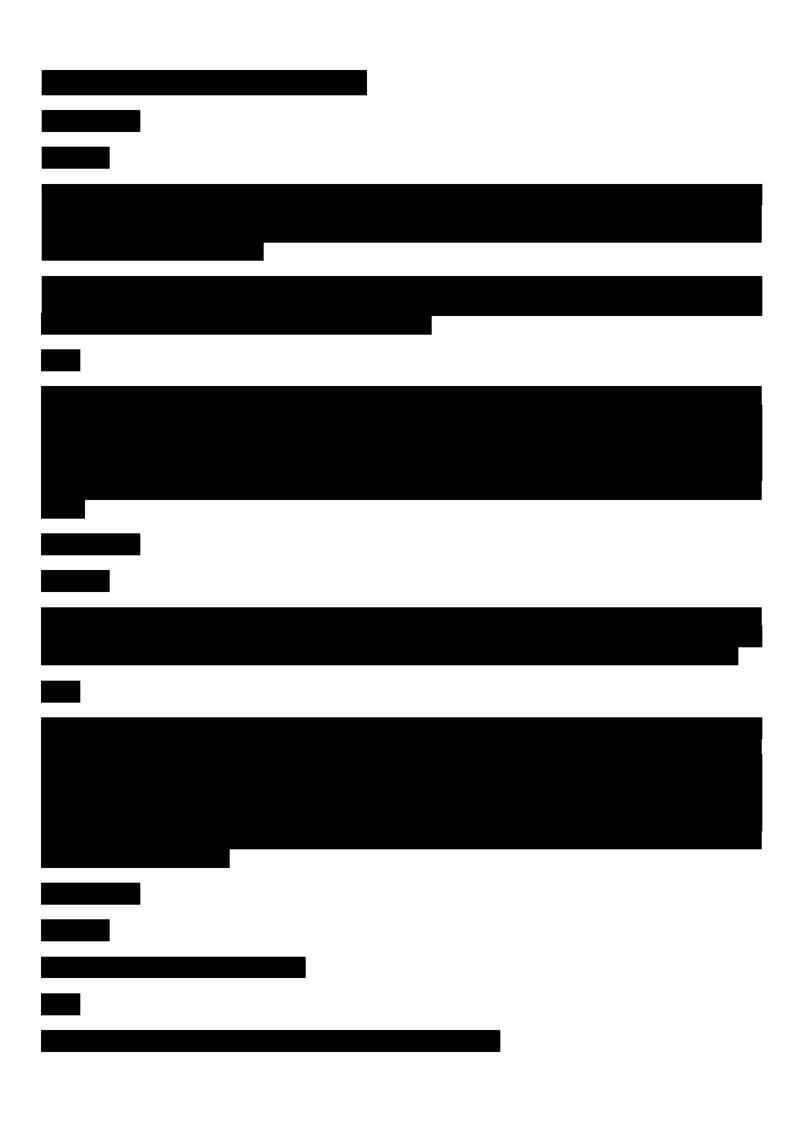


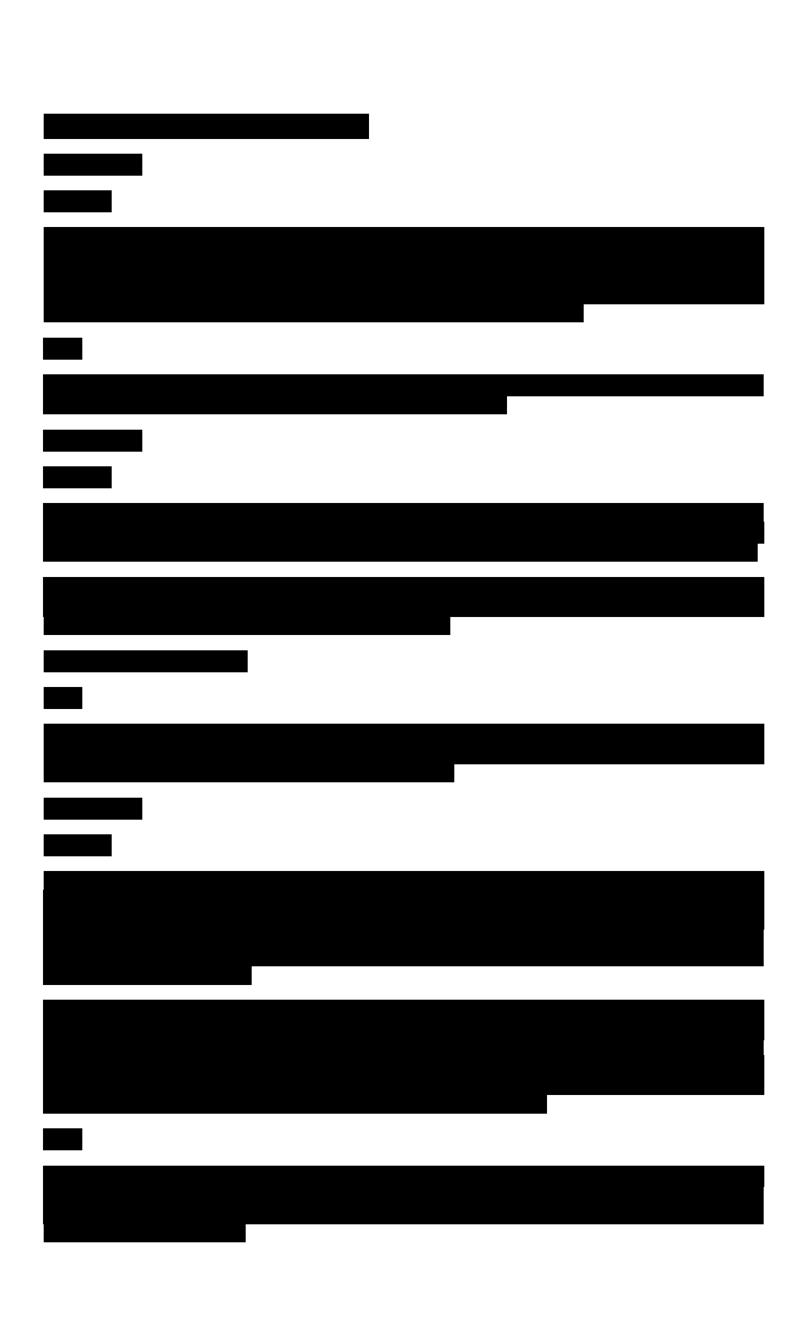


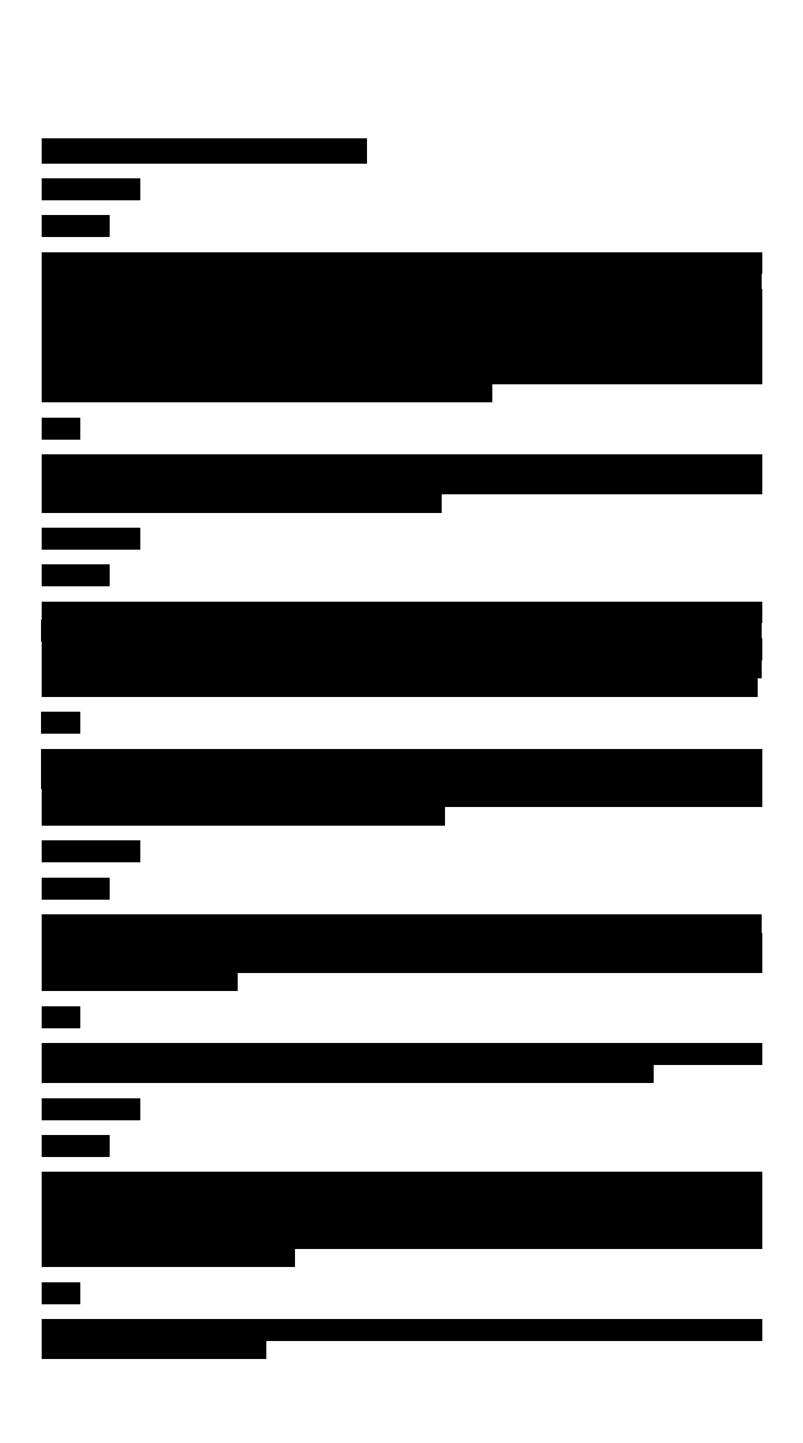


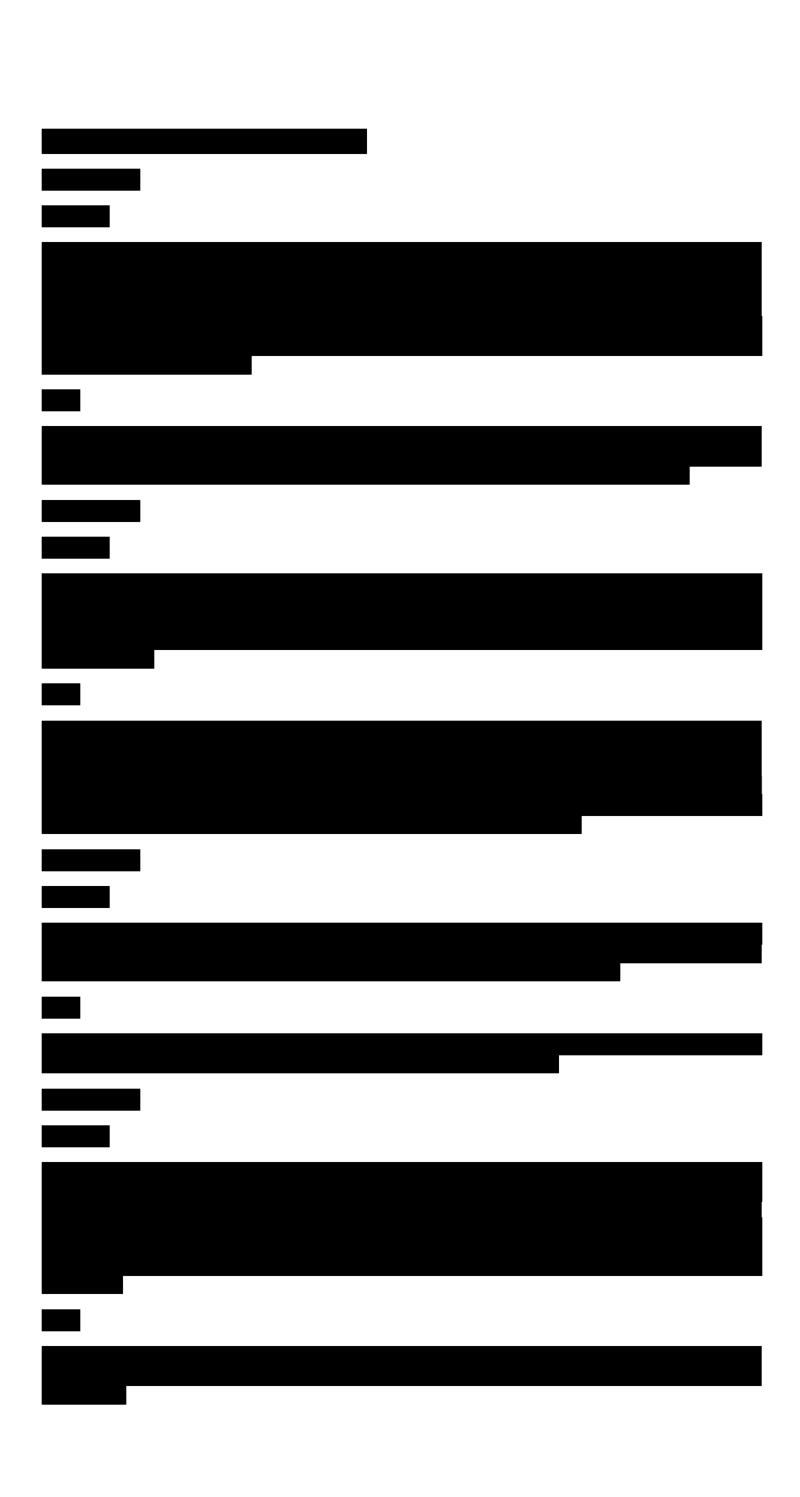


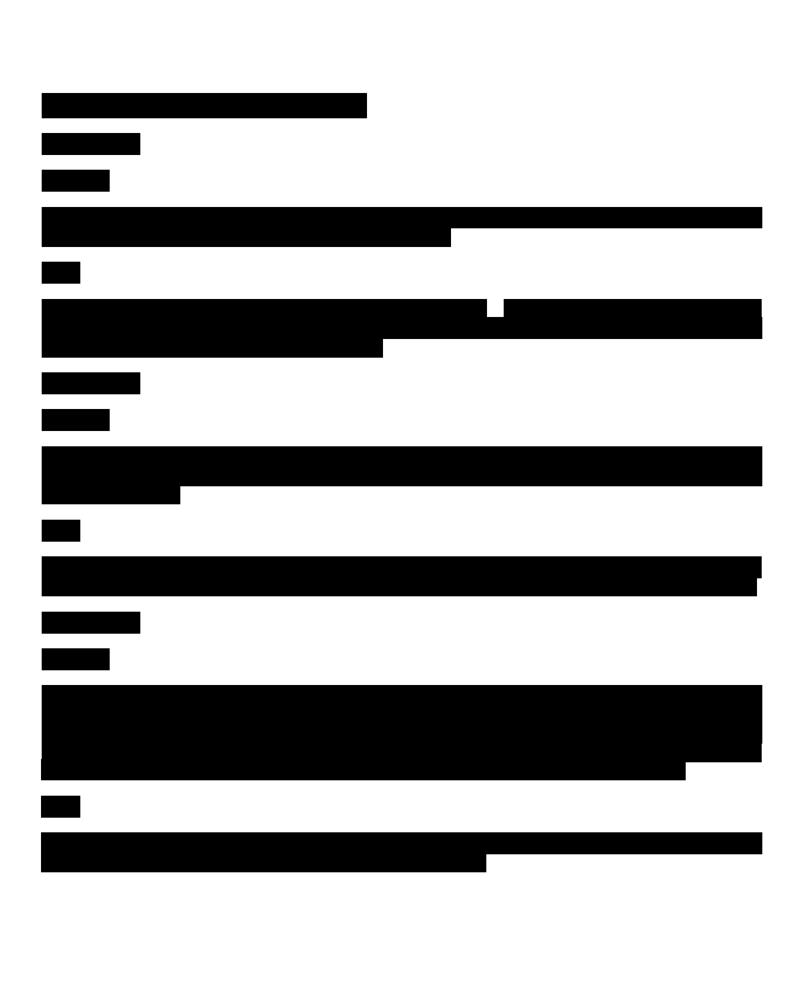


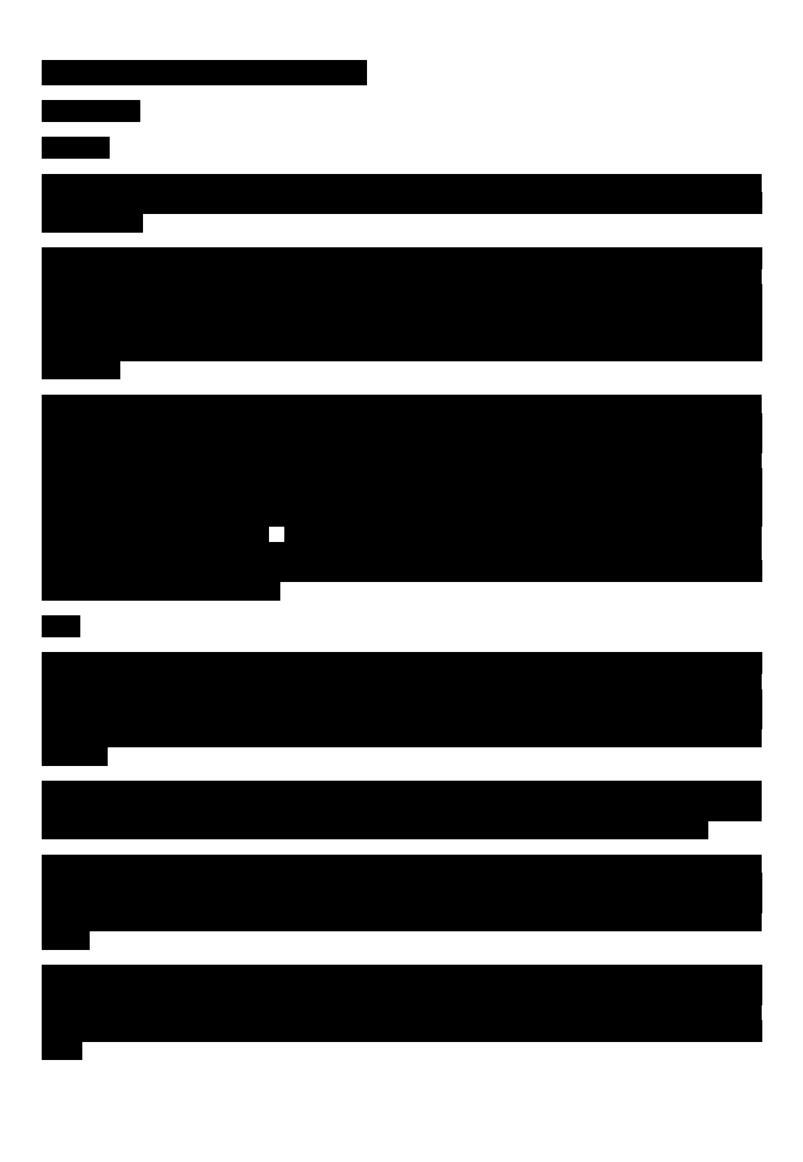


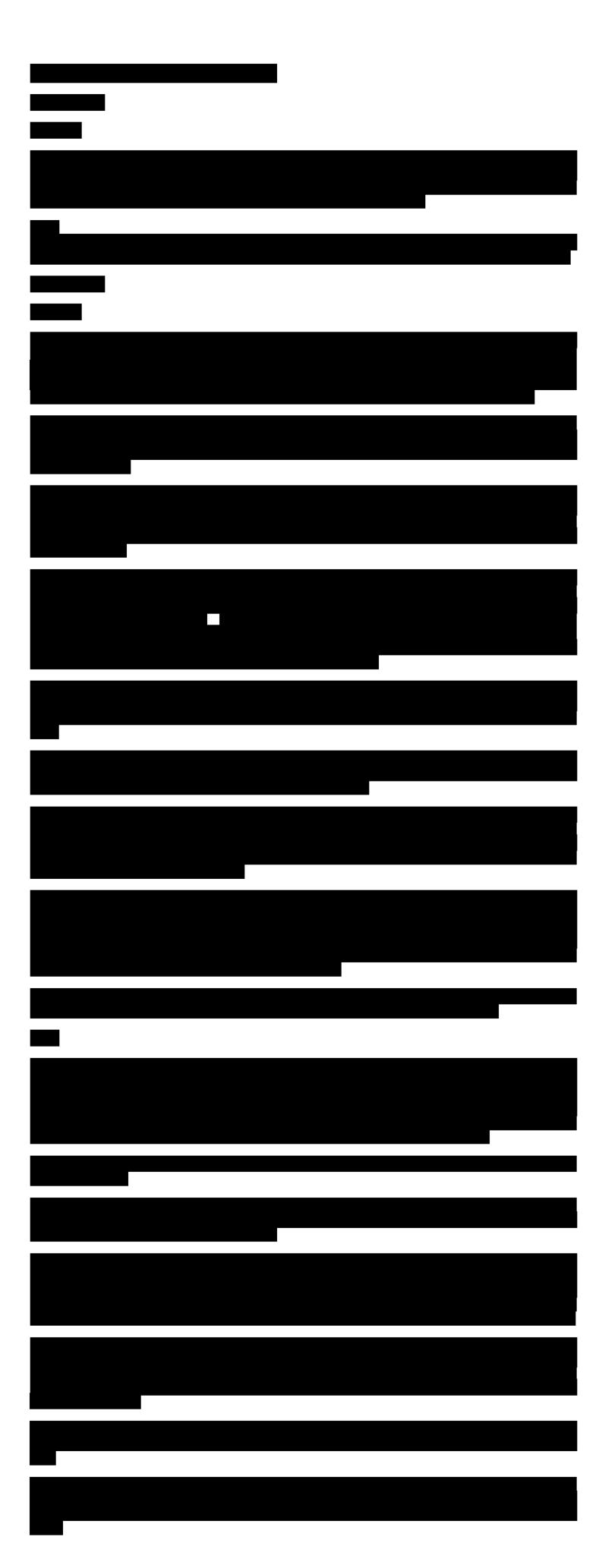


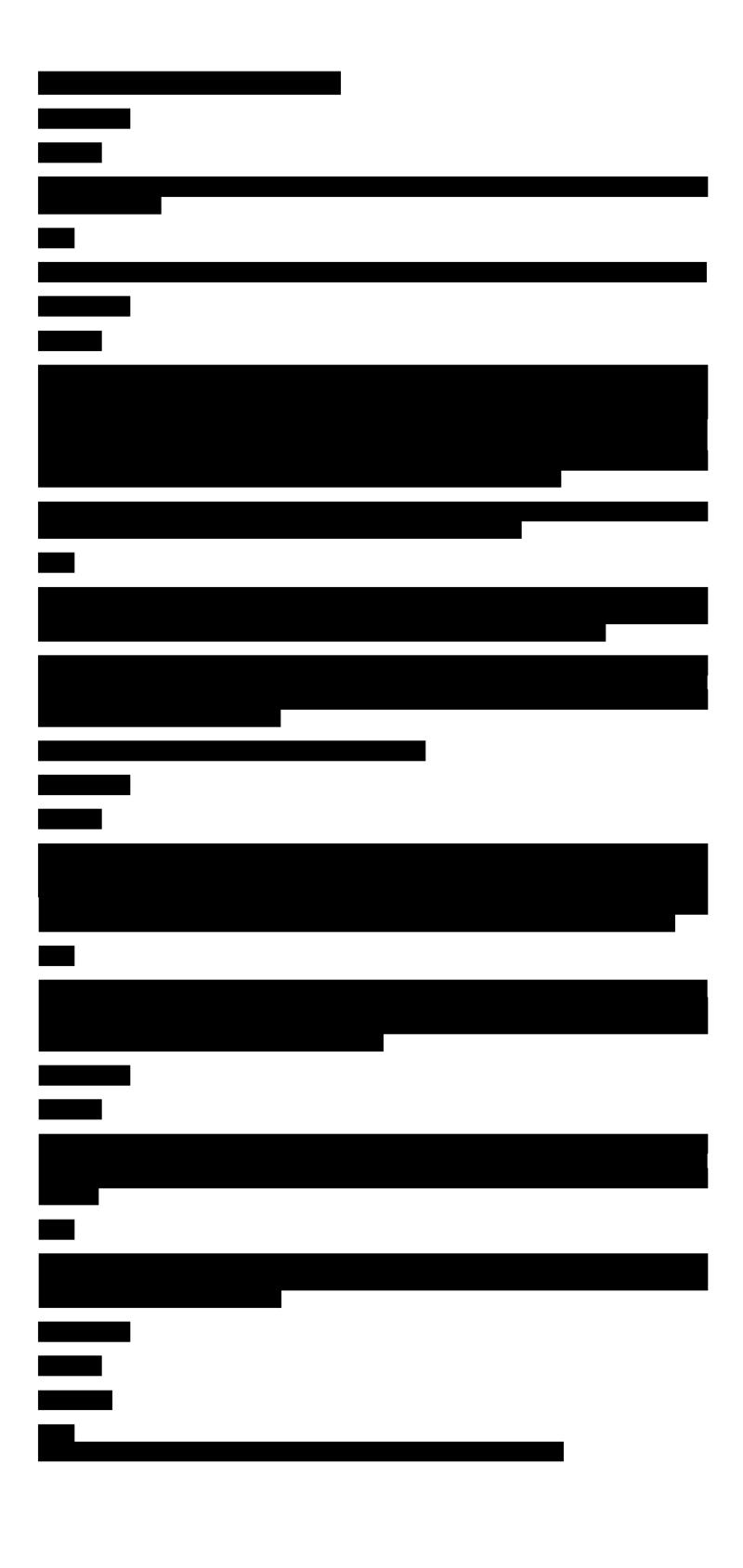
















PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS



THEMES ANALYSIS

The Better Story

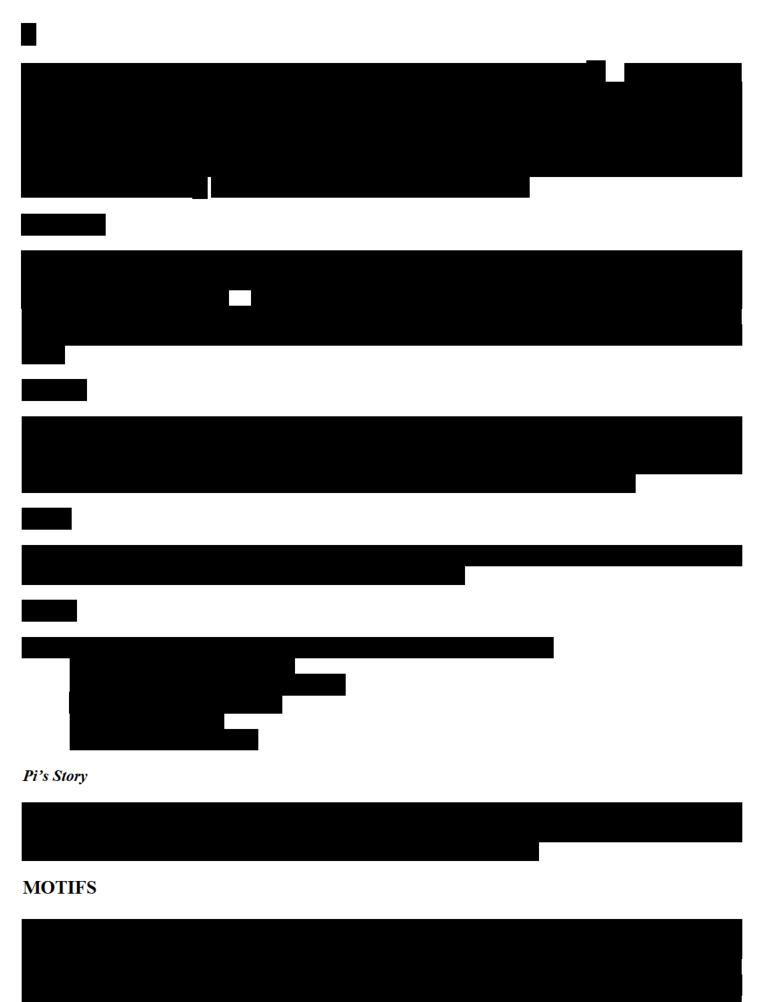
POINT OF VIEW			

IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS / QUOTES

[Page numbers are from the paperback edition, Harcourt, 2001.]

This is spoken by Francis Adirubasamy to the author.	
2.	
8.	
6.	
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SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS



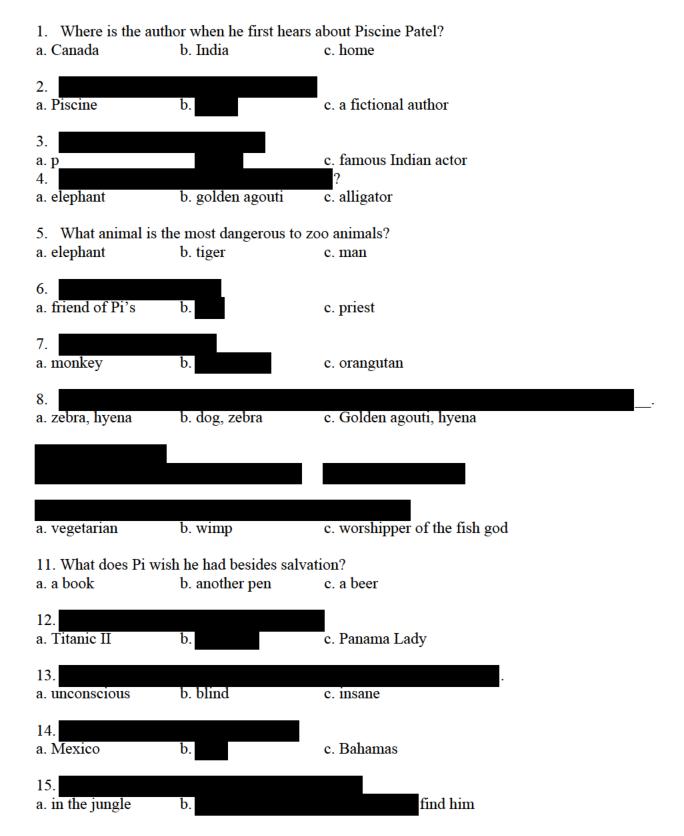
Date Published: 2001	

KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Title: Life of Pi

Author: Yann Martel

STUDY QUESTIONS / QUIZ



ANSWER KEY

1.b 2.c 3.a 4.a 5.c 6.b 7.c 8.a 9.c 10.a 11.a 12.b 13.b 14.a 15.c

ESSAY TOPIC IDEAS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS

