A Thousand Splendid Suns

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KHALED HOSSEINI

Khaled Hosseini was born to a diplomat and a Farsi and history teacher. His family later moved to Paris for his father's work, and they were there when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. When he was fifteen, his family came to the US as asylum seekers and settled in California. Hosseini ultimately attended Santa Clara University and later medical school. After becoming a bestselling author with the publication of *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini quit his job as a doctor to write full-time. In March 2003, he returned to Afghanistan and was compelled to write more about the experiences of Afghans under the Taliban. He is also a UN goodwill ambassador, and has established a nonprofit providing humanitarian assistance to Afghans. He lives in Northern California.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The novel takes place over approximately forty years, from the early 1970s, when Mariam is a teenager, to 2003, when Laila is settled once again in Kabul with her family. Throughout this time, Afghanistan was subjected to a series of violent, brutal wars and numerous political coups. When the story opens, Afghanistan has recently undergone a bloodless coup in 1973. In 1978, there is a Communist counter-coup, and the Soviet Union invades in 1979. After battles with the Mujahideen, or Islamic fighters supported by the United States, the Soviet Union finally withdraws its last troops in 1989 and the Mujahideen take over. After a decade of bloody infighting, the Taliban seize control and establish peace but also an extremely strict Shari'a law. Finally, the book ends during the American occupation of Afghanistan following the events of September 11, 2001. Hosseini attempts to anchor the reader in this complex history, by showing how specific historical events—the departure of the Soviets from Kabul, for instance, or the arrival of the Taliban—impacts the lives of the characters. By interweaving historical facts, often with dates and leaders' names included, with the fictional narrative, Hosseini helps to breathe life into what could be a confusing historical lesson for an English-speaking audience. He also shows the extent to which politics has impacted every Afghan person's life over the past several decades.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Just before *The Kite Runner* was published, Hosseini went to Kabul for the first time in 27 years. His first novel had focused on male relationships in the expatriate Afghan community, but this visit gave him the motivation to concentrate on women's experiences in Afghanistan. Persian literature is heavily based on poetry rather than novels; Hosseini grew up reading Rumi, Hafez, and Omar Khayyám, and throughout the novel there are references to these and other classic Afghan poets such as Ustad Khalilluah Khalili, Nezami, and, of course, the 17th-century Saib-e-Tabrizi poem that gives the book its title. In terms of the novel's form, Hosseini was deeply influenced by John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which he first read in high school and whose descriptions of the bleak lot of migrant farmworkers reminded him of the plight of many Afghans. However, at least some of the success of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (and its forerunner) can be attributed to the fact that, before their publication, there had been few novels in the English-speaking world that dealt with Afghanistan, a literary gap Hosseini set out to fill.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Thousand Splendid Suns*
- **When Written:** 2004-2007
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** 2007
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Herat and Kabul, Afghanistan
- **Climax:** As Rasheed is preparing to choke Laila to death, Mariam kills him with a shovel—thus ensuring both her own death, but also a hopeful future for Laila and her family.
- **Antagonist:** Rasheed, Laila, and Mariam's husband; the Taliban
- **Point of View:** The story is told in the third person, alternating between Laila's and Mariam's point of view—the section and chapter divisions specify which one. The narrator never deviates from the perspective of each woman, but at times provides foreshadowing hints to the reader concerning what awaits the characters.

EXTRA CREDIT

Poetry Slam Hosseini's favorite book of all time is the collected "Poets of Hafez," a revered Persian poet, which he originally read as a schoolboy in Kabul.

Culture Shock When Hosseini arrived in California as a fifteen-year-old, he only spoke a few words of English. Now, though, he finds English the most natural language in which to write.

PLOT SUMMARY

Part I of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* begins in the early 1970s, when Mariam is a teenager living with her mother, Nana, in a *kolba* or small hut outside of the city of Herat. We learn that Mariam is the illegitimate child or *harami* ("bastard") of Nana and Jalil, a wealthy cinema owner in Herat. Mariam is taught to recite verses from the Koran by Mullah Faizullah, whom she looks up to and admires. Jalil comes to visit Mariam every week, and though Nana tries to convince Mariam that Jalil is embarrassed by her and refuses to consider her a true member of his family, to Mariam, he can do no wrong.

One day, against Jalil's wishes, Mariam descends the hill into Herat for the very first time in order to see him. She is told he isn't there, and after spending the entire night sleeping on his stoop, his chauffeur brings her back to the *kolba*, though not before she has a glimpse of Jalil looking down at her from the window. Upon their return, Mariam sees her mother hanging from a rope. She feels desperately guilty, especially now that she knows Nana was right about Jalil. She loathes him even more once he marries her off to Rasheed, a shoe shop owner in Kabul thirty years her senior.

In Kabul, Mariam is astounded by the cosmopolitan atmosphere, though Rasheed makes her wear a burqa and mainly stay within the home. Rasheed initially shows Mariam around the city and buys her gifts, but after she suffers multiple miscarriages he grows sullen and hostile, yelling at her and beating her.

Part II shifts to the perspective of Laila, who is growing up in Kabul not far from Rasheed and Mariam's house, but who is getting an education thanks to her progressive father, Babi. But Mammy, her mother, is depressed and unable to take care of Laila because she so misses her two sons, Ahmad and Noor, who have gone to fight with the Mujahideen against the Soviets. Mammy's depression worsens even more after the two boys are killed. However, Laila has far more happy childhood moments than Mariam, from her walks home from school with her friends Giti and Hasina, to her lessons with Babi and, above all, her friendship with the mischievous Tariq, who lost one leg in a land mine accident when he was five. Tariq and Laila together witness the departure of the Soviets from Afghanistan. Their relationship turns romantic just as the Mujahideen's infighting begins, and they sleep together for the first time just before Tariq's family flees for Pakistan. Not long after that, Laila's family is preparing to leave as well when a rocket hits their home and kills both her parents.

Part III alternates between Mariam's and Laila's point of view with each chapter. Rasheed digs Laila out of the rubble of their home, and Mariam slowly nurses him back to health. However, it soon becomes clear that Rasheed's apparent kindness has hidden his true goal—to take Laila as his second wife. Mariam begs him not to, but Rasheed threatens to turn Laila out onto the streets. Laila agrees to wed Rasheed—she has become pregnant with Tariq's child, and knows this is the only way to save the baby and herself. Mariam despises Laila, and the two live together in constant tension and low-simmering hostility. Not long afterward, a man named Abdul Sharif comes to the house and says he was in a hospital with Tariq, whose lorry (truck) had been caught in crossfire on the way to Pakistan and who was gravely wounded and, Abdul Sharif says, died.

Rasheed is initially solicitous and adoring of Laila. After Laila gives birth to a baby girl, Aziza, however, he grows once again irritable and even violent, angry it was not a boy. At one point, Laila tries to stop Rasheed from beating Mariam. This small act leads the tensions between the two women to cool, and after drinking several cups of chai together, they start to become close friends and allies rather than adversaries. Laila confides to Mariam that she has been stealing bit by bit from Rasheed and plans to escape to Pakistan in the spring. Together with Aziza, the two of them depart for the Kabul bus station and ask a kind-looking man to pretend he's their cousin accompanying them out of the city—the Mujahideen prevent women from travelling alone. But the man betrays them, and Laila and Mariam are questioned before being taken back to Rasheed's, where they are both beaten severely and locked into separate rooms.

The Taliban take control of Afghanistan shortly afterward, and begin to implement strict Shari'a, a strict set of religious laws that prevent women from working and severely restrict their freedom and mobility. Around the same time, Laila realizes she is pregnant with Rasheed's child. She comes close to aborting the child on her own, but ends up deciding that she cannot accept what the Mujahideen had accepted—that sometimes in war innocent life must be taken. She gives birth to a boy, Zalmai, in a harrowing caesarian at the only women's hospital still open in Kabul, which no longer has any anesthetic. Zalmai is cheerful and playful, but he has a malicious streak that comes out when he's with his father, who spoils him while largely ignoring Aziza.

Several years later, during a massive drought, Rasheed loses his business in a fire and the family begins to go hungry. Mariam tries to call Herat to speak with Jalil, but learns that he died back in 1987—not long after he came to Kabul to see Mariam, but she refused to see him. Rasheed forces Laila to send Aziza into an orphanage. He rarely agrees to accompany her and Mariam to see Aziza, though when he doesn't, Laila leaves on her own and endures frequent beatings by the Taliban for being a woman on the street alone.

One day, Laila, Mariam, and Zalmai are returning from the orphanage when Zalmai calls out that there's a strange man outside the house. It's Tariq—it turns out that Rasheed had hired Abdul Sharif to concoct the story of Tariq's death in order to force Laila to accept her marriage to Rasheed. Instead, Tariq had made it to a refugee camp. There he attempted to make

money for his family by transporting coats across the Pakistani border, but the police found drugs inside the coats. He had been imprisoned for seven years before leaving for Murree, Pakistan and saving up money by working at a hotel. Laila tells him about Aziza and they make plans for him to meet her. That night, however, Zalmai tells Rasheed about the strange man Laila was talking to. Rasheed sends him upstairs and begins to beat Laila and Mariam. When Laila hits him back, Rasheed flies on top of her and begins choking her. Mariam, seeing he means to kill her, takes a shovel from the toolshed and breaks it over Rasheed's head, killing him.

Mariam initially comforts Laila by convincing her they will run away together and lead a quiet peaceful life in a small village somewhere. The next day, however, Mariam tells her that she cannot allow Laila and her family to suffer for Mariam's actions. She says she could never have hoped for the love and sense of belonging she experienced through her friendship with Laila. Mariam turns herself in to the Taliban. After a brief trial, she is imprisoned and then sent to Ghazi stadium to be executed.

Part IV opens with Laila and Tariq living in Murree and working at a hotel. Though Laila enjoys her life in Pakistan, she knows that Mariam did not sacrifice herself so that she could be a maid in a foreign country. The family returns to Afghanistan, first stopping at Herat. Laila meets Mullah Faizullah's son, Hamza, and sees where Mariam grew up. Hamza gives her a box that Jalil had left for Mariam, which includes a letter in which Jalil asks for Mariam's forgiveness and encloses her part of the inheritance—a token arriving too late for Mariam.

The novel closes with Laila working at the same orphanage where she had sent Aziza, teaching and working to renovate the building. She is pregnant with her third child, and knows that if it's a girl, the baby will be named Mariam.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mariam – One of the novel's protagonists, Mariam is the illegitimate daughter of one of the most successful businessmen in the city of Herat, Jalil. She grows up in a small hut several kilometers outside the city with her mother, Nana, before being married off at the age of fifteen to Rasheed and moving to Kabul. Throughout her life, Mariam is plagued by the shame of being a *harami*, or bastard (illegitimate child)—in addition to the greater shame of believing she contributed to her mother's suicide. After feeling unwanted by and unimportant to Jalil, she is also shunned by her husband when she is unable to bear him a child. This lack of love and belonging is a constant theme throughout Mariam's life, but she has a remarkable ability to endure and persevere through suffering—often with the help of the Koran verses that she spent her childhood memorizing. After finally finding a sense of belonging with Laila and her daughter, Mariam makes the ultimate sacrifice, giving up her own life so that those she loves can be free. She is the novel's most powerful example of both the suffering and strength of women in Afghanistan.

Laila – Unlike Mariam, Laila is a beautiful young girl from an educated family in Kabul whose father is committed to giving her an education and preparing her for life as an independent woman. However, Laila suffers in her own way from the coldness of her mother, who seems to have abandoned her in favor of her two sons, who have gone off to battle and are eventually killed. Laila is curious and intelligent: she retains a strong sense of Afghanistan's culture and is hopeful for its future. She is also bold and prone to risk-taking, as evidenced by her love affair with Tariq as a teenager, by her plot to escape Rasheed, and by her constant commitment to make it to the orphanage to visit her daughter Aziza despite the possibility of beatings by the Taliban. Ultimately, however, Laila is not as tough or world-weary as Mariam—though she remains forever cognizant of the tremendous sacrifice Mariam has made for her. It is this sense of debt, to Mariam, to her family, and to Afghanistan, that will determine her return to Afghanistan from exile in Pakistsan.

Rasheed – The undeniable villain of the novel. Rasheed owns a shoe shop in Kabul, and is initially a successful businessman, though as things unravel in Afghanistan, he ends up struggling and eventually losing his business. Before marrying Mariam, he had already been married once before, but his wife and son had died—his son drowned while Rasheed was drunk and passed out. He is initially kind and solicitous to Mariam but soon becomes a grunting, hostile bundle of nerves, who treats Mariam with scorn and beats her. The same process is repeated when he marries Laila after her parents' deaths—Rasheed becomes increasingly violent to both his wives up until the book's climax. Rasheed doesn't mind the Taliban, and indeed his character is meant to reveal the worst of men's treatment of women in Afghanistan during the time span of the novel.

Tariq – Laila's childhood friend and eventually lover and husband. Tariq wears a prosthetic leg since he stepped on a land mine at the age of five. He can be mischievous and goofy, and he is always eager to prove his strength by joining in any fight and by defending Laila against other neighborhood boys. Tariq adores Laila and is unfailingly loyal to her, returning to Kabul to find her after years of imprisonment and exile in Pakistan.

Nana – Mariam's mother, once a maid in Jalil's household until she became pregnant with his child. Banished to the *kolba* (a hut on a hill) after her father disowned her, Nana is bitter and unhappy. She constantly complains about Jalil to Mariam and admonishes her not to trust any man. Though she can be at times a stifling presence for Mariam, Nana adores her and won't even let her attend school so as to keep her close. Nana's suicide, after Mariam has gone in search of Jalil, will make

Mariam feel guilty and ashamed for the rest of her life, and harbor regrets about the way she dismissed Nana's warnings.

Jalil – Mariam's father, a successful cinema owner in Herat, who has three wives and nine legitimate children in addition to Mariam. Jalil comes to see Mariam every week when she is a child, but he never allows her to visit him in Herat or join the rest of his family there. Jalil does seem conflicted about Mariam, but he refuses to see her when she comes on her own. Though he seems regretful, he also allows his wives to arrange the marriage between Mariam and Rasheed. For the rest of the novel, there are hints that Jalil deeply regrets the way he acted with Mariam, though it is only at the very end that we learn the extent of this regret and shame.

Mullah Faizullah – The village Koran tutor that teaches Mariam to recite the Koran and memorize the daily prayers. Mariam trusts and looks up to Mullah Faizullah. Though he cannot fully comfort her following Nana's suicide, and though Mariam never sees him again after she leaves for Kabul, for the rest of the novel his teachings serve as a guide for her. She often calls upon what he has taught her as she endures further suffering.

Fariba (Mammy) – Laila's mother. She was originally a curious, joyful woman but, by the time Laila is growing up, she is increasingly depressed at the departure of her two sons to fight in the Mujahideen. Their death drives her into further desperation, and she remains in her room for most of the time, unable to take care of Laila and not able to function fully. Mammy blames Babi for his inability to stop their sons from leaving, and for his bookishness and lack of practical savvy, though Laila comes to understand that these accusations stem from her grief and desperation.

Hakim (Babi) – Laila's father, and a high school teacher in Kabul before being fired by the communists. Nevertheless, Hakim supports the communist regime's policy of equality between men and women, and strongly supports Laila's education, even tutoring her himself after it becomes too dangerous for her to go to school. Despite Mammy's dismissal of his intellectual leanings, Laila admires Babi for his unwavering commitment to his wife.

Zalmai – Laila's son with Rasheed, whom she nearly aborts, but whom she ends up loving just as much as she loves Aziza. When Zalmai is with his father, however, he becomes cranky and difficult to handle. He misses his father desperately after his death, which leads Laila to understand one of the many costs of her happiness.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hamza –Mullah Faizullah's son, who meets Laila when she goes to Herat at the very end of the novel, and who shows her where Mariam once lived.

Ahmad – Laila's older brother, who goes off to fight with the Mujahideen against the Soviets and is killed.

Noor – Brother of Ahmad and Laila, also killed while fighting the Soviets.

Abdul Sharif – A friend of Rasheed's who, perhaps paid off by Rasheed, tells Laila the entirely fabricated story of Tariq's death, so that she will no longer await or attempt to find him.

Giti – A schoolmate and friend of Laila's, who is quiet and earnest before falling in love with an older boy and becoming more confident. She is killed by a stray rocket as a teenager.

Hasina – Another friend of Laila's, who is chatty and mischievous. She is sent away to marry a cousin in Lahore.

Habib Khan – The village leader, who often comes to visit Mariam and Nana when Mariam is a child.

Bibi jo – An old woman and friend of Nana's who also visits the two of them at the *kolba*.

Khala Rangmaal – Laila's teacher during the communist regime, who is wholeheartedly committed to the communist cause, and also to the liberation and education of women.

Afsoon – One of Jalil's official wives.

Niloufar – Afsoon's daughter.

Nargis – Another of Jalil's wives.

Saideh – One of Mariam's half sisters, who, unlike Mariam, is sent to school in Herat.

Naheed – Another of Mariam's half sisters, who also attends school.

Yunus – Rasheed's first son, who drowned in a lake as a child, while Rasheed had been passed out from drinking.

Khadim – A neighborhood troublemaker, who pulls practical jokes on Laila until Tariq beats him up and puts an end to it.

Wakil – A man whom Laila asks to accompany her, Mariam, and Aziza on the bus to Pakistan, but who betrays them to the Mujahideen.

Zaman – The kindly orphanage director who looks after Aziza, and eventually becomes Laila's partner in the orphanage renovation.

Salim – A friend of Tariq's from prison, who puts him in touch with his brother Sayeed.

Sayeed – The owner of a hotel in Murree, Pakistan, who hires Tariq and eventually Laila and helps the two of them settle as exiles there.

Naghma – A woman in the jail with Mariam.

Taxi Driver – Drives Babi, Laila, and Tariq to the Bamiyan Valley.

Aziza – The daughter of Laila and Tariq. Laila marries Rasheed in order to hide the fact of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Laila is eventually forced to put Aziza into an orphanage, but she and Tariq eventually get her back out.

Khadija – One of Jalil's wives.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HISTORY AND MEMORY IN AFGHANISTAN

As Laila, Babi, and Tariq drive out on a day trip from Afghanistan, their taxi driver tells of the tumultuous history of the region. He concludes, "And that my friends, is the story of our country, one invader after another." The novel deals with a thirty-year swath of Afghan history. It begins with the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan up until their withdrawal in 1989, and continues through the infighting among the Mujahideen throughout the 1990s. The book ends shortly after the events of September 11, 2001, which introduced many Americans to Afghanistan for the first time. Many events in the characters' personal lives, in fact, are tightly bound to political events, and the narrator uses history as a reference for the novel's action.

Through it all, the main characters retain a hold on what they consider the "true" Afghanistan, distinct from those "invaders" who may hold power over the country at any one time. There are often competing notions of the "true" Afghanistan, depending on the characters' political opinions and beliefs. Babi, for instance, is distraught by an Afghanistan where women cannot participate equally, while for Rasheed such inequality epitomizes the type of country that Afghanistan should be. The reader, however, is clearly meant to take Babi's side.

The narrator also often stresses the natural beauty and ancient history of Afghanistan, which help to define it. The Taliban's destruction of the ancient Buddhas visited by Laila, for instance, is portrayed as a devastating attack against the nation itself. Despite the multiple invasions, bombings, and massacres, Laila and Mariam are able to keep their notion of Afghanistan intact through their own memories—for Laila, the happier times of her childhood, and for Mariam, the joy she gained from building a bond with Laila and her children. It is Laila's continued memory of Afghanistan that compels her to return, despite the violence, at the end of the novel.

SUFFERING AND PERSEVERANCE

None of the characters in the novel is a stranger to pain and suffering, either physical or emotional. However, this suffering takes different forms. The loss of loved ones brings its own kind of acute pain—often in a way that seems to lack any kind of redemption. On the other hand, there are other types of suffering that the characters willingly endure in the service of others.

A Thousand Splendid Suns seems to grapple with how to create a hierarchy of grief and suffering: is the loss of Laila's brothers, after Babi (or so Mammy accuses him) allowed them to fight the Mujahideen, somehow worse than the random rocket that killed Laila's friend Giti? The characters grapple with such suffering in different ways. Mammy takes refuge in her dark bedroom following her sons' deaths and never quite seems to be able to overcome her grief. Laila is more pragmatic: she marries Rasheed not despite but because of her parents' death, which she sees as her only option. The novel seems to promote this kind of perseverance over the immobilization that can stem from suffering. Though the suffering that the characters have experienced might be impossible to undo, there is value and strength to be drawn from their ability to endure.

This is especially the case when the characters choose willingly to suffer. Laila, for instance, willingly submits to beatings by the Taliban for traveling as a woman alone, just so that she has the chance of seeing and spending time with her daughter Aziza at the orphanage. Mariam, of course, chooses to kill Rasheed so as to give Laila a chance of a better life, knowing all the same that she will be convicted and executed by the Taliban as a result. This ability to suffer willingly for the benefit of others is portrayed as something women in particular excel at. From Laila's horrifically painful childbirth to Mariam's sacrifice, women endure their own suffering and even add to it themselves.

SHAME AND REPUTATION

A particular kind of suffering in the novel has to do with shame, which comes up again and again as both a pain to be endured and as a tool to inflict on others. In the first case, shame is linked to responsibility and ensuing guilt for an incident in a character's past. Mariam's mother's suicide, after Mariam runs away to Jalil, is one example of such shame. Laila feels her own sense of shame for having survived the bombing that killed her parents, purely by luck.

Another type of shame is intimately linked to social standing and reputation, and that particular type of shame has the power to inflict deep psychological damage. As a *harami* (bastard), Mariam is made to feel deeply ashamed by her father Jalil's family, by others in the village, and by her husband Rasheed. She becomes convinced as a result that she does not deserve to be loved, and will never find a place where she belongs. By beating both Mariam and Laila, Rasheed combines psychological and physical harm, making them feel pain but also shaming them and asserting his own power over them.

We see, then, how shame is both intimately personal and extremely political. Many of the Taliban's laws, particularly regarding the status of women, consider women as shameful (though extraordinarily powerful) creatures that must be barred from the public sphere. These standards are often couched in terms of "protecting" a woman's "honor," though honor in the novel is quite often used as the counterpart to shame.

LOVE, LOYALTY, AND BELONGING

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, love may not conquer all, but it is a stronger tie than many other social bonds, from social class to ethnic status. Love makes the novel's characters act in sometimes irrational ways, and their erratic behavior can often be explained by the strong loyalty that stems from love. Mariam's love for her father Jalil remains constant despite hints that he is ashamed of her *harami*—she ultimately turns her back on him only out of love for her own mother. The poignant scene at the end of the novel when Laila receives a letter from Jalil meant for Mariam makes clear that his love for her was never entirely stamped out.

Laila, in turn, believes that by marrying Rasheed and thus saving her and Tariq's baby, she is remaining loyal to Tariq, even after his death. Laila's love for Tariq also transcends ethnic boundaries—often a source of tension and violence in Afghanistan—as she is Tajik and he Pashtun.

Though love can cross social boundaries in the novel, it is also a way to create a territory of belonging. Tariq and Laila band together in love against the destruction and suffering around them, while Mariam initially believes to find in her marriage to Rasheed a place where she can finally belong. Mariam's final dramatic act of killing Rasheed is, paradoxically, based on her close relationship with Laila. The novel portrays such an act, though morally complex, as a powerful statement of love.

GENDER RELATIONS

By telling the story of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through the perspective of two Afghan women, Hosseini can emphasize certain aspects of Afghan life and history that differ from the established historical narrative. The novel, in fact, draws on the limitations imposed on women in Afghan life in order to explore how women have lived, endured, and subverted these constraints.

Gender relations differ throughout the novel depending on the occupying forces and the laws that accompany them. Under communist rule, for instance, girls are permitted to attend school and work outside the home. Babi celebrates this status and encourages Laila to take advantage of it. At the same time, however, girls are discouraged from spending too much time with members of the opposite sex before they're married. Gender relations can also depend on specific traditional or regional norms—Mariam, for instance, is required by her husband to wear a burqa long before this becomes law. Men, like Laila's brothers, are the ones who go off to fight, while the women stay home and often must deal with the repercussions of war.

The relatively progressive gender norms under communism change drastically with the arrival of the Mujahideen and, eventually, the Taliban. For Laila, the restrictions have the effect of taking Kabul, the city that she always thought of as hers, away from her, limiting her freedom of speech and movement. Even so, the characters find ways to subvert these norms: Laila sneaks across town to the orphanage, and with Mariam she plans an escape (though ultimately a thwarted one) from Rasheed. The Taliban may have legally sanctioned Rasheed's violent beatings, but Hosseini is clearly on the side of greater freedoms for women, and the reader is meant to cheer on Laila and Mariam as they struggle against these inequalities.

FEMALE FRIENDSHIP

Though gender norms shift throughout the course of the novel as a result of changing occupations and laws, one constant theme is friendship between women. The relationship between Mariam and Laila rests at the heart of the novel, as even its structure reveals: Part I takes Mariam's perspective, Part II takes Laila's, and Part III alternates between them. Laila also treasures her friendship with her classmates Giti and Hasina, with whom she shares laughs, games, and secrets about boys—forgetting for a time about the violence and dangers of their adolescence.

By the time the Mujahideen impose their own restrictions on the place of women in Afghanistan, female friendship becomes one way to subvert these restrictions from within. Mariam and Laila, for instance, band together against Rasheed, the husband of both and the source of much of their suffering. Most drastically, this takes the form of their plot to escape. But in more subtle ways, the time they spend together drinking tea, joking, and laughing allows them to draw strength from each other and endure their oppression. Even in a society where women cannot participate in the public sphere, the book suggests, relationships between women serve not only as a source of escape but as a means to assert their own legitimacy and dignity.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BAMIYAN BUDDHAS

One of Laila's most treasured memories is the day trip she takes with Tariq and Babi to the Bamiyan Valley, where they look up at the magnificent Buddha statues carved into the cliffs, and climb up atop one of the statues to look over the valley at the Afghan landscape before them. Babi had wanted Laila and Tariq to understand their country's living, breathing heritage—a heritage quite apart from the violence and turmoil of the national wars. The Buddhas, testimony to an ancient community of monks that lived in caves within the cliffs, symbolize the cultural richness of this national heritage. The Taliban's destruction of these statues serves as only another testament to their disregard for the true Afghanistan. In addition, in remembering the day trip to the statues, Laila recalls a time when she was truly happy, surrounded by people she loved, and felt safe under the watchful eye of the statues. The Buddhas also come to stand for a sense of contentment and security for Laila, one that she will yearn for in the tumultuous years to come.

SAIB-E-TABRIZI'S POEM

In fact, the entire seventeenth-century poem is not reprinted in the novel, since Babi can only remember two lines: "One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs, / Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls." The poem is an ode to Kabul, and Babi first recites it just before his death, when he is preparing to leave the city. The second time we hear it is when Laila recalls these lines as she is moving back to Kabul from Murree, Pakistan at the end of the novel. The poem represents the powerful allure of Kabul, which is Laila's home and becomes a home for Mariam, especially once she befriends Laila. Its description of Kabul's beauty can be seen as achingly ironic, since for much of the novel Kabul is hardly splendid but instead a bombed-out bloody shell; but the poem also evokes the "real" Kabul that remains beneath the destruction. Finally, the poem underlines the importance Babi places on literary and cultural heritage, and the necessity for Laila—as for women in general—to be educated and to be able to transmit this heritage.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead Books edition of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* published in 2007.

Part I: Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ She understood then what Nana meant, that a *harami* was an unwanted thing: that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance.

Related Characters: Mariam, Nana

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The first time Mariam hears the word "harami" is when she breaks a piece of Nana's beloved tea set—it is a way for Nana express her anger and condemn Mariam. As a five-year-old, Mariam could not grasp the full implications of the word, which means "bastard." But here Mariam claims that she understood the implications of the word even as a small child. "Harami," as a term of shame and judgment, carries with it a label that stigmatizes the person as unloved and unwanted. This is something that Mariam grasps almost immediately and deeply fears: it is why she will cling so closely to Jalil, who seems to offer a way to escape from such isolation. Nana's use of the word also underlines just how much even she, as someone who suffers from the rigid social structures in place, has internalized these structures herself, such that she has almost come to believe what they imply for her and her daughter.

Part I: Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ "It's our lot in life, Mariam. Women like us. We endure. It's all we have. Do you understand?"

Related Characters: Nana (speaker), Mariam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Mariam has told Nana that she would appreciate the chance to go to school, like Jalil's other children. But Nana is skeptical that this is a possibility, and besides, she doesn't think that Mariam needs the kinds of skills she would learn in school. Instead, Nana tells Mariam, she only needs to learn how to "endure." This advice is not only for Mariam: in using the first-person plural of "us" and "we," Nana lumps herself in this category as well.

"Women like us," according to Nana, are women who have been abandoned by society and are condemned to live at its fringes. Importantly, Nana does not include all marginalized people in this group, but only the women: as the group structurally prevented from attaining the same opportunities as men, women are doubly affected when they are also poor and exist outside of traditional family structures. Nana has a deterministic view of this society; that is, she does not seem to believe that any aspect of society itself can be changed. Instead, she and Mariam can only learn how to live based on what is permitted to them. They are condemned to suffer, but their "success" will depend on how well they react to this suffering—how well they persevere.

Part I: Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ For the first time, Mariam could hear [Jalil] with Nana's ears. She could hear so clearly now the insincerity that had always lurked beneath, the hollow, false assurances. *"One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs, Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls."*

Related Characters: Mariam (speaker), Jalil

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Mariam has returned to Jalil's house after Nana's funeral, and Jalil has told her that he will allow her to stay with him. There was a time when nothing would have made Mariam happier than to be able to live with Jalil. Now, however, Nana's suicide has changed everything. It is not that Jalil's character has been transformed by Nana's death: instead, Mariam simply recognizes the aspects of his character that she had been unable or unwilling to see all along.

Throughout Mariam's childhood, she had idolized Jalil, refusing to see him through Nana's eyes and instead remaining convinced that he was a kind, good father. Only now can she recognize that what she believed to be his goodness was only a pleasant façade concealing a deeper insincerity. After all, Jalil directly participated in keeping Mariam and Nana isolated and apart from his "true" family. Now Mariam's loyalty has shifted definitively to Nana. However, this change of heart comes too late for Nana, who did not live to see her daughter fully come to to terms with her father's true self. Mariam's belated realization will long haunt her.

Part I: Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ "But I'm a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman's face is her husband's business only. I want you to remember that. Do you understand?"

Related Characters: Rasheed (speaker), Mariam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Rasheed is pleased with the dinner Mariam has cooked for him, and he offers to show her around Kabul the next day. But he will require her to wear a floor-length burqa: as he hands it to her, he scornfully talks about the more modern men in the neighborhood, who allow their wives to walk around in short skirts. Like Mariam, Rasheed is from a more rural part of Afghanistan, where more modern, Western customs are not only looked down upon but are often unthinkable.

It is not so much that Mariam is bothered by these customs of dress, but rather by what these customs symbolize in Rasheed's mind. For him, the burqa is meant to proclaim that Mariam is his property, that she belongs to him alone. Even her face cannot be seen by others for risk of allowing other men to have so much as a glimpse of this property. Mariam feels suffocated, not to mention intimidated, by these assumptions, which seem to rely on a code of violent patriarchal honor and reputation.

Part I: Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat. But after four years of marriage, Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid.

Related Characters: Mariam, Rasheed

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Mariam has had multiple miscarriages in the years since she first married Rasheed, and she knows that her husband is furious at her for not giving him a son, a prized and crucial possession among traditional families. Rasheed has lost any

minor tenderness that he once may have shown Mariam, and now in addition to feeling scorned and ridiculed Mariam also has to deal with being frightened by Rasheed's unpredictable moods and tendency to beat her.

Rasheed treats Mariam not as a fellow human being, much less his own wife, but as an animal or a possession, something hardly worthy of attention. Mariam had hoped that she would find long-sought love with her new husband, but now that hope seems wildly naive and optimistic. Instead, Mariam begins to espouse some of the same beliefs that Nana had tried to equip her with when Mariam was a child. She has learned to "tolerate" all that Rasheed hurls at her, rather than fight or challenge him. Fear, rather than preventing her from persevering through the shameful way he treats her, is what ensures that she will be able to accept what happens to her.

Part II: Chapter 16 Quotes

"I know you're still young, but I want you to understand and learn this now," he said. "Marriage can wait, education cannot. You're a very, very bright girl. Truly, you are. You can be anything you want, Laila. I know this about you. And I also know that when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance."

Related Characters: Hakim (Babi) (speaker), Laila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

Laila's friends have been joking around about how to ward off unwanted suitors, but Laila recognizes that she does not need to worry about such problems, since Babi wants her to get an education. Here she recalls what he has repeated to her multiple times.

Babi's advice could not be further from Rasheed's understanding of the proper place of a woman in Afghani life. Rather than considering the home as the women's sphere, Babi thinks that the education of women is not just positive but necessary for Afghanistan to recover from its many wars and succeed in the future. He sees Laila as an example of how the next generation can repair the mistakes and failures of earlier generations, and he understands that that can only take place if all citizens are educated. Babi thus makes the education of women not a private question, a question of giving women opportunities now often barred from them, but a question that is directly linked to the national future of the country.

Part II: Chapter 18 Quotes

"To me, it's nonsense—and very dangerous nonsense at that—all this talk of I'm Tajik and you're Pashtun and he's Hazara and she's Uzbek. We're all Afghans, and that's all that should matter. But when one group rules over the others for so long…There's contempt. Rivalry. There is. There always has been."

Related Characters: Hakim (Babi) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

Unlike Laila's family, which is Tajik, Tariq's family is Pashtun, meaning that they speak Pashto rather than Farsi—but they revert to Farsi when Laila comes to visit, for her sake. Although Laila is not old enough to fully understand all the ethnic conflicts of the country, Babi has explained to her that these two ethnic groups traditionally have not gotten along. However, he also tells her that, from his point of view, such quarrels are not only silly but are also dangerous—especially because the conflicts have so often turned violent.

Babi attempts to instill in Laila a sense of belonging to and gratefulness for the nation of Afghanistan, beyond the quarrels that he sees as petty and belonging to each group. Still, Babi acknowledges the suffering that can result when one group does manage to triumph over others and keep them subservient to its own interests. This inequality, he suggests, is what is at the root of the most violent of ethnic conflicts in Afghanistan, and perhaps what prevents the country from coming together as a unified nation.

Part II: Chapter 19 Quotes

It was hard to feel, *really* feel, Mammy's loss. Hard to summon sorrow, to grieve the deaths of people Laila had never really thought of as alive in the first place. Ahmad and Noor had always been like lore to her. Like characters in a fable. Kings in a history book. It was Tariq who was real, flesh and blood.

Related Characters: Laila, Tariq, Fariba (Mammy), Ahmad, Noor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

Ahmad and Noor, Laila's two brothers, have been killed in the course of fighting, and Mammy, who has always adored them, is beyond comforting. During the funeral, Laila attempts to understand her mother's feelings, and to feel her sorrow herself, but is unable to. Ahmad and Noor, off fighting since Laila was very young, have long remained abstract figures to her rather than real, present, loving brothers. She understands the importance of their positions and their courage in fighting for their country, but these ideals have never gained a sense of reality for Laila. She can only contrast the way she feels about her brothers to the way she feels about Tariq, whom she has grown up with, and to whom she feels more loyal and loving than she feels even towards her own brothers. While Laila would never be able to vocalize such sentiments, she does allow herself these silent feelings as she attempts to come to terms with her family's loss.

Part II: Chapter 21 Quotes

"And that, my young friends, is the story of our country, one invader after another. [...] Macedonians. Sassanians. Arabs. Mongols. Now the Soviets. But we're like those walls up there. Battered, and nothing pretty to look at, but still standing."

Related Characters: Taxi Driver (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Babi has taken Tariq and Laila on a day trip outside Kabul, though their final destination is still a surprise. As they ride along in the taxi Babi has hired, the taxi driver takes the opportunity to share some of his own opinions about the state of Afghanistan and the suffering it has historically experienced. The driver goes through a long list of various foreign peoples that have invaded Afghanistan. Surrounded by other countries, in a strategic location for trading and for other political gains, Afghanistan has long been a prized target for invaders.

The taxi driver does not attempt to put an optimistic spin on this sobering reality for Afghanis. The walls of the Red City to which he points—walls of a nine-hundred-year-old fortress, battered multiple times and failing, at one point or another, to defend the city successfully—have nonetheless not yet crumbled. This physical continuity is, according to the taxi driver, something to admire, and is indicative of Afghanis' general response when facing political challenges and when forced to deal with a new round of difficulties and suffering.

Part II: Chapter 23 Quotes

"By the time we're twenty," Hasina used to say, "Giti and I, we'll have pushed out four, five kids each. But you, Laila, you'll make us two dummies proud. You're going to be somebody. I know one day I'll pick up a newspaper and find your picture on the front page."

Related Characters: Hasina (speaker), Laila, Giti

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

Giti has shared with Hasina and Laila that there is a boy she likes in the neighborhood, and she's thinking about marrying him. Although Laila asks her about school, Giti just looks at her. Laila realizes that she should have understood, and she recalls what Hasina had repeated to her several times throughout their friendship: that Laila is on a different path than other girls in her community. Hasina underlines that Laila's family situation is rare if not unique: there are not many fathers like Babi, who consider it vital for young women to have an education and to have all the same opportunities as young men.

Hasina doesn't seem bitter about the different expectations for her and for Laila. Nor does she seem to question her own path in life, accepting that she will marry young and have children as is expected of her. Instead, she sounds proud and admiring of her friend: for Hasina, Laila is the exception rather than the rule, and her future should be treated as such. Hasina's words thus underline the difficulty of changing expectations and norms around gender relations in Afghanistan: even if one woman manages to attain greater equality with men, this is more likely to be seen as a rare case than as a new standard. Still, Hasina is also an example of the compassion and mutual respect that the book wants to portray as empowering, even if also common, among women.

Part II: Chapter 26 Quotes

There would come a day, in fact, years later, when Laila would no longer bewail his loss. Or not as relentlessly; not nearly. There would come a day when the details of his face would begin to slip from memory's grip, when overhearing a mother on the street call after her child by Tariq's name would no longer cut her adrift. She would not miss him as she did now, when the ache of his absence was her unremitting companion—like the phantom pain of an amputee.

Related Characters: Laila, Tariq

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the few moments in the book during which the narrator looks into the future and compares one of the character's later states of mind with how she is feeling at the current moment. Here, the contrast between Laila's current and later states is meant to show just how acute her pain at Tariq's absence is now—but also how such acute suffering inevitably softens and eases with the passage of time. This is not to say that Laila will have lost her feelings for Tariq. Instead, the book tries to show how it is possible for even those who have suffered the most, in ways unimaginable to many readers, to carry on in their own lives. The book is also interested in the persistence of love, and how it can change and mutate even while persevering below the surface. The way this takes place is described through a simile that is highly significant, given that Tariq of course has an amputated leg himself. The simile of amputation is meant to show how an absence can be its own kind of presence.

All day, this poem about Kabul has been bouncing around in my head. Saib-e-Tabrizi wrote it back in the seventeenth century, I think. I used to known the whole poem, but all I can remember now is two lines:*"One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs, Or the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls."*

Related Characters: Hakim (Babi) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 191-192

Explanation and Analysis

As Babi is mourning what has become of the country that he loves so much, he confides in Laila and shares something that consoles him in times of difficulty: a poem. This classic work from the seventeenth century is what gives the novel its title. The poem itself is beautiful, but its significance for Babi lies also in the image of Afghanistan that the work calls up, an image that shares nothing with the violent destructiveness that now seems to characterize Kabul and the nation at large.

These two lines in particular suggest that suffering is not the only thing shared by Kabul's inhabitants. The "moons that shimmer" and the "splendid suns" underline the beauty of daily life in the city—a spectacle that repeats with each rising of the sun and view of the moon at night. But these beauties are not always readily available, remaining at times "hidden" behind the various walls of the city. The diversity of experiences and lives is to be marveled at, but one should also understand the inability of ever knowing all that takes place behind the physical walls of Kabul and behind the walls of its inhabitants' memories. Even in a time of war, however, it is possible to acknowledge the persistence of such daily histories.

Part III: Chapter 27 Quotes

The girl was looking back as if waiting for Mariam to pass on some morsel of wisdom, to say something encouraging. But what wisdom did Mariam have to offer? What encouragement? Mariam remembered the day they'd buried Nana and how little comfort she had found when Mullah Faizullah had quoted the Koran for her.

Related Characters: Mariam, Laila, Nana, Mullah Faizullah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 202

Explanation and Analysis

During her recovery, Laila has had time to ruminate on her own place in the tragedy that has befallen her family, and to ask herself what, if any, responsibility she might have in it. She settles on the fact that if she hadn't insisted on completing an errand that her father wanted to do, she would have died rather than Babi. For her part, Mariam is quite familiar with such feelings of guilt and responsibility: she too has experienced the painful process of grief mixed up with shame after the death of a family member.

But Mariam's own experiences do not seem to have made her any wiser, at least from her own perspective. Mariam recognizes that there is little she can say that will make Laila feel better—something she understands having realized how little others, even those she respected and admired like Mullah Faizullah, could comfort her in her own grief. That Mariam does not try to soothe Laila thus stems not from coldness or hardness but from a shared experience and understanding.

She was remembering the day the man from Panjshir had come to deliver the news of Ahmad's and Noor's deaths. She remembered Babi, white-faced, slumping on the couch, and Mammy, her hand flying to her mouth when she heard. Laila had watched Mammy come undone that day and it had scared her, but she hadn't felt any true sorrow. She hadn't understood the awfulness of her mother's loss. Now another stranger bringing news of another death. Now she was the one sitting on the chair. Was this her penalty, then, her punishment for being aloof to her own mother's suffering?

Related Characters: Laila, Tariq, Fariba (Mammy), Hakim (Babi), Ahmad, Noor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

As Laila struggles to react to the news of Tariq's death, her mind returns to an earlier moment of another person's suffering, in another reaction to horrific news. As readers, we too can recall that moment and remember how Laila struggled to feel a real sense of loss at the death of her brothers, even as her own mother broke down in grief at the news. Now Laila can finally recognize what Mammy was feeling at that long-ago moment, but she also feels that she is being made to pay, in some cosmic way, for her lack of grief when Ahmad and Noor died. At that moment in time, she had contrasted the abstract figures of her brothers to the real, visceral presence of Tariq. Here, that comparison is tragically fulfilled, as Laila learns that the person who has always seemed most real and true to her has died. In a tragically ironic twist, Laila can only fully understand her own mother's suffering when she is made to experience something just as painful herself.

Part III: Chapter 30 Quotes

But, miraculously, something of her former life remained, her last link to the person that she had been before she had become so utterly alone. A part of Tariq still alive inside her, sprouting tiny arms, growing translucent hands. How could she jeopardize the only thing she had left of him, of her old life?

Related Characters: Laila, Tariq

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

Laila had been plotting to escape Rasheed and flee to Pakistan, but now a regular morning nausea has made her realize that she is pregnant with Tariq's child, and her plans are forced to change. In some ways, this realization makes things more difficult and complicated: no longer can Laila realistically escape, and she will have to find a way to ensure that Rasheed believes that this child is his own. But rather than feeling afraid or trapped, Laila's pregnancy is a source of gratefulness and relief.

After the death of her parents, Laila had been left with no living blood relations: only the knowledge that Tariq was alive and safe gave her a sense of continuity with her past. With Tariq gone, Laila feels alone in the world and bereft of anyone who could make her feel the kind of belonging she had with Babi and Tariq. The thought of Tariq's child now gives her the strength to want to carry on, and the ability to withstand the desperation of her new life by clinging on to something that remains from her former reality.

Part III: Chapter 34 Quotes

Laila examined Mariam's drooping cheeks, the eyelids that sagged in tired folds, the deep lines that framed her mouth—she saw these things as though she too were looking at someone for the first time. And, for the first time, it was not an adversary's face Laila saw but a face of grievances unspoken, burdens gone unprotested, a destiny submitted to and endured.

Related Characters: Mariam, Laila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

Laila and Mariam have so far accepted their position as natural enemies, competing wives. But now Mariam admits that she is grateful for Laila's attempt to stop Rasheed from hitting her, for sticking up for her as no one has done before. Mariam's expression of gratefulness causes Laila to see her in a different light. Before, Laila had considered Mariam as simply another enemy to face, another unpleasant reality in her new life. But now she begins to recognize that Mariam has struggled in similar ways that she, Laila, has—that perhaps Mariam has even suffered more than herself. The sense of stubborn perseverance and acceptance of past wrongs that she sees in Mariam's face makes Laila feel sympathetically towards Mariam, and it also makes her wonder if she and Mariam could derive mutual strength from the things that they have both gone through—if the two women could be stronger united in their suffering than divided.

Part III: Chapter 35 Quotes

"Why have you pinned your heart to an old, ugly hag like me?" Mariam would murmur into Aziza's hair. "Huh? I am nobody, don't you see? A dehati. What have I got to give you?"But Aziza only muttered contentedly and dug her face in deeper. And when she did that, Mariam swooned. Her eyes watered. Her heart took flight. And she marveled at how, after all these years of rattling loose, she had found in this little creature the first true connection in her life of false, failed connections.

Related Characters: Mariam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 252

Explanation and Analysis

Since the end of their mutual suspicion and dislike, Mariam and Laila have grown continually closer, creating a surrogate family out of the two of them and Aziza—a truer family than the traditional one headed by Rasheed. Mariam's murmurs to Aziza reflect the joyful shock that Mariam feels at being accepted and loved, for perhaps the first time in her life. As an infant, Aziza is unaware of Mariam's shameful status as a "harami" and of her past of isolation and unhappiness.

Mariam takes solace in Aziza's unquestioning contentment in her arms, even as she marvels that this contentment is even possible. Before now, the mere idea of children would only have served to remind Mariam of her own failure in giving Rasheed a child, especially a son. Rather than feel bitter that Laila has had such an opportunity, or upset at the existence of a child not her own in the household, Mariam delights in the chance to forge a real connection thanks to her growing friendship with Laila.

[Mariam] had passed these years in a distant corner of her mind. A dry, barren field, out beyond dream and disillusionment. There, the future did not matter. And the past held only this wisdom: that love was a damaging mistake, and its accomplice, hope, a treacherous illusion.

Related Characters: Mariam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 256

Explanation and Analysis

Mariam goes through the past years of her marriage to Rasheed in her mind, recognizing the sense of disillusionment that has been the only way she has found to deal with Rasheed's overbearing nature and the numbing disappointments that have characterized her life with him. Now Mariam recognizes that in order to persevere in her life with Rasheed, she has had to give up on some of the ideals that she held as a child. Before Nana's death, Mariam had dreamed of finding love and belonging, first with Jalil and his family, and then, at the beginning, with a new life as the wife of Rasheed. Both of those possibilities had turned out to be false hopes. As a result, Mariam has learned to be suspicious of any of those hopes or desires. Instead, she has pushed them aside, preferring not to hope for anything better so that she will not be disappointed once again. Mariam only now recognizes this "dry, barren field" by which she describes her past as she begins to wonder if there is in fact another possibility—if she need not push all thoughts of hope or love aside.

Part III: Chapter 38 Quotes

Laila dropped the spoke because she could not accept what the Mujahideen readily had: that sometimes in war innocent life had to be taken. Her war was against Rasheed. The baby was blameless. And there had been enough killing already. Laila had seen enough killing of innocents caught in the cross fire of enemies.

Related Characters: Laila, Rasheed

Related Themes:

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

Rasheed has hinted to Laila that he knows that Aziza is not his child, and he threatens her with all he could do, legally, as her husband, to punish her. Laila's rage has not gone away by the time she realizes that she is once again pregnant, this time with Rasheed's child. Her anger is such that she comes very close to completing a homegrown abortion, ensuring that she won't give birth to the child of the man she despises.

Laila's decision not to go through with the abortion is portrayed not as a sign of acquiescence to Rasheed's power, but rather as a decision Laila makes herself to cut off the endless cycle of suffering and retribution. From her brothers and her parents to Tariq, Laila has seen first-hand how innocent people have suffered as a result of others' desires for justice and revenge. Here she recognizes that such a process of violent vengeance can easily go on forever: it is up to her to choose, in this individual case, not to continue the cycle. She makes the decision to treat the baby as an "innocent caught in the cross fire" rather than as a symbol of Rasheed's own malevolence.

Part III: Chapter 41 Quotes

❝ Mariam regretted her foolish, youthful pride now. She wished now that she had let him in. what would have been the harm to let him in, sit with him, let him say what he'd come to say? He was her father. He'd not been a good father, it was true, but how ordinary his faults seemed now how forgivable, when compared to Rasheed's malice, or to the brutality and violence that she had seen men inflict on one another.

Related Characters: Mariam, Rasheed, Jalil

Related Themes:

Page Number: 309

Explanation and Analysis

Mariam has gone to the Intercontinental Hotel with Rasheed to attempt to call Jalil. They want to ask if he can help the family, as the children are going hungry and they are in a desperate situation. Mariam has not seen Jalil for thirteen years, since he came to see her at Rasheed's house, and she had refused to go out to meet him. Thinking back on that moment, Mariam decides she was wrong to stubbornly refuse to see her father. She does not argue that Jalil was blameless, or that she should forgive him for his behavior with her and Nana. But having lived longer and having seen greater suffering and greater evil, Mariam now acknowledges that Jalil's sins are not on the same level as those of the Taliban, for instance, or even of Rasheed.

Mariam has developed a more nuanced understanding of the way that love and loyalty can function in families. She does not expect love to mean that families will be perfect, or that family members will not hurt each other, but she has come to accept that she can still acknowledge her father and respect him without forgetting about the pain he caused her.

Part III: Chapter 42 Quotes

❝ [Laila] thought of Aziza's stutter, and of what Aziza had said earlier about fractures and powerful collisions deep down and how sometimes all we see on the surface is a slight tremor.

Related Characters: Laila

Related Themes:

Page Number: 326

Explanation and Analysis

Laila has managed a rare visit to the orphanage to see Aziza, but as the two return together, Aziza grows quiet, worrying Laila. Aziza had told her earlier about what she's been learning, about tectonic plates that collide deep in the earth, even if only a slight tremor is apparent on the surface. Laila ties this anecdote to the stutter that, she notices, Aziza has begun to develop.

Laila has to recognize that, although Aziza tries to be cheerful and happy whenever Laila manages to visit her, Aziza's new life in the orphanage cannot be pleasant. Her descent into silence is emblematic, for Laila, of all that lies below the surface, and all that Aziza refrains from saying for fear of worrying or causing pain to her mother. Laila will inevitably worry about her daughter, but her anxiety is coupled with a knowledge that living in the orphanage is the only possibility to keep Aziza alive—that Laila is trapped by her situation with Rasheed and unable to do anything else to keep her daughter safe.

Part III: Chapter 47 Quotes

❝ Though there had been moments of beauty in it. Mariam knew that life for the most part had been unkind to her. But as she walked the final twenty paces, she could not help but wish for more of it. [...] Yet as she closed her eyes, it was not regret any longer but a sensation of abundant peace that washed over her. She thought of her entry into this world, the *harami* daughter of a lowly villager, an unintended thing, a pitiable, regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back.

Related Characters: Mariam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 370

Explanation and Analysis

In the final moments of Mariam's life, as she walks out into the stadium and prepares to be executed, she once again considers her life in her mind as if going through film reels. Mariam compares the difficulties and acute suffering she has experienced to the "moments of beauty" that she remembers with Laila and Aziza. These moments were fleeting and rare compared to the regular pain, and yet for Mariam they are worth much more—and it would even be worth living longer and suffering more in order to also live through more of such moments.

Although Mariam does wish she could live longer, she ends her life with a feeling of contentment rather than regret. After yearning for love and belonging at the beginning of her life, she had pushed those hopes away, only to have them offered to her when she least expected it—not through the love of a father or of a husband but through that of a female friend. She clings to this love, which to her means more than the shame of being a harami or the isolation of being continually unwanted and considered low in the hierarchy of her society, as a kind of solace even in the midst of the final violent act that will end her life.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART I: CHAPTER 1

Mariam remembers the first time she heard the word "*harami*," or bastard. She is five years old, and it's a Thursday—the day her father Jalil comes to visit her at the small one-room house where she lives with her mother, Nana. She accidentally breaks a piece of Nana's treasured tea set, and Nana calls her a clumsy *harami*. Only later does Mariam understand the shame associated with the word, staking her out as an unwanted person who will never find love.

From the very first page, the theme of shame envelops Mariam's story. Throughout the novel, the very word "harami" will be used as a weapon, accusation, or simply a placeholder for the fact that Mariam occupies the lowest rung on the social ladder in Afghanistan.

Mariam adores Jalil, who never calls her such a name, but instead visits and tells her stories about their city, Herat, and the famous poet Jami who lived there. Mariam believes his stories because she's never been into the city. Nana, though, says Jalil spins lies, and has betrayed them by casting them out.

As a child, Mariam adores her father unconditionally. As a distant, benign presence, Jalil is easier to love than Mariam's bitter and beleaguered mother, who nevertheless is bringing up Mariam on her own.

Jalil has three wives and nine legitimate children. He owns a cinema and is very wealthy. Nana was one of his housekeepers, but then became pregnant with Mariam. Her own father disowned her and Jalil sent her off to live in the one-room "*kolba*." Nana reminds Mariam never to trust men as a result—a man will always find a way to accuse a woman.

This backstory says much about Mariam's social situation—adjacent to but worlds away from wealth and security. Nana's explicit articulation of the inequalities between men and women will gain even greater significance later on.

PART I: CHAPTER 2

Nana explains to Mariam that she refused to live in Herat, where the neighbors would whisper about her. Instead, she moved to a clearing on the edge of the village of Gul Daman on the outskirts of Herat.

There is a slight ambiguity here, between Jalil sending Nana off because of his shame, and Nana choosing to live in isolation because of her pride.

Nana had been engaged once before, to a parakeet seller, but a week before the wedding, a *jinn* entered Nana's body (that is, Nana is prone to seizures). The family called off the wedding.

Nana is no stranger to suffering, though here we gain a sense that hope was once available to her.

Nana says that when she gave birth to Mariam, in spring 1959, Jalil hadn't bothered to call a doctor. She describes her pain to Mariam, who apologizes. However, when Mariam is a little older, she begins to believe Jalil, who says he did send Nana to a hospital in Heart. Nana fumes at this version of the story, countering that Jalil was away horseback riding and didn't care. Nana and Jalil also each claim to have chosen Mariam's name, though Mariam believes Jalil.

Mariam constantly has to assess the truthfulness of the different versions of the stories she hears, versions which differ depending on the kind of person that Jalil is. The fact that she always takes his side reflects her unceasing loyalty to her father and her inability to see past pure love to the messier social relations behind it.

PART I: CHAPTER 3

Every so often, Jalil's two sons push a wheelbarrow filled with food and cooking supplies up the hill to the *kolba*. Nana always greets them with her arms crossed and a defiant posture, cursing their mothers and making faces at them. Mariam feels sorry for them. Once she yells an insult at them, just to please Nana, but she always waits in hiding to watch them leave.

The brothers offer Mariam a glimpse into the life that she could have if she were to be fully accepted as one of Jalil's true children. She remains conflicted between Jalil and Nana, however, toggling between the two as she attempts to please both.

Nana teaches Mariam to cook and sew. She only admits a few visitors: the village leader Habib Khan, her old friend Bibi jo, and especially Mullah Faizullah, the elderly Koran teacher or *akhund*. He tutors Mariam in prayer and recitation, and teaches her to read. They also sometimes go for walks and Mullah Faizullah enchants Mariam with stories of his youthful travels. He tells her that she can use the Koran for comfort when she needs it.

Mariam's life is simple, but has its own joys. Mullah Faizullah will remain one of the most significant figures in Mariam's life, a source of spiritual guidance and wisdom that she will rely upon in her most difficult moments. He also gives her a glimpse into the world beyond the kolba and the village.

One day, Mariam confides that she'd like to go to school—Bibi jo had mentioned that Jalil's other daughters would be attending. Mullah Faizullah asks Nana, but she says there's no use. The only skill a girl like Mariam needs, she says is to endure. She claims the kids at school will call Mariam a *harami*. Besides, Mariam is all Nana has.

Even at this historical moment, when education is available to women, only wealthier girls can actually get an education. Nana, for one, is convinced that the social situation into which one is born will determine the kind of life one can have.

PART I: CHAPTER 4

Though Mariam loves having visitors, she treasures Jalil's visits each Thursday the most. Each week she awaits him anxiously, though she tries not to seem to excited for Nana's sake. Nevertheless, Nana always is calmer and more polite in Jalil's presence, washing her hair, putting on a nice hijab, and serving him and Mariam tea.

Though Nana rails against Jalil in his absence, he clearly continues to exert a kind of power over her. Nana's relationship to Jalil is complex: they may once have loved each other, though now only the power of reputation persists.

Jalil shows Mariam how to fish, teaches her rhymes, and shows her clippings from Herat's newspaper—a piece of the world outside the *kolba*. In the summer of 1973, when Mariam is fourteen, he tells her that the king has been deposed in a bloodless coup and that Afghanistan has become a republic.

Along with Mullah Faizullah, Jalil serves as Mariam's link to the broader world, where political coups and national affairs—even if they seem remote—will come to affect her personally.

Jalil gives Mariam a leaf-shaped pendant. Mariam loves it, but Nana scoffs that it's just nomad jewelry made from coins people throw at them.

Again, Mariam has to choose between two competing visions of her father. At this moment, though, any gift from her father only makes her adore him more.

After Jalil's visits, Mariam always wonders what his life in Herat is like, and imagines living with him and being able to see him every day.

Even Herat, though not far from the kolba, represents an entirely distinct way of life that is simply unavailable to Mariam.

PART I: CHAPTER 5

For Mariam's fifteenth birthday, she asks Jalil to take her to see the American film that is playing at his cinema—a cartoon about a childless toymaker who carves a puppet that comes to life and has lots of adventures. Nana says it's not a good idea, and Jalil agrees, saying that, in fact, the film's quality isn't that good. But Mariam insists, and she asks him to meet her at noon the next day. He looks forlorn and hugs her without answering.

Until now, Jalil has been able to satisfy Mariam only with stories about the world beyond her home—as she gets older, however, mere stories won't suffice. For the first time, Nana and Jalil agree on something: the boundaries imposed by the shame of Mariam's harami status cannot be demolished.

Nana is furious when she hears, and mocks Mariam for thinking she's wanted in Jalil's house. She tries to make Mariam guilty by saying a *jinn* will come and she'll have a fit while Mariam's gone. Mariam goes for a walk rather than responding in anger. She is tired of Nana pitting her against Jalil, of fearing that Mariam will find some happiness whereas Nana never had any. Mariam sits at a lookout over Herat, and arranges a series of pebbles to represent Jalil's wives and ten children. She adds an extra, eleventh pebble beside them.

Though Nana yells at Mariam and attempts to guilt-trip her into staying, her tirades clearly stem from Nana's love for her daughter. Mariam, however, cannot see past Nana's bitterness. As a teenager, she still holds out hope that life might be better for her, and her game with the pebbles reflects her notion that this better life can only rest with Jalil's family.

The next day, Mariam dresses in her nicest hijab and sits by the stream to meet Jalil. After an hour, she heads down to Herat alone—the first time she's ever gone to the city. No one yells that she's a *harami*, and she enjoys the anonymity. She wanders around the parks and paths, and eventually asks a carriage driver if he knows where Jalil, the cinema owner, lives. He offers to drive her, and when he pulls onto a tree-lined street, he points out that Jalil's car is parked there.

The boundaries set up because Mariam is a harami are invisible rather than physical. As a result, Mariam believes, as she enters Herat, that they are easily surmountable. With Jalil's car parked in the driveway, Mariam cannot imagine any other major obstacles in her path.

A young woman opens the door, and when Mariam introduces herself, she runs inside. Jalil's chauffeur comes to the door and says Jalil's not there, and didn't say when he'd be back. Mariam says she'll wait, even after the driver comes back out and asks her to leave. He offers to take her back to the *kolba*, but she refuses, and spends the night sleeping on Jalil's stoop. In the morning, the driver awakens her and says she's made a scene—Jalil has told him that he needs to take her back right away. Mariam races past him into the garden, a spectacular courtyard with a fishpond and fruit trees, before seeing a face for an instant in the upstairs window. The driver catches up to Mariam, picks her up, and carries her into the car.

At first, Mariam remains confident that Jalil will return and embrace her fully. This confidence shifts to a sense that there's been a misunderstanding. Mariam simply cannot leave—she has staked so much on the belief that she belongs with Jalil and his family, and that he loves her, that she cannot face the reality that he's turned his back on her. It is only upon seeing his face in the window that Mariam is forced to come to terms with this abandonment.

On the way back, Mariam cries out of disillusionment, anger, and mainly shame at how much she idealized Jalil and dismissed Nana, who had been right all along. She wonders how she'll be able to apologize. The driver offers to walk her up to the *kolba*, but on the way, he suddenly yells at her to go back and covers her eyes. But it's too late—Mariam has already seen an overturned chair under a tree, and Nana hanging at the end of a rope from a branch.

The drive back to the kolba constitutes an epiphany for Mariam: for the first time, she (and the reader) understand the bias towards Jalil and against Nana in the previous several chapters. This already enormous suffering is almost unimaginably compounded by the realization that Nana has committed suicide.

PART I: CHAPTER 6

After Nana's funeral, Jalil brings Mariam back to the kolba to gather her things. Mullah Faizullah arrives and tries to comfort her with words from the Koran. But Mariam continues to hear Nana's voice begging her not to go, and she can't stop crying.

Even the verses from the Koran, which have so often reassured Mariam, are insufficient against the enormous guilt and responsibility she feels.

Jalil tells Mariam she can stay in his house, but now Mariam sees through his façade and understands his insincerity. She keeps her head down as she walks into the opulent, grand house, and into the guest room, where she lies down on the bed and shuts her eyes. Mariam stays in her room for the most part, eating alone rather than with the family. She knows she doesn't belong here, but wonders where she does belong.

An offer that would have thrilled Mariam so recently no longer means anything to her. As confident as she once was that she belonged with Jalil's family, she is now just as confident of the opposite—yet now, devastatingly, she has nowhere else to go.

On Mariam's second day, Niloufar, another of Jalil's daughters, comes into the room to get her gramophone. She plays a song for Mariam and shows her how she can do a headstand. Niloufar says her mother told her Mariam isn't really her sister, and that a *jinn* made Mariam's mother kill herself. Mariam tells her to stop the gramophone. Bibi jo also comes to see Mariam, but Mariam can only cry. That night, she hears voices arguing from downstairs.

Even though Niloufar means well, a harmless child whom Mariam would once have loved to befriend, her babbling reveals the power of notions like sister, family, and guilt. Mariam is not completely alone—Bibi jo is one remnant of her earlier life—but the elderly woman cannot provide what Mariam really needs.

The next day, Mullah Faizullah comes to visit Mariam. She admits that she keeps thinking of what Nana said to her before she left. Mullah Faizullah assures her that Nana was always troubled and unhappy, and that none of this was Mariam's fault. She wants to believe him but cannot.

Nana's "jinn" has been the best way for the villagers to explain her mysterious severe mental ailments. But Mariam cannot bring herself to point to a sickness as the result of her mother's death; she feels the responsibility for it herself.

The next week, Niloufar's mother Afsoon tells Mariam she needs to come downstairs—it's important that they talk to her.

Mariam's belief that she does not belong with Jalil's family is about to be vindicated.

PART I: CHAPTER 7

Jalil and his wives—Afsoon, Khadija, and Nargis—sit across from Mariam at a long dark table. They make awkward small talk. Mariam looks through the window and at the cabinet next to it, where there is a framed photo of Jalil and three of his sons.

Everything in Jalil's home reminds Mariam that she does not fit inthere, from his "true" wives around the table to the picture of his sons.

Khadija tells Mariam that she has a suitor named Rasheed, a friend of Jalil's business colleague. He's a Pashtun who lives in Kabul, but speaks Farsi like them. He's a very sought-after shoemaker, so, Khadija reassures Mariam, he'll be able to take care of her. Mariam looks desperately at Jalil, but he refuses to look back. Afsoon admits that he's forty or forty-five, but as a fifteen-year-old Mariam is at a good marrying age. Mariam knows that her fifteen-year-old half-sisters Saideh or Naheed, who both are in school and plan to attend Kabul University, would not be considered of marrying age.

The importance of Rasheed being able to "take care of" Mariam reflects a certain belief regarding gender relations, in which men are responsible for and have control over their wives—especially if the wife has little say in such an arranged marriage. These gender norms, however, clearly depend on the social status of the woman, as Saideh and Naheed's own trajectories reveal.

Nargis says that Rasheed's wife died during childbirth, and his son drowned a few years ago, so he's suffered too. Mariam begs Jalil not to make her go. The wives continue to try to convince her, but she says she'll live with Mullah Faizullah. Khadija says he's too old, and Mariam knows she also means he's too close—they'd still have to deal with the shame of their husband's mistake.

Though Mariam knows she does not belong with Jalil's family, she is just as certain that being separated from the few people she continues to trust and rely on can only be worse. But just as Nana was banished to the kolba because of shame and reputation, Mariam will now be sent away as well.

Mariam tries to imagine living in Kabul, 650 kilometers away, and cooking and cleaning for Rasheed. She is particularly terrified of what Nana told her about chores of intimacy that women have to endure with their husbands. Mariam begs Jalil to say no to his wives, but after a long silence, he only asks Mariam meekly not to do this to him. Afsoon brings her back upstairs and locks the door behind her.

Mariam is only fifteen when she must face the prospect of becoming a wife, no longer just a daughter. Jalil's selfish response to his daughter is difficult to justify, given that he's the one "doing" something to Mariam—even if his words suggest that he too is unhappy with the decision.

PART I: CHAPTER 8

In the morning, Mariam is given a long-sleeved green dress and hijab, and taken to the same room as yesterday, which now has a Koran, green veil, and mirror on the table. Nargis places the veil on Mariam's head, and Rasheed enters the room, smelling of cigarette smoke and thick cologne. The man is tall, with broad shoulders and a thick belly, and Mariam's heart starts to beat quickly.

Rasheed is first described through sensory clues, which are unfamiliar, overpowering, and distasteful—just the way Rasheed's personality will turn out to be. This is clearly a much older man, which makes fifteen-year-old Mariam's apprehension even more understandable.

The mullah says that the wedding ceremony or *nikka* will be brief since Rasheed has bus tickets to Kabul for that day. When the mullah asks Mariam if she accepts this man as her husband, she initially stays quiet. After a few awkward moments, Jalil whispers her name and she finally says, "Yes." The mirror is slipped under her veil, and she sees both her own face, long, triangular, with eyes too close together—a face not pretty, though not unpleasant either—as well as the ruddy cheeks, watery eyes, and coarse salt-and-pepper hair of Rasheed.

The mullah's questions seem meant to evoke a true desire on the part of those getting married, but it is clear that in this case, Mariam is being virtually coerced. The fact that she cannot see Rasheed as he really is—only through a mirror—is meant to suggest a more profound intimacy, but here only ominously foreshadows what awaits her.

They exchange thin gold bands, and Mariam signs her name to the contract. The narrator tells us that twenty-seven years later, when she would next sign her name to a document, it would also be in the presence of a mullah.

This is the first of several cases in which the narrator will give the reader a hint of foreshadowing, which suggests continuity and thematic resonance even in the midst of overwhelming change.

As Mariam and Rasheed wait for the bus, Jalil tells Mariam how beautiful Kabul is. Unable to stand it, she tells him she used to worship him, and didn't know that he was ashamed of her. He stammers that he'll visit her, but she says she never wants to hear from him again. He tells her not to leave like this, but she turns and climbs up the stairs to the bus. She doesn't turn to look as Jalil knocks at the glass or runs alongside the bus before disappearing behind it.

For the first time, Mariam explicitly tells Jalil off for the way he treated her and Nana, now that she has come to understand his insincerity and Nana's sacrifices. Jalil does seem upset, even contrite, but forgiveness is out of the question for Mariam: after all, she is only leaving now because she is being sent out from Jalil's home.

PART I: CHAPTER 9

The next evening they arrive at Rasheed's house, which he explains is in the southwest part of Kabul, near the zoo and university. Mariam has to pay close attention to understand his Kabuli dialect of Farsi.

Afghanistan's multilingualism makes it culturally vibrant, but can also be divisive and create cultural clashes.

The houses on the street have flat roofs and are made of burned brick, with small walled yards. Rasheed's house looks like it was once blue. Inside there is a barren, unkempt yard, with an outhouse, well, and tool shed. The house is smaller than Jalil's but much larger than the *kolba*. But as Mariam looks around, she misses the familiarity of home, and realizes she is in a stranger's house with its unfamiliar furniture and smells. She longs for her old life and begins to cry, annoying Rasheed, who says she has no patience for women's crying.

Such intricate description is meant to follow Mariam's thoughts as she enters a new place and a new life where nothing is familiar: she can only relate whatever she sees in the two homes, one tiny and one magnificent, to the profound sadness and homesickness she is now experiencing.

Upstairs, there are two bedrooms, and Rasheed gives her the guest room since he likes to sleep alone. Mariam is relieved. He shows her white tuberoses he's placed in the windowsills for her. He asks her to thank him, and asks if she's afraid of him. She says no—the first lie of their marriage.

Though Rasheed is curt and not affectionate, he seems to be making at least some gestures of kindness. Mariam is only a teenager, though, so it's hardly surprising that she is afraid of her new husband.

PART I: CHAPTER 10

The first few days, Mariam mainly stays in her room, watching Rasheed leave for work on his bicycle. She looks through the house, everything reminding her of how she's been uprooted. She's barely hungry, and instead stays in bed and watches the women and children in the neighboring houses. She longs for the nights she and Nana would sit outside, or the afternoons reading the Koran with Mullah Faizullah. As the sun goes down, Mariam grows increasingly anxious at Rasheed's return, and worries he'll do to her what husbands do to their wives.

Mariam was uprooted from Herat in the midst of the grieving process for Nana, and now has been hoisted into a new life, in which she grieves the life she's left behind. This grief takes place not only because she is in Kabul, but because the times she recalls at the kolba are gone forever now that Nana has died.

When Rasheed arrives home, he tells her about his day at the shoe shop, and things he's heard on the street, such as about the American president Richard Nixon, who Mariam has never heard of. One night, instead of saying good night, he tells Mariam she's been acting absurdly, and orders her to unpack her suitcase and start behaving like a wife.

Like Jalil or Mullah Faizullah, Rasheed—another man—has access to the larger world that Mariam does not. His male privilege also enables him to order Mariam to act in a certain way, "like a wife," as he says.

The next morning Mariam unpacks and begins to cook lentils, carrots, and potatoes, kneading dough the way Nana showed her to make bread. She heads out for the communal tandoor, following the women and children walking in groups of three or four and complaining about their husbands. Mariam wonders if they've all had unlucky marriages, or if this is just a game the wives play. Mariam imagines they'll somehow know she's a *harami*.

Though Mariam has never prepared for "being a wife", Nana had made sure she understood the practical matters that her station in life required. Nevertheless, she still feels separate and distant from the other wives going to the tandoor, in part because of the profound shame she feels.

A round, light-skinned woman taps Mariam on the shoulder, introducing herself as Fariba and saying she must be Rasheed's new wife. She says her husband is Hakim, a teacher, and invites her to tea sometime. The other women begin to gather around Mariam and ask her all sorts of questions. Mariam backs away, anxious and feeling trapped, and Fariba tells the other women they're frightening her. Mariam pushes out of the crowd and up the street, where she trips and falls, scraping her knee. She can't remember which house is Rasheed's, and pushes on several doors, increasingly desperate, until she recognizes the yard. She's never before felt so alone.

Almost immediately, however, Mariam is thrust into the world of female friendship—one with which she is entirely unfamiliar, and which she finds overwhelming. Rather than finding these women a source of comfort, Mariam is nearly as scared of them as she is of Rasheed. Her panic reflects the sense of isolation she feels, unable to confide either in men or in women and committed to bearing her suffering alone.

That night, Rasheed seems pleased to see dinner set out. Mariam is nervous, but Rasheed says that it's good. Rasheed offers to show Mariam around Kabul the next day. He takes out a blue burqa from his bag, and tells Mariam about the wives of customers who come to his shop wearing makeup and short skirts, and their husbands who think they're modern intellectuals. Rasheed says they're spoiling their honor and pride. Hakim and Fariba are one of these couples, he says—it's embarrassing. Rasheed says that where he comes from, a woman's face belongs to her husband alone. He gives her the burqa, and Mariam feels suddenly shrunken and small.

The small victory of Mariam's cooking begins to compensate for the anxiety she felt earlier at the tandoor, as does Rasheed's offer to accompany her into Kabul. Rasheed's discourse on the place of women places him firmly in the conservative camp of gender norms, one that, in Kabul, coexists with another way of considering gender relations, in which women are the equals of men. Mariam has had some exposure to both camps, but the requirement of wearing a burqa is not something even Jalil's family embraced.

PART I: CHAPTER 11

Mariam tries on the burqa and is unnerved by the suffocating fabric and her inability to see peripherally. She and Rasheed take a bus to a park, and to a kebab house near the Haji Yaghoub mosque. It's Mariam's first time in a restaurant, and although she's initially anxious, she is comforted both by Rasheed's presence and by the anonymity of the burqa, which seems to hide her shameful past. Rasheed buys her her first ice cream, which she devours, and shows her Chicken Street where rich businessmen, diplomats, and members of the royal family live. They walk past all sorts of shops, and sometimes Rasheed enters to say hello, while Mariam remains off to the side.

The physical limitations imposed by the burqa are meant to suggest other limitations as well, restricting women's freedom intellectually as well. Nevertheless, Hosseini also presents an alternative way of considering the burqa, as a way for women to feel anonymous and therefore liberated in a different way. Nonetheless, in Mariam's case, Rasheed remains the controlling half of the couple, and Mariam the dutiful wife on his arm.

Mariam is fascinated by the women in this neighborhood, who seem independent and carefree, accompanying children with shiny shoes and bicycles—nothing like the children in her neighborhood who roll old bicycle tires for fun. These women make Mariam realize how little she knows.

Even within one city, the possibilities for women differ wildly depending on which notions of gender relations prevail, within families, social groups, and even neighborhoods.

Rasheed taps Mariam on her shoulder and shows her a maroon shawl he's bought for her. He asks her if she likes it, and looks away shyly. Mariam realizes how much this true gift contrasts with Jalil's halfhearted, insincere gifts, and she says the shawl is beautiful.

Mariam continues to reinterpret Jalil's earlier actions based on what she now understands about him—though confident, even now, that she will not make the same mistake with Rasheed.

That night, Rasheed enters her room and lies down on her bed. Mariam starts shivering as he begins to touch her and removes their clothes. As he rolls on top of her, she feels a sudden, sharp pain, gritting her teeth until he's done. Rasheed says there is no shame in this for married people. He leaves her and she tries to cope with the pain alone.

Here, the sexual act is portrayed as something painful rather than pleasant, a chore to be endured rather than an act of love. This suffering is distinct from the "shame" that Rasheed says does not apply to married couples, but it is no less painful as a result.

PART I: CHAPTER 12

That fall, during Ramadan, Mariam is surprised at how the entire city shuts down. She enjoys breaking the fast each night with the entire city, one of her only communal experiences. Rasheed only rarely fasts, since hunger makes him irritable. One night Mariam is late with dinner and he refuses to speak to her, or to eat her dinner even when it's ready, stuffing bread into his mouth instead as the veins on his temple pulse with anger.

Ramadan in a city like Kabul lends Mariam a sense of communal belonging that she never had while living isolated at the kolba. This community feeling, though, is not reflected in her relationship with Rasheed, which seems to be shifting beyond its initial "honeymoon" stage.

Mariam recalls how Jalil would visit Mariam and Nana at the first of the three days of Eid-ul-Fitr, the celebration to end Ramadan, before excusing himself to celebrate with his "real" family, as Nana said. Mullah Faizullah would also come and bring sweet treats for Mariam. However, Mariam usually dreaded Eid, since it was a time of hospitality meant for large families.

Mariam's past was not entirely devoid of love and belonging. However, these celebrations were always marred by Mariam's inability to feel accepted and at ease because of her shameful status as a harami.

This year, Mariam and Rasheed walk the streets and she is astounded by the liveliness. They see Fariba and her husband, and when Fariba waves and calls out to her, Mariam only nods. Rasheed admonishes her not to spend too much time with Fariba, a gossiper, and her husband who thinks he's an intellectual.

Though Fariba had seemed kind to Mariam before, to Rasheed all that matters are her more progressive opinions regarding the status of women, and what he sees as suspicious intellectualism on the part of her husband.

Strangers call out *Eid mubarak* to her, and that night they watch fireworks above the city. Mariam wishes her mother was alive to see this, to know that even Mariam could have some beauty in her life.

For years, Mariam had rebelled against her mother's belief that no happiness awaited her or her daughter; this sliver of joy, though, comes too late for Nana.

For Eid, Rasheed invites friends to her home, and tells Mariam to stay upstairs while they're there. She is flattered that Rasheed values her honor, and she feels wanted and significant. On the last day of Eid, Mariam feels sick to her stomach, and makes tea while she cleans up the mess from the men last night. She finds herself in Rasheed's room, where she slides open the top drawer of his dresser, feeling guilty. She finds his gun, and then a magazine filled with pictures of naked women. She is shocked and disgusted, feeling he is hypocritical with all his talk of honor and shame. Though she feels embarrassed and confused, she eventually convinces himself that he is a man with needs unknown to her, and she, as a *harami*, is in no place to judge.

Rasheed's command to Mariam to remain upstairs might be seen as stifling (and unfair, given that she is the one to clean everything up afterwards), but Mariam is so starved for love that she interprets this demand as a gesture of love and honor. Even the hypocrisy she uncovers by finding Rasheed's pornographic magazines, she justifies with a similar desire for love mixed with her feelings of shame about her heritage and identity.

In the bottom drawer, Mariam finds a picture of Jalil's son, Yunus, and below that, a beautiful woman standing next to Mariam. She feels a flicker of jealousy, though it also seems almost as if the wife is sullen and leaning away from Rasheed. Later, she regrets having sneaked around the room, and feels sorry for Rasheed and the loss he's been through. She imagines his grief after his son's death, and feels a certain compassion for and kinship with him.

Mariam pays little attention to the subtle signs of discontentment she sees in Rasheed's earlier wife's eyes. Instead, she thinks of what they have in common—the death of a mother or son—and finds a sense of kinship in this shared suffering, which for her can stand in for or at least lead to love.

PART I: CHAPTER 13

Mariam rides a bus home from the doctor's, where she learned that she's pregnant. Rasheed is in an excellent mood and is convinced that it's a boy. He points out the window where the first snow of the year is falling, and Mariam wonders if the first snowfall is so enthralling because it's a new, pure beginning before being trampled and growing corrupted.

Mariam's thoughts on the new snowfall serve as both a symbol and a warning. The baby growing inside her could be considered another new beginning; but Mariam seems to suggest that all such beginnings are corrupted, or at least that it's never sure that they won't be.

The next day Mariam finds Rasheed building a crib that the baby, which he continues to refer to as a "he." Mariam is anxious about this expectation, especially when Rasheed buys a boy's winter coat and worries about boys' reckless behavior.

Rasheed does not only want a son to replace the son he lost. To a man like him, boys are always far more desirable than girls given the dominant role they play and the special rights they enjoy in Afghan society.

The next night, Rasheed invites friends over to celebrate. Mariam cooks and cleans all day. She sits upstairs as the men laugh and eat below and thinks about how far she's traveled to get to where she is now. She is thrilled to think of this baby—a true mark of belonging for her and Rasheed—and knows she no longer needs to play pebble games and mimic love. When she thinks of the baby, the grief and loneliness of her life seem to fade. She recalls a prayer from the Koran that Mullah Faizullah had taught her, and prays that God not take away this good fortune.

Mariam remains convinced that happiness awaits her and Rasheed together, especially with a child that will bind them together even more. Mariam already loves her child unconditionally—a feeling that, for her, is closely tied to belonging. This moment seems to her to be a turning point, after which all Nana's warnings about her place in life will prove unwarranted.

Following that night, Mariam attends a women's *hamam*, where she is scrubbing herself when, suddenly, there is blood and pain. Fariba rushes over to take care of her. She takes another bus ride with Rasheed, who is no longer in a good mood. Once they arrive home, he fumes that "God's will" is no kind of answer from a doctor. It's snowing hard, and Mariam remembers how Nana said that each snowflake is the sigh of a woman suffering somewhere in the world.

It turns out that the previous scene was a turning point, though not in the way Mariam imagined. The chapter ends with another bus ride and another snowfall, each of which recall an earlier, happier moment. Nevertheless, though the snow has not been "trampled" and "corrupted," here the snow comes to stand in for female suffering.

PART I: CHAPTER 14

Mariam's grief seems to wash over her at unexpected times, in overwhelming ways, though other days resuming normal life seems more manageable. Still, Mariam doesn't like to go outside, and is jealous of the neighborhood women who have many children, such that they even complain about them.

Once again, Mariam must endure another period of grief for a life lost. Being surrounded by so many women with children only deepens her sadness and suffering.

Sometimes, Mariam thinks that she is being punished for abandoning Nana. Other days, she is angry at Rasheed for celebrating prematurely, or at herself for eating the wrong things or sleeping in the wrong position, or at God for taunting her with happiness. Then she grows guilty for her blasphemous thoughts and prays for forgiveness.

Mariam cannot seem to grapple with her miscarriage without finding something or someone who is guilty, even if that someone is herself. She even wrestles with her relationship with God, though her guilt at blasphemous thoughts shows that she is far from renouncing religion.

Rasheed, meanwhile, has grown moody and silent, complaining about Mariam's cooking or cleaning. He no longer buys her gifts or shows her around Kabul. One night she asks if he's angry with her, but Rasheed is initially silent and then tells her to stop pestering him. Mariam, wanting a proper burial, digs a hole in the backyard, placing the winter coat inside and praying.

The miscarriage that has so devastated Mariam seems to have done the same to Rasheed, though instead of suffering alone he takes it out on his wife. Mariam's process of grieving is more introspective and reveals a more profound struggle with God and fate.

PART I: CHAPTER 15

In April 1978, a man named Mir Akbar Khyber is found murdered, leading to a massive demonstration in Kabul. Mariam sees outside the window neighbors milling about, including Fariba with another woman, holding a little boy's name—Tariq, Mariam has heard her say.

Since Mariam is kept largely at home and isolated by Rasheed, her window serves as both a literal and figurative window out into the world—unlike women such as Fariba, who participate actively in society, Mariam remains confined.

Rasheed says that Mir Akbar Khyber had been a communist, and his supporters are blaming his death on the government. Mariam tries to ask who the communists are and what they want, but Rasheed, even though he isn't quite able to answer, makes fun of Mariam for her lack of knowledge.

Rasheed's inability to fully explain the political situation is a testament to the complexity of Afghan history and politics, though that doesn't stop him from making his wife feel small and ashamed.

Mariam is increasingly afraid of Rasheed's violent moods and increasingly common beatings. In the four years since her first pregnancy, she has miscarried six times, and Rasheed has grown increasingly resentful and sullen each time. Mariam dreads his return home each evening, since he always finds something that she's done wrong—excuses, she knows, for having failed him in that she hasn't given him a son.

Mariam has not grown any less fearful since Rasheed asked if she was afraid of him when they were first married—and for good reason. Instead of simply exerting his authority over her, he uses his physical advantage to physically hurt her and psychologically torture her.

On April 27, Mariam awakens to the sound of military planes whooshing past and bombs hitting the ground outside Kabul. On the radio, a man announces himself as Air Force Colonel Abdul Qader and reports that the army has seized the airport, major urban areas, and several government buildings. President Daoud's forces have been defeated, he says.

Again, Mariam's ability to witness Afghan national affairs is restricted to what she can perceive from within her home. The last time there was a political coup, it was Jalil telling Mariam about President Daoud's ascent to power, as she hung onto every word.

Later, Mariam will learn that along with executions of loyalists, the communists had killed twenty members of Daoud Khan's family along with him, with rumors that he'd been made to watch. On the radio, Abdul Qader announces the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, claiming that a new era of freedom and democracy is at hand. Rasheed says this change will be bad for the rich, but possibly not for people like them.

Abdul Qader's proclamations of freedom and democracy clash severely with what Mariam will later learn about the brutal tactics used to overthrow the president. Despite Rasheed's optimism, it is difficult to tell exactly how politics and personal lives will intertwine, and who will benefit.

Down the street, Fariba has just given birth to a baby girl, with jade-green eyes that her son Noor says look like gemstones. Her other son, Ahmad, sings to her. Hakim and Fariba name the baby Laila.

The narrator, setting up the next part of the novel, here intimates how much Afghan experiences can vary, even on the same street.

Back at Mariam's, Rasheed shoves a ball of rice into his mouth and then spits it out disgustedly, saying she's undercooked the rice. He overturns the plate onto the floor and storms out. When he returns, he forces pebbles into Mariam's mouth and commands her to chew—he says that's what her rice tastes like. He leaves again, and Mariam spits out pebbles, blood, and two broken teeth.

In direct contrast to the earlier scene of calm and joy, here the narrator makes clear just how tyrannical Rasheed has become. He is a true villain now, and there is no more chance that Mariam will hope for a life of love and happiness with him.

PART II: CHAPTER 16

It's the spring of 1987, and Laila, who is nine years old, is sulking at the departure of her friend Tariq for a two-week vacation. She knows that time goes by more quickly or more slowly depending on whether she's with Tariq or not.

After a nine-year jump and a shift of perspective, we have left the realm of a husband's (Rasheed's) brutality to enter that of a close childhood friendship.

Downstairs, Laila's parents are fighting like usual—Mammy, angry and ranting, and Babi, quiet and sheepish-looking. Afterward, Babi calls for Laila, and she brushes her blond hair, recalling how Mammy always says Laila inherited her beauty from her great-grandmother, who lived in the Farsi-speaking Tajik region of the Panjshir valley. Mammy and Babi had both moved to Kabul in 1960 for Babi to attend Kabul University.

At the end of Part I, Laila's parents seemed happy and in love, but something seems to have changed drastically over the past nine years. The description of Laila's physical beauty contrasts with the earlier description of Mariam's plainness, just as her parents' educated upbringing contrasts with Mariam's childhood.

Babi shows Laila a rip in the screen door, and says that Mammy has complained it's letting in bees. Laila feels sorry for Babi, a small, delicate man with his nose always buried in a book. Babi knows poetry by heart and is well-versed in politics and geology, but he's hopeless in practical matters. Mammy complains about Babi's lack of handiness, but Laila feels that before Babi had let Ahmad and Noor leave to fight against the Soviets, Mammy might have found his bookishness charming rather than irritating.

We now begin to understand how the relationship between Mammy and Babi has begun to disintegrate over the years. Love had allowed Mammy to see Babi's bookishness as endearing, just as her grief and anger with him now makes her see the same qualities as irritating. Laila, though, has inherited some of Babi's intellectualism and finds it appealing.

Babi teases Laila about missing Tariq, saying that before she knows it, he'll be sending her a signal with a flashlight from his next-door house, a bedtime ritual.

Laila and Tariq are intimate childhood friends, though their intimacy is public knowledge.

Babi takes Laila to school, and on the way she spots a blue Benz car parked across from the shoemaker Rasheed's house, where he lives with his "reclusive" wife. Laila asks who the two men sitting inside are, and Babi says it's not their business. Laila recalls how Mammy yelled at Babi for making nothing his business, even his two sons were going to war. Laila can only notice that the man in the backseat is thin and white-haired, dressed in a dark brown suit, and that the car has Herat license plates.

Just as Mariam's life had intersected with Laila's on occasion—Fariba was an acquaintance of hers, and she had once caught a glimpse of Tariq—Laila's now intersects briefly with Mariam's. Herat may mean nothing to her, but the reader is aware that this visitor can only be a person from Mariam's past, most likely Jalil.

In class, Laila is distracted and doesn't notice when the teacher asks her a question. The teacher's name is Shanzai, but the students call her Khala Rangmaal, "Auntie Painter," because of the brushing motion she makes with her hands when she slaps students. She forbids the female students from covering their heads, since she says men and women are equal. She also says the Soviet Union is, along with Afghanistan, the world's greatest nation, and Afghanistan would become as idyllic as that country once the bandits were defeated.

Whereas politics has entered into Mariam's life sporadically and, up until this point, largely superficially, the communist regime in Afghanistan has a direct impact on Laila's education. Soviet propaganda is clearly evident in the way Khala Rangmaal teaches. In addition, however, Soviet norms about women's rights are progressive, even allowing girls to attend school.

Khala Rangmaal asks Laila again, calling her *Inqilabi* or Revolutionary Girl, since Laila was born the night of the April coup of 1978. Khala Rangmaal, however, prefers *inqilab* or revolution to *coup*, and also insists that the fighting in the provinces is skirmishes rather than *jihad*. She forbids anyone from mentioning the rumors that the Soviets are losing the war, especially with the Americans helping the Mujahideen and other Muslims arriving to fight with them.

Here we're reminded of when Mariam's story ended, with both Laila's birth and a shift in political destiny. The narrator toggles between Khala Rangmaal's official party line and a more balanced background description, explaining the beginning of the Soviet occupation's unraveling thanks to the Mujahideen and help from America and others.

After school, since Mammy doesn't show up, Laila walks home with her classmates Giti and Hasina. Hasina is clever and talkative, and today she is telling them how to fend off unwanted suitors—eat four cans of beans before the man arrives to ask for marriage. Laila knows she doesn't need this advice, since Babi wants her to get an education. He tells her she can do anything she wants. Hasina's father is a taxi driver and will probably marry her off in a few years.

Though all three girls attend school in Kabul, their futures will diverge widely according to their families' opinions regarding the place of women in society. Hasina is, however, still able to joke about her relatively restricted future, thanks to her friendship with the other girls.

Hasina teases Laila about her "one-legged prince." Giti yells at Hasina not to talk that way about people injured in the war, but Laila, since it's Hasina, doesn't take offense.

Obviously referring to Tariq, Hasina is yet another person who suggests that his relationship with Laila is more than just friendship.

Laila walks the last few blocks alone, and sees the blue Benz still parked outside Rasheed's house, with the elderly man standing outside it looking up at the house. She hears someone behind her tell her to turn around, and when she does she sees a gun pointing at her.

Laila finds herself paying less attention to her surroundings since she's naturally curious. Her curiosity is helpful to the reader, who can fill in knowledge about what this man might be doing—has Jalil come to see Mariam?

PART II: CHAPTER 17

Khadim, a troublemaker in the neighborhood, is pointing a red and green water gun at Laila. He mocks her and asks what she'll do to stop him—have her crippled friend Tariq save her? He pumps the trigger and warm water sprays onto Laila's hair, face, and hands. The boys tell her to smell her hands and Laila, smelling urine, lets out a yelp. She races home to wash her hair, thinking she might throw up.

The hint of danger at the end of the preceding paragraph—quite possible given that Afghanistan is at war—yields right away to a childhood prank. Despite the lack of true danger, though, Laila's close friendship with Tariq certainly complicates her life.

Laila knows the boys wouldn't have dared to do it if Tariq was there—but also that it wouldn't have happened had Mammy showed up. She grows angry at her mother's abandonment. On Mammy's good days, she bathes, puts on makeup, and takes Laila shopping before greeting Babi happily upon his return. She bakes and invites other women over for tea and pastries, and tells affectionate stories about Babi, making Laila realize that things were different before, back when Mammy and Babi still slept in the same room.

Laila's mental flashback also helps to link up the Fariba we saw in Part I with Mammy, now unable to withstand the pressure of having her sons go off to war. This Mammy—who seems to care little about Laila's welfare—is shown to be not her true personality, but warped by war and suffering such that she has grown unable to love anyone but her two sons.

At these tea parties, the women's conversation often turns to matchmaking for Ahmad and Noor, who are away fighting. Laila barely remembers them, since she was two years old when they left. Mammy always refuses any suggestion as unworthy of her boys. These conversations make Laila think of Tariq.

Laila was never able to develop a relationship with her brothers, who left when she has small. The only way she can understand Mammy's unwavering love for them is by thinking of her own feelings for Tariq.

After these reminiscences, Laila slowly enters Mammy's room, where she is greeted by a smell of unwashed linen, leftover meals, and clothes strewn over the floor. The walls are covered with pictures of Ahmad and Noor, and under the bed Mammy keeps a shoebox with old newspaper clippings and pamphlets from insurgent groups fighting against the Soviets.

Mammy's emotional undoing is reflected in the physical clutter and disorder of her room. At the same time, there is a common theme to the madness: the political rationale for which her sons are fighting against the Soviets.

Laila tells Mammy to wake up, and she slowly emerges from under layers of blankets. She asks Laila perfunctory questions about school, before saying she has a headache. Suddenly angry again, Laila tells her mother that a boy shot piss from a water gun onto her hair. Mammy only responds vaguely, and Laila says that she was supposed to pick her up. Mammy asks if she washed, and when Laila says yes, Mammy says that everything's fine. Mammy promises she won't forget tomorrow, even though Laila says she said that yesterday. Mammy claims Laila doesn't know how she's suffering.

Laila clearly loves her mother and is eager for her attention—her anger at Mammy is no more than the counterpoint to this desire, as revealed by the way in which Laila tries to provoke Mammy's outrage and sympathy by telling her the story. For Mammy, though, her own suffering is so great that anyone else's pain pales in comparison, and she cannot bring herself to feel Laila's own suffering deeply.

PART II: CHAPTER 18

After a few weeks, Tariq still hasn't returned. Laila initially is able to distract herself, but then grows anxious that he'll never come back, or that he's been hit by another land mine, like the one that caused him to lose a leg when he was five. One night, though Laila sees a flashlight winking from down the street, and is enormously relieved.

The loss of Tariq's leg has been mentioned subtly, but here we learn for the first time how Afghan history and politics has directly impacted his life. Laila worries about him because of these real dangers, but also simply because she cares about him.

The next day Laila hurries to Tariq's house, where she exclaims at his newly shaved head and his sunburned cheeks. He says his uncle was sick, which is why they stayed so long. Tariq's parents welcome Laila, whom they jokingly call their daughter-in-law. She stays for lunch: Laila loves eating at Tariq's since they always eat as a family, beginning each meal with fresh yogurt and joking with each other at ease.

Again, everyone in the neighborhood seems to understand the special relationship between Laila and Tariq, teasing them as a result. Tariq's family could not be more different than Laila's, and by eating with them she can imagine a distinct, more vibrant family life.

Though they are Pashtuns, they speak Farsi rather than Pashto for Laila's sake. Babi says that there are tensions between Tajiks, like them, and Pashtuns—Afghanistan's largest ethnic group—since Pashtun kings have ruled for many more years. Babi says that all that matters should be the Afghan identity, but he understands the rivalry and resentment.

Afghanistan is composed of many different ethnic groups, and the novel attempts to reveal this diversity through the languages and heritage of different characters. There is a tension throughout the novel between these strong ethnic identities and a national Afghan identity.

After lunch, Laila and Tariq go to his room, where he tells Laila about his trip and they play games. She remembers the first time she saw his stump.

Friends since they were small children, Laila and Tariq have already weathered difficult times.

The two decide to go to the zoo. Laila says that she's missed him, and after a pause Tariq makes a face and asks what's wrong with her. She realizes that with boys, friendship doesn't necessarily need constant confirmation and validation.

Though all the neighbors make fun of Laila and Tariq's childhood romance, Laila and Tariq themselves just dance around the issue,

At the bus stop, she sees Khadim grinning at her from down the street, and she tells Tariq the story. Clenching his teeth, he crosses the street to Khadim, and bends down as if to tie his shoe. He hops up on one leg, charging at Khadim with his unstrapped leg. The other boys step aside and allow Tariq a free path to Khadim—who never bothers Laila again.

Unable to rely on Mammy to protect her, Laila turns to Tariq, whose loyalty means that he'll do whatever it takes to defend Laila from the neighborhood troublemakers—even with his physical disability.

That night, Laila sets the table for her and Babi alone, as usual. Babi asks Laila what she's working on—every night, he helps her with homework and gives her extra lessons. Even though the communists fired Babi, he thinks they've done well to promote the education of women, and encourages Laila to take advantage of it. He says that their attitude is one reason people in the provinces, where women are far more repressed and ancient tribal laws reign, have taken up arms against the communists.

Unlike with Tariq's family, Laila's dinners are for just Laila and Babi. Though this means their meals are more subdued than they'd be with Mammy and Laila's brothers, it also allows Babi to stress the importance of education for Laila—a progressive belief in women's rights that is not shared by everyone in Afghanistan.

Laila decides to tell Babi about Tariq's fight with Khadim, but doesn't have time before a stranger knocks at the door with news.

Another cliffhanger, which interrupts Laila's decision to boast a bit about Tariq's loyalty.

PART II: CHAPTER 19

A stocky man asks for Laila's parents—he has news from Panjshir. Babi asks Laila to go upstairs, and from the top of the stairs she sees the man whisper something at her parents, and then Babi's face turning white, and Mammy screaming.

Panjshir is an unknown place both for the reader and Laila, but its very remoteness means that the messenger must be bringing news from Noor and Ahmad's fight against the Soviets.

The next morning, women arrive at the home to cook and prepare the house for the ceremony following the funeral. They shoo Laila away, where she feels in the way until Giti and Hasina arrive with their families. Babi also feels useless, and the only thing Mammy says is to keep him away from her.

The very personal process of grief is paired with the Afghan social customs that dictate how death should be dealt with. It is this social aspect of death that proves

That afternoon, mourners arrive and gather around the room to listen to a cassette player of chants from the Koran. Mariam, Rasheed's wife, enters in a black *hijab* and sits across from Laila. Mammy sways back and forth, her gaze blank. But Laila struggles to really feel the loss, since Ahmad and Noor had only ever seemed like characters in a story to her. It's Tariq, instead, who is truly real to her.

The traditions of Afghanistan permeate the funeral. Meanwhile, the vast gulf between the two heroines of the novel, Mariam and Laila, is stark as they sit across from each other at the funeral, Mariam in her hijab and Laila thinking of Tariq. The funeral only marks the beginning of the suffering that Laila's family will face, but as of now that suffering hits Mammy in a way that it doesn't hit Laila.

PART II: CHAPTER 20

Mammy begins to have mysterious aches, pains, and lumps, and although doctors find nothing wrong she stays in bed, wearing black and picking at her hair. She does still pray five times a day. It's up to Laila, though, to complete all the household chores.

Mammy's claims of physical ailments are meant to stand in for her acute emotional pain—pain which makes little room for other sentiments, even the ability to care for Laila.

Sometimes, Laila lies next to Mammy in bed. One day Mammy tells a story about Ahmad's talent for architecture and sketches, before crying that both her boys are now *shaheed* or martyrs. Laila wishes Mammy would notice that she, Laila, is still there, but knows that she can't compete with them. She says she wishes she could do something for Mammy, who says Laila's been a good daughter, even though she hasn't been the best mother.

Again, Laila's anger at Mammy stems from her love for her, and her desire for Mammy to return this love rather than lavish it on her martyred brothers. Mammy seems for the first time to recognize her inability to care for Laila, though this doesn't appear to result in any major change.

After hesitating, Laila says she's been meaning to ask Mammy something. Already, with Hasina, she's gotten rid of the house's supply of aspirin and has hidden sharp objects. "You wouldn't—" she begins, but Mammy reassures her that she wants to see the day the Soviets are conquered and Afghanistan is free, and her sons' dreams come true. Though Laila is comforted, she is hurt that she is not the reason Mammy wants to stay alive.

At several points in the novel, Mariam's and Laila's experience resonate, despite their divergent childhoods. Here, Laila fears that Mammy, like Nana, will kill herself because of her grief. In this case, Mammy does feel and can articulate her will to live—even if it is not, devastatingly, for Laila.

PART II: CHAPTER 21

Tariq, Laila, and Babi are in a taxi leaving Kabul on a day trip—the destination is Babi's surprise, though he says it will contribute to Laila's education. The landscape shifts from mountains to deserts and canyons with rock outcroppings, dotted with the black tents of Koochi nomads. Laila also glimpses burned-out cars and helicopters, and thinks that this is Abdul and Noor's Afghanistan, not Kabul.

Babi is deeply committed to ensuring that Laila will be not only cultivated but also well-prepared to enter the public sphere. The landscape outside their window conveys the vast diversity of Afghanistan, in which cosmopolitan city life coexists with nomadic villages.

As they enter a valley, Babi points to ancient-looking red walls in the distance. They are Shahr-e-Zohak or the Red City, an ancient fortress built nine hundred years ago for defense. Genghis Khan's grandson was killed trying to attack it, and Genghis Khan then destroyed it. The driver says that this is the story of Afghanistan—constantly invaded, and battered as a result, but still standing.

Already, we have seen Afghanistan weather several changes in government, as well as the Soviet invasion. This tumultuousness is, we now learn, far from unusual, and even stretches back a millennium. Afghanistan's ability to endure such invasions instills a certain nobility and pride in its people.

Half an hour later, they get out of the taxi and find themselves in front of two enormous Buddhas, chiseled into a rock cliff and flanked by caves. Babi says that Bamiyan had once been a thriving home of Buddhism before Islamic Arabs began to control it in the ninth century. Buddhist monks had lived in these sandstone cliffs, and had painted frescoes along the walls of their caves.

The Bamiyan Buddhas are another example of Afghanistan's vibrant cultural heritage and storied path. The diversity of experiences, ethnic and otherwise, remained constant from this 9th-century historical period to the ethnic diversity of contemporary Afghanistan.

At the top, they look out over the Bamiyan Valley with its farming fields of winter wheat, alfalfa, and potatoes, crisscrossed by streams and dotted with tiny figures of women washing their clothes. Laila makes out people on the roofs of their mud brick dwellings, the main town road lined with poplars, and, beyond, the foothills and then the massive, snowcapped Hindu Kush. Babi says he wanted the children to see and feel their country's heritage in person.

The narrator's vivid description helps to paint an image of Afghanistan that counters images Westerners may have of a war-torn, barren country. Babi's words again underline his belief in the importance of female education, but also of understanding Afghan identity through its cultural heritage.

Babi says that he often brought Mammy up here, back when she was adventurous and alive. He smiles at the memories, and Laila knows she'll always remember Babi in this way, happy and reminiscing. Tariq heads off to explore the caves, and Babi says to Laila that he also misses the boys, even if he shows it in a different way from Mammy. But he says he thanks God that he has Laila—he doesn't know what he'd do without her. Sometimes, he continues, he has thoughts of leaving Afghanistan, maybe to Pakistan first and eventually to America, where they could open up an Afghan restaurant. Laila could go to school and even college, and in the meantime help out at the restaurant, which would host parties and birthdays for other Afghans fleeing the war.

Laila once again has a glimpse of what Mammy used to be like, the woman Babi married. During their sons' funeral, Babi was shooed away and unable to participate fully in the social customs that delimit and structure grief. Here, he is able both to share his own suffering and—in a way that Mammy cannot—insist on his love for Laila. Babi's dream for leaving Afghanistan is, ironically, based in his love for the country—a love he thinks can be better kept alive by continuing to celebrate its culture and cuisine abroad.

When Babi is done, they both grow quiet, knowing that Mammy would never leave the land of her martyr sons—and Babi would never leave without her. Laila remembers Mammy saying that she had married a man with no convictions, but Laila knows that Mammy is the one constant conviction of his life.

Almost immediately, this bewitching dream yields to the reality of the situation that Babi and Laila must endure—in Babi's case, thanks to his unyielding loyalty to his wife, despite her grief and depression.

Later, Tariq naps and Babi reads under the acacias. Laila dips her feet into the water and thinks about Babi's dreams of America. She has to admit to herself that she is partly glad they can't go—she would miss Giti, Hasina, and especially Tariq, as irrational as wanting to stay in a disintegrating country might be.

Though Babi had believed he could stay loyal to Afghanistan even while abroad, for Laila, her understanding of Afghanistan is bound up with the memories of the people she loves in the country.

Six months later, in April 1988, Babi returns home to announce that a treaty has been signed in Geneva. Mammy claims that the communist puppet president, Najibullah, is still staying. She won't celebrate until the Mujahideen march in victory in Kabul.

Once again, the political winds are shifting in Afghanistan, though for Mammy, her sons' martyrdom will only lead to one particular political outcome.

PART II: CHAPTER 22

In January 1989, when Laila is ten, she joins her parents and Hasina to watch the departure of one of the last Soviet convoys. Mammy holds a photo of Ahmad and Noor over her head. Tariq taps Laila and Hasina on the shoulder, dressed in a giant Russian fur hat, for the occasion, he says. Tariq's father recently had a heart attack, so Laila is happy to see him in a good mood for the first time in awhile.

Finally, Mammy can feel as though her and her sons' suffering was not for nothing. The Soviets' withdrawal is intimately personal for her, though less so for Laila and Tariq, who use the departure as an excuse for playful banter and excursions.

On the bus ride home, a man argues to Babi that the Soviets will continue to send weapons to Najibullah, their puppet in Kabul. Mammy mutters prayers to herself over and over again.

Najibullah's presence helps to muddy any sense of a clear-cut transition from one kind of government in Afghanistan to the next.

That day, Laila and Tariq go to Cinema Park to see a Soviet film dubbed, very badly, into Farsi, which sets them into hysterics. At the wedding scene near the end, Tariq whispers that he'll never get married, and Laila, though disappointed, joins in making fun of over-the-top weddings. As Laila watches the couple kiss, she feels incredibly self-conscious, and feels like Tariq is watching her. He shifts in his seat and lets loose another dumb joke—they both laugh, but nervously this time.

There are still remnants of Soviet culture that remain in Afghanistan, melding with traditional Afghan languages and customs to at times humorous effect. Tariq and Laila are still wary of making their feelings for each other explicit, and instead fall back on the casual, joky atmosphere of their childhood friendship.

PART II: CHAPTER 23

Over the next three years, Tariq's father has a series of strokes, Tariq is issued a new leg by the Red Cross, and Hasina is made to marry a cousin in Lahore. Every few weeks, Babi comes home with news of the Soviet Union crumbling. Najibullah tries to claim he's a devout Muslim, but the Mujahideen refuse to work with him.

For Laila, the years pass in a series of milestones that are more personal than political, even as world politics continues to play a significant role in internal Afghan affairs, as the Soviet Union's fall impacts the government's negotiations.

In April 1992, when Laila turns fourteen, Najibullah finally surrenders and the jihad is over—the comrades of Ahmad and Noor have triumphed. Mammy knows the names of all the leaders of each faction, separated by ethnicity and alliance. Her hero is the Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, or the Lion of Panjshir. She nails up a poster of him in the house—a portrait that would soon become ubiquitous in Kabul.

The goal Mammy had once expressed to Laila—of seeing the Mujahideen triumph and the last of the communists depart—is finally at hand. Her loyalty to Massoud is ethnic at heart, even while Laila and Tariq feel that their different ethnic sects affect their relationship very little.

The day after Najibullah's surrender, Mammy stops wearing black, cleans the house, and invites all the neighbors over for a big lunch. As she prepares, she asks Laila how Tariq is doing—almost a man now, she says. She tells Lails it was charming when they were little kids running around, but now Laila needs to worry about her reputation. Laila claims they're just friends, but she admits to herself that for the first time, she feels a bit strange when they're in public together—scrutinized.

Briefly, Mammy seems to return to the Fariba of Laila's now-distant memories, who is social and fun-loving. With this shift comes a renewed sense of motherly responsibility, linked closely to the gender norms that regulate and limit relationships between boys and girls in Kabul, especially as they grow older.

In fact, Laila has fallen head over heels in love with Tariq. She pictures them in bed together at night, though she feels guilty when she thinks of him that way. She knows the neighbors gossip: recently, Rasheed passed by and referred to them as Laili and Majnoon, the lovers of a twelfth-century romantic poem by Nezami, or a Farsi "Romeo and Juliet," though written centuries earlier.

Laila and Tariq's childhood friendship has, as Mammy may have suspected, developed into more adult feelings. Mammy is not the only one to harbor suspicions, as Mariam's Rasheed seems also to be aware that the two may be more than friends.

Nevertheless, it irritates Laila that Mammy has criticized her, when she's been aloof and distant for so many years. Still, she doesn't want to ruin the mood, so she tells Mammy that she sees her point.

To Laila, motherly advice seems empty without long-term love and care to back it up. But Mammy is in these moods rarely enough that Laila does not dare to fight.

At the party, the men discuss the Mujahideen's plan: govern through an Islamic Jihad Council and then another leadership council for several months, as a *loya jirga* or grand council of leaders would form an interim government, leading up to democratic elections.

It is telling that it is only the men who discuss politics, or even seem to know what is going on in internal Afghan affairs (this despite Babi's personal insistence on Laila's education).

The women gather inside to chat, and Laila helps with the cooking with Giti. Giti is not as quiet as before—she's been trying to catch the eye of an eighteen-year-old soccer player named Sabir. They've met secretly for tea a few times in another part of Kabul, and Giti says he's going to ask for her hand. Laila asks about school, but Giti just looks at her. Hasina always said that she and Giti would be married by the time they're twenty, but that they'd see Laila on the front page of the newspaper one day.

Laila is not the only one to be developing romantic feelings—Giti, after all, is a teenager too. However, these feelings will have quite different practical repercussions, according to the way the families of Giti, Hasina, and Laila consider the role and place of a woman and the importance of marrying their daughters off.

Every once in awhile, Tariq wanders in to taste the food before being shooed out by the women. Laila tries not to look at him so as not to add to the gossip, but she recalls a recent dream, in which their faces were together beneath a green veil. Tariq is taller than Laila now, with broad shoulders and muscular arms from lifting a pair of old, rusty weights in his backyard.

The party is pretty well delineated between the men's and women's territories. Tariq's brief entrances, however, allow the boundaries to bend slightly, only adding to Laila's daydreams about a possible romantic relationship with her childhood friend.

After lunch, Tariq motions to Laila discreetly and slips out the door. A few minutes later, she follows, finding him up the street humming an old Pashto song and smoking—a habit picked up from the cocky, self-sure friends of his whom Laila hates. Laila tells him his mother would kill him if she knew about his smoking, but he knows she won't tell. Laila asks him to give one to her, but he refuses, saying it's bad for her. He only does it to look good for girls, he says. "What girls anyway?" Laila replies, though she insists she's not jealous. Tariq laughs that the neighbors are probably talking about them right at that moment.

No longer is Tariq simply a mischievous boy wearing a fur Russian hat: he has picked up adult habits in addition to his increasingly adult body. Laila seems to be trying to flirt with Tariq even while insisting on maintaining their platonic, years-old relationship through jokes and banter. Tariq's comment about the neighbors, though, helps to establish a kind of intimacy between the two.

Tariq tells Laila that her hair is getting longer, and looks nice. She teases him about the girls he's chasing after, but he says he only has eyes for her. She can't tell whether he's mocking or being serious. She's about to say something else when they hear screaming coming from the house. In the yard two men are wrestling on the ground, and a few others are trying to pull them apart. Apparently one of them, a Pashtun, had called Ahmad Shah Massoud a traitor for negotiating with the Soviets in the 1980s, and the other, a Tajik had demanded he apologize. A few others, including Tariq, join in, until the yard is a mass of arms and legs and punches.

The relationship between Tariq and Laila is just at the verge of shifting from childlike playfulness to more adult seriousness, when it's suddenly interrupted. Tariq is Pashtun and Laila Tajik, but this difference has never seemed important to either of them. Here, though, it becomes clear how seriously many people do take the ethnic divisions of Afghanistan—divisions that are clear even to Tariq, who joins in.

Soon afterward, politics starts to unravel in Afghanistan. Several factions complain that they're being excluded, and tensions begin to rise. The Mujahideen now lack a common enemy, and begin to turn on each other. Rockets begin to fall on Kabul, and Mammy changes back into black and retreats into her room.

The personal tensions revealed at Mammy's party seem to both foreshadow and symbolize the broader political antagonisms taking place in Afghanistan, in the vacuum left by the Soviets. The one goal in which Mammy placed all her hopes now seems to be disintegrating.

PART II: CHAPTER 24

Laila confides to Tariq that she hates the whistling—or rather, the brief moments between when it starts and the impact of the bombs that make the whistle as they fall. Often it's at dinner, and she and Babi clench their teeth and wait, frozen, before hearing a blast fall elsewhere. Sometimes, at night, the light of rocket fire is so bright that she can't sleep. Each morning, the Mujahideen set down their guns to pray, before going back out to fight.

As a new chapter begins, the political tensions that were slowly gaining steam have now fully erupted into war. Merely living in Kabul is now dangerous, as each whistle of a falling bomb suggests imminent peril. The devout prayer of the Mujahideen is juxtaposed ironically with their love of violence.

Laila sees Massoud's men everywhere, roaming the streets and stopping people for questioning. Tariq buys a gun, telling Laila that three sisters were raped and killed in Karteh-Seh last week. Laila doesn't go out much anymore, so it's Tariq who brings back news to her. He says that militiamen in the mountains are working on their aim by shooting civilians at random below. He explains to her the constantly shifting boundaries of warlords' territory in Kabul. Now, Mammy's heroes are called warlords, or else Mujahideen but ironically, scornfully.

Laila originally knew of Massoud as Mammy's hero—a position now complicated, at least for Laila, by his apparent brutality. When Ahmad and Noor were fighting, the family could still claim that they were battling for a cause: now the violence seems far more gratuitous, simply war for the sake of war. But "Mammy's heroes" are still complex figures given their start as freedom fighters.

Laila asks Tariq if he has it in him to kill with the gun. He says that he would for her. Their fingers brush against each other, and Tariq leans in to kiss Laila. At that moment, Laila doesn't care at all about Mammy's warnings—she can't think of anything better than kissing Tariq beneath a tree in the midst of all the killing and war.

Tariq and Laila are, finally, more than simply childhood friends—though it is notable that the beginning of their romantic relationship takes place in the context of danger and war. Laila's feelings for him are such that she is able to at least briefly put aside any feelings of shame.

That June, in 1992, the Pashtun faction fights the Hazaras in West Kabul, and each side attacks civilians of the other ethnicity as well. Girls are raped and bodies found tied to trees. Babi tries to convince Mammy to leave Kabul, but she insists that the fighting is temporary and that they'll work it out. She claims it would be a betrayal of Ahmad and Noor, though Babi says it's not them doing the betraying.

While Laila, a Tajik, and Tariq, a Pashtun, are kissing, the conflict between these same ethnic identities is growing elsewhere in Kabul. Mammy cannot seem to understand how the noble cause for which her sons sacrificed themselves has now disintegrated into infighting.

Babi even has Laila drop out of school because of the danger, and becomes her tutor himself. With rockets falling outside, they discuss the works of Hafez or the poet Ustad Khalilullah Khalili. Babi is in his element teaching, but Laila still finds it difficult to concentrate—she's distracted by the thought of Tariq, and the now three kisses they've shared.

Babi may not always be practical, but he is stubborn, and continues to stress the importance of Laila's education and the significance of instructing her in Afghanistan's cultural heritage—even if her own intellectual interests are clouded by love.

One day that June, Giti is walking home from school with two classmates when a stray rocket strikes them. Her right foot, still in its sock and sneaker, wouldn't be found until two weeks later. At her funeral, Laila is stunned, unable to wrap her head around the fact that Giti is gone. She hadn't been able to cry at her brothers' funeral, but now the tears begin to fall.

Such brutal details help to paint a vivid portrait of the suffering in Kabul, in which no one's family or friends are spared. Death is no longer an abstract notion for Laila, as it was at her brothers' funeral, but now she recognizes its proximity.

PART II: CHAPTER 25

It's August 1992, and Tariq and Laila are sitting in her living room, as he tells her that he and his family are leaving Afghanistan—tomorrow. His father's heart can't take it anymore, he says. Laila knows that almost everyone she knows has left, for Iran, Islamabad, or elsewhere. But she starts to weep, swiping his hand away when he tries to comfort her. She starts slapping at him, pulling at his hair, until they end up face to face and then, somehow, kissing.

Though several years have passed, the situation in Kabul has not improved. At the Bamiyan Valley, Laila had wanted to stay in Afghanistan since she felt close ties to everyone around her—now, after Giti's death and the departure of others, the person most important to her will no longer be there to weather the difficulties of war with her.

In the days and weeks afterward, Laila will struggle to commit all of what happens next to memory. Though some of it will be lost to time, she will retain a few details from the first time they have sex: the feel of his body, the fear of discovery, and the way he looks at her.

Love in the novel becomes more urgent and necessary with the backdrop of war: Laila and Tariq know they may never see each other again, and desperately seek a way to show their feelings for each other one last time.

Afterward, they redress hastily, unable to believe what they've just done. She suddenly feels shame and guilt. Tariq tells her to come with him, that he wants to marry her. They could marry today, he says. But she remembers Babi above the Buddha statues telling her how much he treasures her, and she knows that she's all he has. She tells Tariq she can't, even when he says he loves her. Ultimately, she has to make him leave, making him promise to go without good-byes. He promises to come back for her.

Though Laila has been able to push aside her mother's warnings, she is still affected by the social norms that consider sex before marriage a deeply shameful scandal—both shame and happiness mingle and coexist for her. At the same time, Laila's love for Babi prevents her from entirely acting on her feelings for Tariq and joining him in leaving.

PART II: CHAPTER 26

It's the hottest day of the year, and Laila is lying on the living-room couch, listening to her parents upstairs and torn between shame and guilt at what she did with Tariq, and the thought that it was not sinful but natural and beautiful. She tries to remember a particular detail from that night, but finds that time is blurring the edges. In the future, the narrator states, when Laila is a grown woman, she will not miss him with as sharp and constant an ache as she does now—except for once in awhile, when a slight, trivial detail will reawaken that night.

Again, Laila's feelings for Tariq are just as strong as her understanding of the shame associated with breaching cultural norms. This is another moment at which the narrator intercedes to signal the broader arc of the story to the reader—we now know that Tariq's absence will be a constant, though duller, source of grief for Laila into the future.

Babi calls to Laila from upstairs, saying that Mammy has agreed to leave. The three of them sit on the bed as rockets fall outside. Babi says they'll go to Pakistan first to apply for visas, and Laila is thrilled—Pakistan is where Tariq's family is.

Laila had committed herself to staying with Babi out of love and loyalty for him, but now it seems as though she will not have to choose between him and Tariq.

Three days earlier, Laila had slipped outside for some fresh air when, with a loud crack, some stray shrapnel whizzed by next to her, sending splinters onto her face. It was this small hole in the gate that finally convinced Mammy she could lose her one last child as well. She looks resigned, but embraces Babi.

Though Laila's family has certainly heard about the many atrocities taking place in Kabul, such suffering can seem remote and not entirely real, as we've learned with Ahmad's and Noor's deaths, unless they strike closer to home.

That night, Laila has a dream of her and Tariq sitting on a quilt on a beach, watching sailboats. They hear a noise like a chant, and she tells him about what Babi, years before, had called singing sand—the friction of grain against grain.

Many of Babi's stories and lessons have a magical, even dreamlike quality to them—a quality that meshes well with Laila's desire to dream of a possible, though remote, future with Tariq.

Babi says that they should only take what's absolutely necessary, and they start to gather and separate possessions into piles. Babi struggles to choose what to bring from his book collection. He tells Laila that it's strange to think he'll be leaving Kabul, where he's lived, studied, and taught. He recites two lines of a seventeenth-century poem by Saib-e-Tabrizi, which talks about Kabul as the city where a "thousand splendid suns" hide behind its walls. He starts weeping, and Laila reassures him that they'll return to Kabul.

Babi defines himself based on his intellectualism and book-learning, so leaving his books behind means leaving behind a piece of himself. Saib-e-Tabrizi's poem, though, as a piece of Afghanistan's literary heritage, will stay with him. The poem suggests that there is a true Kabul beneath all the violence and destruction—a real Afghanistan hidden behind the walls of fighting.

On the third day, Laila carries boxes of books from the house to the yard, where they'll take everything to a pawnshop. Mammy tells Laila to come up when she's done sorting everything in the yard, and they'll have lunch. Lails pictures the beach from her dream again, this time with the singing growing louder and louder, flooding her ears. Suddenly, she realizes that the sound is a whistling. She looks up at the sky, and hears a giant roar and sees a flash of white. She is thrown into the air and tumbles to the ground, crashing against the wall. The last thing she remembers seeing is a bloody body part crash to the ground beside her.

Once again, the constant bombing and ensuing suffering does not always seem quite real to Laila, for whom daily reality melds easily into her daydreams and hopes for the future. This time, though, the suffering does not take place elsewhere, as has happened before: Laila bears direct witness to the death of her parents, seeing what a child should never have to witness and only barely escaping alive herself.

When she comes to, she becomes conscious of a man and woman feeding her, giving her pills. She wonders where Tariq is. In another flash of consciousness, she sees herself and Babi sitting high up, looking out over fields of barley. With another pink pill, everything fades into silence.

As is often the case, in her most difficult moments Laila recalls the day trip to the Bamiyan Valley, where she was surrounded by people she loved in a landscape where she felt at home.

PART III: CHAPTER 27

Mariam leans in, asking if "the girl" knows who she is. The girl asks her to move to her other ear—she can't hear. That first week, the girl does little other than sleep, thanks to the pink pills Rasheed buys at the hospital. Sometimes she cries out names that Mariam doesn't recognize, and grows agitated. Other times, she's sullen and quiet, refusing to eat, but soon surrendering. Mariam dresses her wounds, and Rasheed says she'll stay with them until she's better.

In Part III, we begin with Mariam's perspective. Laila is essentially a stranger to Mariam, which helps to explain why Mariam calls her simply "the girl." Nevertheless, Mariam is a natural caretaker—it is more surprising that Rasheed is so eager to take care of Laila as well.

Rasheed had found the girl amid the rubble of her house, and had salvaged the few books not burned or looted. Rasheed sometimes returns home from work with a new blanket and pillow or with vitamins. He tells Laila (which is how he refers to her, rather than "the girl") that her friend Tariq's house is now occupied by some of Sayyaf's men. Mariam sometimes sees them playing cards and smoking next to their Kalashnikovs. The oldest is scornful and cocky, but the youngest is quiet and polite, always nodding to Mariam. One day, a rocket hits the house and kills all three boys. Rasheed says they had it coming.

Rasheed lavishes Laila with the kind of gifts he has long since stopped giving Mariam. When the narrator refers to Rasheed's perspective, Laila is called by her name, further underlining Rasheed's interest in her. Mariam has a far more nuanced understanding of combat than Rasheed: she knows that "Sayyaf's men" have most likely committed brutal acts as well, but she cannot bring herself to rejoice, like Rasheed, at more loss of life.

Slowly, the girl gets better. One day, she confides to Mariam that she shouldn't be alive: Babi wanted to take out the boxes of books, but she insisted on doing it herself, and so wasn't in the house when it happened. Mariam recalls the day of Nana's burial and how nothing could comfort her, not even Mullah Faizullah's prayers.

This kind of shame is distinct from what Laila felt after sleeping with Tariq: here she feels guilt and responsibility for her parents' death, just as Mariam did for Nana's suicide. Knowing there is little she can do to comfort her, Mariam does not make this common experience explicit.

About a month after the blast, a man named Abdul Sharif comes to see the girl. She says she doesn't know who he is, but Mariam tells her to come down and talk to him.

The arrival of Abdul Sharif echoes the arrival, earlier in the novel, of the man from Panjshir: these strangers tend not to bear good news.

PART III: CHAPTER 28

Abdul Sharif is thin with a big nose and short, brown hair sticking up from his head. Laila asks if he's a friend of her parents, and he says no. He says he is a businessman and often travels betwen Kabul and Peshawar. He became sick, and after refusing his wife's admonishments, finally went to the hospital with blood poisoning. As she listens, Laila grows increasingly anxious. Abdul Sharif continues that at the hospital he met her friend, Mohammad Tariq Walizai.

Even before Abdul Sharif tells Laila anything about why he's come, she has a subliminal sense that he cannot be bringing good news. The fact that Abdul Sharif mentions Tariq by his full name makes his story more frightening to Laila, by making him sound distant and anonymous. Abdul Sharif's tale only grows graver once Laila realizes it takes place at a hospital.

One of the nurses told Abdul Sharif that Tariq was in a lorry with other refugees headed for Peshawar when they were hit with a stray rocket. There were only six survivors, three of whom died soon after at the hospital. Tariq was the last still alive, three weeks later. Laila realizes that she's hot and sweating, and despite her best efforts pictures Tariq's parents trapped in the lorry.

Laila had pictured Tariq successfully in exile in Pakistan, and her own family going to join them. Now she has to once again modify her ideas based on what she knows: she and Tariq have both been orphaned, and Tariq gravely injured.

Abdul Sharif continues, saying that initially he thought Tariq had lost both legs in the attack, but the nurse told him that the left one was from an older injury. He had internal injuries as well, in addition to bad burns. Laila wills herself not to collapse, unable to imagine Tariq legless. Abdul Sharif tells Laila that the two became friendly, chatting about their families. Tariq mostly talked about Laila, saying she was his earliest memory.

Once again, Laila has to modify the way she imagines Tariq, given that she now knows war has taken away both his legs. What Tariq tells Abdul Sharif reflects the depth of his relationship to Laila, since they've weathered extraordinarily difficult childhoods together.

When Abdul Sharif said he was going to Kabul, Tariq had asked him to find Laila and tell her he was thinking of her, and missed her. Abdul Sharif promised to do it. One night not long after, he woke in the middle of the night to see doctors huddled around Tariq's bed, with alarms bleeping. In the morning, the bed was empty, and when Abdul Sharif asked a nurse, she said that Tariq had fought valiantly.

Finally, Abdul Sharif says what he's come to tell Laila. Just as she had tried to visualize Tariq wounded, without legs, but alive, she now has to face the fact of his death: his absence not only from her in Kabul, but for good.

Laila realizes she's nodding—she's known all along what news this man would bring. Abdul Sharif apologizes, but Laila isn't listening: instead, she recalls the day the man from Panjshir had come with news about Ahmad's and Noor's deaths. Only now does she understand the true sorrow of her mother's loss. She wonders if this is her punishment for being unable to truly feel her mother's suffering.

Giti's death had allowed Laila to begin to understand how loss and grief can affect a person, but only now can she truly comprehend the extent of Mammy's suffering. And once again, she feels ashamed of this earlier inability, which reveals just how personal and intimate suffering can be.

Laila sits, immobile, her hands in her lap, willing her mind towards a better place, with green barley fields and clear water, with Babi reading under an acacia and Tariq napping, under the ancient stone gods.

Again, Laila returns to the day spent around the Bamiyan Buddhas, a moment of love and contentment under the watchful eyes of one of Afghanistan's cultural monuments.

PART III: CHAPTER 29

Rasheed tells the girl he's very sorry, and knows the two of them were close friends. Mariam watches him, recalling how for years he's eaten with his hands, in silence, only letting forth one-word grunts when he needs something. Now he's polite, using a spoon and napkin, and talking constantly.

Over the years, Mariam has grown accustomed to enduring her husband's brutish ways and utter scorn for his wife—she does not yet fully understand why his attitude has shifted.

Rasheed says that the CIA armed the wrong faction in the fight against the Soviets, and now the Soviets are gone and innocent people are being killed—they should have armed "Commander Massoud." Mariam is shocked, recalling Rasheed's rants against Massoud as a communist traitor, but then realizes that Massoud, like Laila, is a Tajik.

Rasheed has often railed against particular political groups or leaders, while dismissing Mariam's opinions as a woman. Here, though, he seems less interested in the political details than in currying favor with Laila.

Later, as Mariam is washing the dishes, she thinks about what a performance Rasheed has put on. She realizes with dread that she's been witnessing a courtship.

Though Mariam is resigned to living with a man who is cruel to her, accepting that her husband is courting a young girl is the height of shame.

When she finally confronts Rasheed, he simply says, "Why not?" and Mariam knows she's defeated. Rasheed is at least sixty, now with thick white hair and saggy skin, but still with the broad shoulders and strong hands of earlier years. Mariam says she's never asked him for anything before this. Rasheed counters that Laila can't just stay there—he's not the Red Cross. He says it's common for men to take more than one wife, but Mariam says she won't allow it. In that case, Rasheed says, he'll turn her out onto the streets—who knows what'll happen to her then. After graphically describing the chances of rape and murder that await her, not to mention the bleak Peshawar refugee camps, he claims that this is for the best.

Rather than being ashamed himself of his actions, Rasheed knows that as a man whose wife does not have family or other supporters, he can do whatever he'd like. His threats to Mariam take advantage of her kindness and goodness—the fact that Mariam would do whatever she could not to condemn Laila to a life on the streets or in a refugee camp, even if that means accepting Laila as Rasheed's second wife.

That night, Mariam tells the girl about Rasheed's proposal. For a long time, she says nothing, but then tells Mariam that her answer is yes.

It now makes even more sense why Mariam refuses to call Laila by her name.

PART III: CHAPTER 30

Laila stays in bed the next day, up until Rasheed returns from the barber with a new haircut, a new suit, and a wedding band—he's traded Mariam's old ring for it. Laila asks him to take it back, but he smiles and said he had to add a lot of cash for this one. He offers to take her to a tailor to get her fitted for a dress, but Laila says she'd rather get it done. Rasheed grins toothily, calling her "eager."

Rasheed is frank and straightforward about his intentions with Laila, and does not hesitate to condemn or scorn his first wife, though Laila (now occupying the chapter's point of view) is uncomfortable with this treatment. Rasheed obviously misinterprets Laila's desire to get the wedding over with.

Before Abdul Sharif's visit, Laila had decided to leave for Pakistan. But now, she's begun to have nausea in the morning, and realizes she's missed a cycle. She imagines herself in a refugee camp, with her and Tariq's baby beneath a dirty tent. She can't run now. So many people in her life have died, but there is a miraculous piece of her former life growing inside her.

We now understand better why Laila has agreed to marry Rasheed, and why so quickly. Amid the death and destruction that she has witnessed around her, the existence of a child growing inside her strikes her as no less than a miracle, a small piece of life amid death and a reminder of Tariq.

Laila knows that her agreement to wed Rasheed is dishonorable, shameful, and unfair to Mariam, but she is committed to sacrificing anything for her child.

Already, Laila's love for her unborn child will lead her to do anything that would ensure its health.

Laila would only remember fragments from the ceremony, including Mariam watching, disapproving. Laila can't bring herself to meet Mariam's gaze. That night, as Rasheed undresses her, she starts shaking involuntarily. She asks him to turn off the lights. Later, once he's asleep, Laila pricks her finger with the knife she's hidden under the mattress, and lets it bleed on the sheets.

Though Laila has committed to doing what she needs to do for her baby, this does not prevent her from feeling the shame of her act, especially the questionable morality of doing this to Mariam. With Rasheed, sex is a matter of fear rather than love, as it had been with Tariq.

PART III: CHAPTER 31

Mariam barely sees the girl during the day, but they sometimes inevitably run into each other, leading to tension and awkwardness. Sometimes she can smell Rasheed on him—he never sleeps with Mariam anymore, thankfully, and even thinking about him makes her feel sick.

Mariam's feelings are complex: she has long ago lost hope of having a loving relationship with Rasheed, but even so, the shameful position he and Laila have placed her in leads her to despise both.

At night, Rasheed insists they all eat together, and tries to get Mariam to talk to the girl. He tells Laila that Mariam is a village girl, a *harami*, but is a good worker and has no pretensions. Even as a thirty-three-year-old, the word still stings Mariam.

The very word harami is a powerful conveyor of shame, still potent enough to suggest that Mariam will never be loved and never belong anywhere, as she always feared.

Rasheed says that he doesn't want to speak ill of the dead, but he is concerned about Laila's parents' leniency with her. Mariam sees the girl's look of hatred, though Rasheed misses it. Now, he says, Laila is the queen of the house, and he has to guard her honor. She shouldn't leave the house without his company—she can ask Mariam to fetch anything she'd like, since Mariam isn't worth as much. He also tells Laila she'll have to wear a burqa when they're out together, for her own protection.

Though Rasheed still dotes on Laila, he does so according to his own protocol, which in this case means retaining strict boundaries between male and female spheres, and "honoring" a woman by covering her and refusing to allow her to walk around on her own. That Mariam is allowed to do so reflects that Rasheed no longer considers her a woman, a full human being.

One day, Mariam is folding laundry when she turns around and sees the girl in the doorway. She tries to make small talk, asking Mariam if she knew her mother. Mariam says she didn't really. When the girl tries to broach the subject of the other night, Mariam says she won't be her servant. She says that Laila can't use her looks against Mariam, and snaps that she can start contributing to the household chores now that she's healed. The girl tries to thank Mariam for nursing her, but Mariam says she wouldn't have if she'd known she would steal her husband. She coldly lays out the rules for how they'll split up the chores. Mariam has never spoken so forcefully or sharply, but she can't feel satisfied when she sees the girl's face teary and drooping.

Ever since Mariam nursed Laila back to health, she has endured the shame and sting of having to share her household with another woman, especially now that Rasheed speaks scornfully of Mariam even in her presence. This is one of the first times Mariam stands up for herself and attempts to set her own boundaries. However, Mariam is still kind enough at heart that she gains little satisfaction from speaking harshly at Laila, even if Laila is the source of much of Mariam's own suffering.

PART III: CHAPTER 32

Laila recalls a gathering years earlier on one of Mammy's good days. Their neighbor Wajma had told the others how Rasheed's son died: Rasheed used to drink *sharab* and was drunk that day, passed out on a chair. Later that day, they found the boy in the water.

Laila had briefly crossed paths with Rasheed in the past, though she could never have expected that Rasheed's past suffering would be relevant to her own life.

Laila is thinking about this story when she tells Rasheed about the baby. He immediately cycles to the mosque to pray for a boy. Rasheed cheerfully, cruelly tells Mariam, who looks devastated. Mariam snaps that Laila is still responsible for chores. Laila is about to respond sharply before remembering that Mariam is the only innocent one in the household.

After six miscarriages and the shame of having to allow Laila into her home, Mariam now has the added grief of knowing that Laila has given Rasheed what she could not.

As fall turns to winter, Rasheed comes home with news of ever-shifting alliances: Sayyaf is fighting the Hazaras, who are fighting Massoud, who is fighting the Pakistan-supported Hekmatyar. Fires engulf western Kabul, embassies close and schools collapse. Laila dreams about the free, open Kabul of her childhood. But then her thoughts turn to Tariq, she pictures him pierced through with tubes on a hospital bed far from home, and she feels nauseous.

Though some of these factions are familiar to the reader—Sayyaf's men had occupied Tariq's old home, while Massoud was Mammy's hero—it is difficult to keep track of the shifting ethnic alliances. Laila continues to think of the true Kabul as safe and idyllic, though it's difficult to retain that image when she knows how little that Kabul has remained.

Sometimes she feels like a shipwreck survivor, drifting amidst miles of water. She ambles through the house before running into Mariam, and then feels guilty and ashamed.

Like Mariam, Laila no longer feels that there is a place she can belong and feel loved—a sentiment exacerbated by the shame she feels at accepting Rasheed's proposal.

One day, Rasheed takes her to his shoe shop. She has to concentrate while wearing the burqa so as not to trip and fall, but she does appreciate the anonymity, and the inability for any old acquaintance to recognize her. Rasheed talks of his hopes for their son, and how he will resemble his father, filling Laila with fear.

Just as Mariam had felt a certain sense of security in the anonymity of the burqa, Laila takes refuge in this physical covering, even as she fears that Rasheed will uncover her secret.

Rasheed asks how things are with Mariam, and she doesn't tell him about their first real fight a few days earlier, when Mariam accused her of hiding a long wooden spoon. For the first time, Laila yelled back back, and they ended up hurling insults at each other. They haven't spoken since. But for Laila, there had been something satisfying in letting loose all her pent-up anger and grief. She had raced upstairs, missing her parents desperately. Suddenly, the baby had kicked for the first time.

While Mariam and Laila have for the most part managed the simmering tensions in the household, their first fight allows them to explicitly voice the pain and resentment that each of them feels. For Laila, at least, the imminent arrival of her child allows her to retain some kind of hope for the future.

PART III: CHAPTER 33

One morning the next spring, in 1993, Mariam watches from the window as Rasheed, overly attentive, accompanies "the girl," as Mariam continues to think of Laila, through the gate. The next evening, they return, Rasheed brusque and sullen, telling Mariam to get dinner ready. Laila enters afterword, struggling to hold the baby and her bag of belongings. Mariam watches her struggle but turns back to the kitchen rather than helping.

By seeing the events unfold through Mariam's perspective, we are similarly forced to examine and interpret signs, like the shift from Rasheed's attentiveness to his sullen, morose attitude once the baby is brought back. Though Mariam certainly isn't on Rasheed's side, neither can she bring herself to care for Laila as she once innocently did.

Rasheed complains constantly about the crying for the first few months, saying he wishes he could just send the "thing" down the river like Moses. He never uses the baby's real name, Aziza, or the "Cherished One." Some nights Mariam hears them arguing, about how the baby, a girl, has stolen Laila's attentions, or how she refuses to start sleeping with him again. Mariam takes a perverse pleasure in all of it.

Learning that Laila has had a baby girl rather than a boy, we understand better why Rasheed—who refused to acknowledge this possibility—no longer lavishes attention on Laila as he once did. Rasheed's apparent love for her was no more than desire at what she could bring him.

Mariam finds the girl's enthusiasm annoying, but also impressive. Rasheed is not nearly as enthralled by Aziza, and rolls his eyes at Laila. Mariam recalls that earlier, in his eyes, Laila could do no wrong, but instead of feeling vindicated she feels sorry for her.

Mariam perhaps recalls how Rasheed's attitude towards her changed drastically after she was unable to give him a baby boy or any child—they now share this scorn.

One night, Rasheed says that he's heard on the radio that one in four Afghan children will die before the age of five, so Laila shouldn't get so attached. She storms upstairs, and later that night Mariam hears them bickering again. All at once, Rasheed storms into his room, accusing Mariam of teaching the girl to deny him. Mariam, even after all these years, shivers with fright at Rasheed's rage. He swings his belt at Mariam, as Laila cries out and lunges at him. She hangs on to him, pleading, before Rasheed lets off, having made his point, and stomps back into his room.

Laila's unconditional love for her child contrasts with Rasheed's attitude: for him the baby is no more than an irritating object—though one that gives his wife the courage to refuse to sleep with him. For the first time, Laila makes a dramatic act of solidarity with Mariam by attempting to defend her from Rasheed—though after all, it was because of her refusal that Rasheed had gone after Marium.

In the middle of the night, Mariam goes downstairs for a cup of water, and nearly trips over the girl and the baby lying on the floor atop a quilt. Mariam gazes at the baby for the first time, and it squeals happily back at her, smiling. Mariam pulls the multiple layers of blankets off, realizing the baby must be hot. She tries to sneak back up to bed, but the baby coos for her, and she returns, letting her finger be grabbed until the baby falls asleep.

Until this moment, the baby had, for Mariam, been not much more than a nuisance. But as a kind, caring person at heart, Mariam cannot help but feel warmly towards Aziza once she actually has a moment to interact with her. The start of Mariam's close relationship with Aziza begins with this example of care.

PART III: CHAPTER 34

Laila adores lying next to Aziza and watching her, whispering stories about her father Tariq. Sometimes she notices that Rasheed looks at Aziza oddly. One night he asks what things were like between Laila and "Majnoon," the cripple. He asks if they ever did anything out of order, and Laila, her heart pounding, says that Tariq was just a friend. People gossiped, Rasheed says, but Laila just glares at him.

Before the deaths of Laila's parents, Rasheed had teased Laila and Tariq by invoking this 12th-century Romeo and Juliet-esque poem. Now, Rasheed is using knowledge of their intimacy as a weapon against Laila, though neither of them can prove or disprove Laila's secret.

Laila shivers to think what would happen if Rasheed knew that each week since Aziza's birth, she's been stealing from him, little by little. She plans to run away next spring or summer to Peshawar.

Laila is naturally determined and stubborn (like Babi). And as a mother, she is willing to do anything for her daughter, from marrying Rasheed to running away.

Two days later, Laila finds a stack of girl baby clothes outside her room, neatly folded. That night, Rasheed mentions the rumors of alliances shifting once again, and warns that if the commander Dostum switches sides, the war will become a true bloodbath.

The baby clothes are a token of friendship from Mariam, subtle but powerful. Just as the characters (and the reader) have gotten used to a certain set of political alliances in Afghanistan, they threaten to shift again.

Later that night, when Rasheed is asleep, Laila goes down to the kitchen, where Mariam is cleaning trout. She thanks Mariam for the clothes, and Mariam says she had no use for them. They start to talk about tricks of cooking and sewing. Finally, Mariam admits that before the other night, when Laila tried to stop Rasheed from hitting her, no one had ever stood up for her before. Laila looks into Mariam's eyes and realizes that she is seeing not an enemy but a woman who has suffered greatly, and has endured it all.

Mariam's small expression of friendship is equaled by Laila's gratitude. Of course, the two of them have far more in common than either had admitted—not only are they both responsible for Rasheed's household, but they both must endure his tyranny—and it is unsurprising that they find so much to talk about. By looking into Mariam's eyes, Laila begins to understand the validity of others' suffering, not just her own.

Laila proposes that they two have a cup of chai in the yard. They end up having three cups, as gunfire is heard over the hills. Then Aziza wakes up crying, and Rasheed yells for Laila. But the two exchange a look of trust, and Laila knows that they're no longer adversaries.

In the midst of trying times, both personally and politically, Mariam and Laila begin to cultivate a true friendship, one based on mutual trust and shared experiences.

PART III: CHAPTER 35

Now Mariam and Laila do their chores together, keeping an eye on Aziza in her bassinet. Mariam grows to enjoy the cups of chai that they share each night. Aziza adores Mariam, whom Laila calls Khala Mariam—Aziza's aunt. Mariam is shocked by how much Aziza loves her, and how guilelessly. She feels like she's finally found a true connection in her life.

For the first time in a chapter narrated by Mariam, Laila is referred to by name rather than as "the girl." Never having had a child herself, Mariam is new to the particular form of love that comes from an infant—one that she often doubted she would have.

In January 1994, Dostum does switch sides, joining Hekmatyar and firing on Massoud and Rabbin's forces in Kabul. There is looting, murder, and rape of civilians, and Mariam hears of men who would kill their own wives or daughters out of honor if they'd been raped by the militia.

Filtered through Mariam's perspective, the general terror of the infighting gains greater immediacy in terms of the violence done against women: in this case, "honor" is invoked merely as the counterpoint to shame.

Mariam wonders if there's fighting like this in Herat as well, and if Mullah Faizullah and Bibi jo are still alive and coping. She wonders about Jalil also, hoping he's safe and away from all the killing.

Though Mariam had left Herat refusing to ever see Jalil again, the adoration she once felt for him has not entirely disappeared.

For a week, even Rasheed stays home because of the violence. He says that the Mujahideen are forcing young boys to join them, dragging them off the streets. He waves his gun and boasts that he'll chase them away. Aziza is at his feet, clutching his leg, and he shakes her off brusquely. She crawls back to Mariam, looking to be comforted, though Mariam can't give her any reassurances about fathers.

Rasheed's blustering claims are portrayed as over-the-top, even ridiculous. When his daughter looks for a concrete example of his love—which he seems so willing to show through violence—he brushes her off. Mariam, unfortunately, has witnessed similar behavior with Jalil.

One day that winter, Laila asks to braid Mariam's hair as Aziza is curled up asleep on the floor. Mariam starts telling Laila about Jalil, Nana, and Mullah Faizullah, about her humiliation at Jalil's house and Nana's suicide. After she's explained everything, Laila says she has something to tell Mariam too.

Up until this point, Mariam's and Laila's former lives have remained separate—even narrated in separate voices. Their trust now leads them to share stories of their individual grief, in addition to the suffering they both share.

That night, Mariam doesn't sleep. She's spent these years hopeless, numb to everything happening around her—until Laila and Aziza (another *harami*, she now knows) entered her life. Despite her anguished past, Mariam wonders if there are better years awaiting her. Laila has asked her to join them in escaping. She thinks of Mullah Faizullah telling her that it is God's will for her to tend to any flowers of hope that might bloom in her life.

When Mariam first left for Kabul, she still hoped that she'd find love and belonging somewhere. Though romantic love has proved a disappointment, her friendship with Laila may be a way for her to both experience a different kind of love, and finally overcome the shame of her social position.

PART III: CHAPTER 36

That morning, in spring 1994, Laila is convinced Rasheed knows of their escape plan. But he leaves for work as usual. As she and Mariam leave in a taxi, Laila thinks she sees Rasheed everywhere. A few weeks earlier, she'd pawned her wedding ring. All around her she sees the bombed-out shells of homes and packed cemeteries.

Though Laila is determined enough to stick to her escape plan, she knows that the path out of Afghanistan is fraught with danger. However, the devastation around her reveals that staying in Kabul may not be any less perilous.

At the Lahore Gate bus station in East Kabul, Mujahideen militiamen patrol the station and curb with their Kalashnikovs. Since their takeover, the courts under Rabbani have become filled with conservative mullahs who undid the communist decrees empowering women. Instead, Shari'a or strict Islamic law reigns. Women are forbidden from traveling without a companion, and adultery is punished with stoning. Laila also knows that the Pakistani border is officially closed to Afghans, but people still manage to be smuggled through.

Not only must Laila fear discovery by Rasheed: the new Shari'a laws also mean that merely being a woman makes any possibility of escape far more remote and treacherous. However, the novel stresses that even though Afghan women may have legally become second-class citizens, this does not make them any less intelligent, courageous, or able to endure.

Eventually, Laila finds a kind-looking man sitting on a park bench. She tells him that she is a widow, and is traveling to Peshawar with her mother and daughter. She asks if she can travel with him and his family. He agrees, introducing himself as Wakil, and goes to buy their tickets, telling them to stay close.

Because of the strict rules imposed on women by Shari'a, Laila cannot be entirely independent, as she is used to: instead, she must trust in the goodwill of a stranger.

Wakil motions towards Laila when it's time to board. As he climbs onto the bus, he whispers something to the militiaman, and Laila's heart sinks. The soldier tells her and Mariam to follow them, and that they won't get on that bus.

Putting her faith in a stranger was always a gamble, but it was also the only way Laila and Mariam could hope to flee. Now, they must pay the price for flouting the strict gender norms.

At the police station, they are forced to sit apart for three hours. Laila is interviewed alone, and a soldier says he knows she's already told one lie. He accuses her of more, and asks for the specific address of her family in Peshawar, in addition to a number of other details. Laila is tired and anxious and stumbles over her words. The soldier leans forward and tells her that it is a crime for a woman to run away.

Having made it so close to escaping, Laila no longer has the energy to create a story that will satisfy the soldier, who is already looking for a reason to condemn her. The soldier reminds Laila of what she already knows—that life for a woman in Afghanistan is far more limited now.

Laila begs him to let them leave, saying that there's no telling what Rasheed will do to them if they're sent back. The soldier seems uncomfortable but says that it's the man's business what he does in his own home. He sends her out, where Mariam is waiting. The police drive them home, where Rasheed is waiting.

The clear-cut laws of Shari'a seem to become more ambiguous once the soldier is faced with the nuances of a particular situation, especially one in which the law is on the side of the wrongdoer. Nevertheless, he cannot overturn the system himself.

Rasheed drags Laila upstairs. She starts to insist that it was her idea, not Mariam's, and at once Rasheed punches her and drags her by the hair into Mariam's room, flinging Aziza onto the bed and locking them inside. She hears beating downstairs, and rocks Aziza until the sounds stop, and Rasheed drags Mariam into the toolshed.

Rasheed's general mocking, taunting attitude towards Mariam and Laila has now disintegrated into full-throttle violence and wife-beating. Even Aziza, the innocent party in this, is not spared Rasheed's wrath.

Rasheed nails boards across Laila's window, so it's impossible for her to tell the time of day. Aziza asks for milk, and the room grows increasingly hot and sweaty, until Aziza stops crying and drifts in and out of sleep. Laila dozes too, awakening to the sound of blasts and machine guns. She hears Rasheed's footsteps and begs for a glass of water for Aziza. Finally, on the second day, the room is suddenly flooded with light. Rasheed looms over her, swearing on the Prophet that if she ever tries to run away again, no court will hold him accountable for what he'll do to the three of them—Laila last, so she can watch.

Outside the house's walls, war is being waged: inside, Laila is persevering through another kind of battle. Throughout it, she continues to focus her thoughts and attention on Aziza. But this is a battle in which all she can do is endure rather than fight back. Rasheed, unfortunately, is probably right about the court backing him—as the soldier said, the laws now give far more power to men than to women, especially inside the home.

PART III: CHAPTER 37

Two and a half years later, on September 27, 1996, Mariam awakens to the sound of firecrackers and music: the Taliban have arrived. She'd first heard of the Taliban two years earlier: the Pashtun guerrillas often raised in refugee camps along the Pakistani border, led by the one-eyed Mullah Omar.

As often is the case, a new chapter begins with a shift in the political environment. The Taliban are described through their ethnic loyalties, but also clearly developed within the unstable political context of Mariam and Laila's lifetimes.

Rasheed admits that the Taliban have no past or home, but they can only be better than the corrupt, greedy Mujahideen. Unlike the Mujahideen, the Taliban are united, and he welcomes their arrival.

Rasheed rarely seems to have a sophisticated understand of Afghanistan's political affairs, but his attitude reflects a general weariness with the constant fighting of the Mujahideen.

The four of them go out that day, and see others emerging from the rubble, shouting *Allah-u-akbar* and "Long live the Taliban!" In Pashtunistan Square, Mariam sees her first Talib, a bearded young man in a black turban. Aside him two bloody men are hanging from ropes: the former Communist leader Najibullah and his brother. Later she'll learn that the Taliban had dragged him from his UN sanctuary and had tortured him for hours before dragging his body through the streets. The Talib announces through the loudspeaker that this is what will be done to infidels who commit crimes against Islam, and Rasheed smirks as he listens.

While others are celebrating the arrival of a new leadership and the hope for a better future that accompanies it, Mariam is, as usual, acutely aware of the suffering and loss that has gone with this transition in power. Unlike Rasheed, she takes no pleasure in this suffering. But what she has learned about the torture and death of Najibullah is stated calmly, matter-of-factly, as if it was simply necessary to baldly face the horrors rather than pretending they didn't exist.

The next day, trucks fill the streets of Kabul, and a message about the implementation of Shari'a law can be heard from the loudspeakers and on the radio. Men must grow their beards and wear turbans; everyone must pray five times a day; and no singing, dancing, or kite-flying is allowed. Stealing will be punished by having one's hand cut off, and women will be beaten if they go outside alone. They cannot wear jewelry or makeup, and must not make eye contact with men. Girls are forbidden from attending school.

Laila and Mariam have already suffered from the Shari'a law implemented by the Mujahideen. The Taliban, however, has taken these rules to another level. The bans and laws apply to everyone, limiting Kabulis and other Afghans in general, but women are disproportionately affected by the twisted attempt to protect women's "honor."

Laila says that they can't shut down half the population in Kabul, where women have practiced law and medicine and have worked in government. Rasheed calls her arrogant, telling her that she knows nothing about the "real" Afghanistan, where such laws have always been vigorously upheld.

Unlike Mariam, Laila has lived her entire life in cosmopolitan, progressive Kabul, and finds it difficult to believe that this is the new reality—even if Rasheed has already acted according to these laws in his own household.

PART III: CHAPTER 38

The Taliban smash pre-Islamic statues at the Kabul Museum, shut down the university, and burn books, including all the classic Afghan poets. Marco Polo Restaurant is turned into an interrogation center. Cinemas are shut down, and Laila remembers having gone to see melodramatic Hindi films with Tariq. Mariam wonders what's happened to Jalil's cinema.

Many of Kabul's major cultural and intellectual centers and artifacts—for Laila, elements of the true Afghanistan—are now masked by the Afghanistan that the Taliban are attempting to construct.

Rasheed doesn't mind the Taliban. Every Wednesday he listens to the names of the condemned on the Voice of Shari'a radio, and then watches the spectacle of punishments at Ghazi Stadium while drinking a Pepsi. At night, he tells Laila of the hangings and beheadings he's seen. Laila calls the Taliban savages, but Rasheed counters that compared to the fifty thousand killed by Mujahideen, "eye for an eye" isn't a bad law.

The novel portrays Rasheed—a cruel, brute misogynist—as the typical kind of person who would welcome the Taliban, even participating in its culture of violent spectacle. Nevertheless, Rasheed isn't wrong to bring up the destruction wrought by the Mujahideen—though for Laila, the one does not justify the other.

Rasheed tells Laila that he's noticed Aziza has an interesting eye color—it's neither his nor hers. He says it would be perfectly legal for him to give Aziza away, or to tell the Taliban that he has his suspicions about her. Laila calls him despicable, and Rasheed taunts her for using big words and thinking she's so clever, when in fact she can't keep herself off the streets without him.

By waiting until Aziza is a bit older, and Laila is entirely dependent on him, Rasheed can fully revel in his power over her—especially now that he is backed up by the unequal gender norms promoted by the Taliban. Independent by nature, Laila feels ashamed and angry at her need to rely on her husband.

Rasheed's words make Laila sick, especially since she knows they're true. But her queasiness persists, until it becomes something that she finds familiar. She is pregnant again, though this time she's dismayed.

The first time she was pregnant, Laila was thrilled to retain a vestige of Tariq; now, she cannot imagine giving birth to Rasheed's child.

Not long after, Laila snaps a metal spoke off an old bicycle wheel. She lies on her back on the bedroom floor, legs parted. She cannot imagine loving this child—but ultimately, she can't force herself to do it. She cannot accept the law of the Mujahideen, that sometimes innocent life needs to be sacrificed in war.

Laila finds the idea of caring for Rasheed's child so repellent that she comes very close to aborting it. However, her inability to do so shows that destruction, while powerful, does not always prevail over love.

PART III: CHAPTER 39

It's September 1997, and there is a crowd outside Malalai hospital, a women's hospital, when the guard barks that it no longer serves women. The guard tells them the only place to go is Rabia Balkhi, but a young woman in the crowd says there's no clean water, oxygen, or medicine there. The Talib fires his Kalashnikov into the air.

The Taliban's separation of men and women, and its privileging of men, has extended even into hospital care. The narrator paints a vivid scene of the chaos that results, regulated only by the Talib's brute physical force.

The waiting room at Rabia Balkhi is dirty and packed with women and children. Mariam claws her way to the front of the registration window, thinking of the sacrifices a mother makes—like the ones Nana had made, enduring the shame of bearing a *harami*. She wishes she'd been a better daughter to Nana.

Mariam's stream of thoughts connects her relationship with Nana to Laila and Mariam's friendship to Laila's motherly sense—all permutations of love and friendship for which so much can be sacrificed.

Mariam finds herself at the window and tells the nurse that her daughter's water broke, but the nurse says that the two doctors on staff are both operating on others at the moment. Much later, the nurse finally calls them in. The burqa-clad doctor is small and harried-looking. After examining Laila, she says the baby is in the breech position and they'll have to perform a caesarian. Embarrassed, the doctor whispers to Mariam that she has no anesthetic. Mariam could try to cross the city to find medicine herself, but in that time they'd risk losing the baby. Laila tells the doctor to operate.

Mariam finds herself playing a much more crucial role than Laila's husband: though Mariam is not truly her mother, as she claimed, there is a similar strength of love and loyalty between them. Laila, always strong and committed, is no different in the face of enormous physical pain—pain permitted, again, by the Taliban's dismissal of women and their particular needs, of which childbirth is a major part.

The doctor takes off her burqa to operate, saying that they're supposed to operate in burqa, but a nurse keeps watch at the door. Mariam positions herself behind Laila's head and holds her hands as she shivers, grits her teeth, and finally screams.

Even within strict Shari'a law, women find a way to subvert these norms. This scene with Mariam, Laila, and the doctor is a powerful example of women's ability to endure and survive.

PART III: CHAPTER 40

It's fall 1999, and Mariam and Laila take turns digging a hole, which is more demanding than it should be, since it's the second year of a devastating drought. Mariam, now almost forty, has lost two front teeth, one knocked out by Rasheed when she accidentally dropped Zalmai.

Mariam's loss of two teeth reflects both the general struggle of daily life and the active brutality of her husband, for whom he has no use other than in the service of his only son.

Zalmai is two now, plump with curly hair and rosy cheeks like Rasheed. When Laila is alone with him, he's sweet and playful. Her stomach turns when she thinks about the afternoon lying with a bicycle spoke between her legs. She loves Zalmai just as much as Aziza. But when his father, whom he worships, is around, he turns mischievous and is easily offended, and Rasheed rewards him, saying it's a sign of intelligence. He dotes on Zalmai and buys him clothes, toys, and gadgets they can't really afford. He takes him to his store, returning home grinning as if they share a secret. Rasheed scowls at Laila if she asks to hold him or play with Zalmai.

Laila has learned that a mother's unconditional love for her children can transcend the circumstances around their birth. Nevertheless, it is disturbing how Rasheed's authentic love for Zalmai can be twisted and perverted. For Rasheed, in fact, love is selfish rather than generous—though Laila, too, has in the past acted in the interests of herself and her unborn child and against those of Mariam. Love, it seems, is powerful but not necessarily always a force for good.

Aziza is now six, and is quiet and even-tempered. She loves taking care of Zalmai. One day Rasheed comes home with a TV. Aziza presses the power button, and Rasheed snatches her wrist out of the way, saying it's Zalmai's TV. She crawls into Mariam's lap—they're inseparable, and Mariam has been teaching Aziza Koran verses. The Taliban had banned television, but Rasheed knows he can find cartoons in underground bazaars—even though they can't really afford it.

Rasheed's love for Zalmai now makes his attitude towards his daughter even more of an affront. Rasheed is even willing to go against his formerly benign attitude towards the Taliban just to buy cartoons. It is Mariam, instead, who becomes the closest thing to Aziza's second parent.

That night, in fact, Rasheed tells Laila he's decided to send Aziza into the street to beg at a corner—many families in Kabul are doing the same. Laila says she won't allow it, and when Rasheed slaps her, she punches him back. Rasheed walks out of the room calmly, and she feels a momentary triumph. But he soon returns, putting his hands around her throat and slamming her against the wall, and sticks the barrel of his gun into her mouth.

Though she rarely feels able to stand up for herself, Laila will face Rasheed if it's a question of defending her daughter. Ultimately, though, Laila must come to terms—vividly—with the power that Rasheed continues to hold over her thanks to both his physical force and the legal norms backing him up.

Mariam and Laila are now digging in the yard to hide the TV for awhile, since the Taliban has been conducting raids lately. Laila has a dream that they're digging again, but this time lowering a screaming Aziza into the ground, saying they'll dig her back up when things are better.

While Rasheed has flouted Taliban norms by buying the television, it's Mariam and Laila who must work together to ensure that their family remains safe—even if, as Laila's dream shows, she isn't confident she can keep Aziza safe.

PART III: CHAPTER 41

In the summer of 2000, the drought is worse then ever, and villages turn nomadic, searching for water and pastures and settling in slums outside Kabul. This is also the summer when all of Kabul is obsessed with the movie *Titanic*. People smuggle pirated copies into Kabul and watch with the volume down late at night. Sometimes, Mariam and Laila unearth the TV to watch with the children. Kabul River has dried up and the riverbed becomes "Titanic City," with people selling all kinds of *Titanic*-themed objects, from toothpaste to perfume. Laila tells Mariam that it's become an obsession because everyone wants Jack, the main character of the movie, to rescue them—but Jack is dead, and isn't coming back.

While the public sphere is growing increasingly restricted in Kabul, the novel makes clear that not all simple joys have been destroyed. The bustling Kabul that Mariam found exciting and overwhelming when she first arrived has moved underground to Titanic City, despite the Taliban's bans. As a romantic love story, Titanic seems to appeal to Kabulis in search of a happy ending, or of a world in which love really does triumph over suffering.

Later that summer, a merchant falls asleep without putting out his cigarette, and Rasheed's shop is one of the ones consumed in fire. Thrown into poverty, they must sell everything. Rasheed stays home every day, slapping Aziza, kicking Mariam, and yelling at Laila. He is fired from a job at a kebab house for getting into a fight, and from a restaurant because customers complained about long waits. When Laila says he was probably napping, he goes at her with both fists, kicking until he no longer can.

Whereas Laila and Mariam deal with setbacks with grace and endurance, Rasheed grows even more unbearable than he was before. For the first time, the very qualities that make him a tyrannical force to deal with at home make him unable to contribute productively in public. Laila seems to have lost some of her wariness about saying what she thinks to him.

Soon, hunger is all they can think about. They skip meals, eating dried bread, stolen canned ravioli, raw turnips and blackened bananas. Aziza grows extremely thin and Zalmai becomes listless and pale.

Though Laila and Mariam have weathered Rasheed's abuse, this new threat poses a greater peril because of its effect on Laila's children.

But Mariam has a plan. She and Rasheed walk to the Intercontinental Hotel, and Rasheed greets one of the doormen, who Mariam finds vaguely familiar. Every few minutes, cars drive up to the hotel holding men in turbans—the Pakistani and Arab Islamists who Rasheed says are really running the country. An hour later, the doorman leads them inside, to a balcony where he gives them a small black phone and a scrap of paper with a number on it.

While a few blocks away, families are suffering from hunger, the Intercontinental Hotel is still a sleek, modern center of political action—one of the few places where phones can be found in Afghanistan— even if Afghans themselves are no longer as involved in these negotiations.

Mariam thinks back to the last time she'd seen Jalil, thirteen years earlier, in the spring of 1987. He had stood outside her house next to the blue Benz with Herat license plates, calling her name. Mariam had caught a glimpse of him from her window, but she refused to leave. Now she wishes she hadn't had so much pride, and had forgiven him—his faults seem like so little next to Rasheed's malice or the violence of the Mujahideen. She reaches the mayor's office in Herat on the phone, and asks for Jalil Khan. He says he doesn't know him—the cinema has long been closed. Mariam pleads with him, and he tells her that there's a groundskeeper who has lived in Herat all his life. After a few minutes, he returns to the phone to report that Jalil Khan died back in 1987.

Jalil's visit to the neighborhood had caught the attention of Laila, who knew only that there was a blue Benz from Herat outside Mariam and Rasheed's home. Now we have the backstory, which makes far more sense given our understanding of Mariam's history with Jalil, and her final refusal to submit to the shame of being snubbed by him. Now, though—having suffered even more herself and having witnessed even greater destruction on a national level—Mariam finds that her love for her father is stronger than pride or shame, though it's too late.

Mariam realizes that Jalil was dying back then, and had driven from Herat to say goodbye. Rasheed looks at her, and Mariam shakes her head. Rasheed calls her useless.

As usual, Rasheed is uninterested in the nuances of Mariam's past, and only cares about what can be useful for him.

PART III: CHAPTER 42

It's April 2001, shortly before Laila turns twenty-three, and Aziza is packing a few clothes and possessions. A few days earlier, Massoud had gone to speak to the European Parliament about his opposition against the Taliban. He had warned the West about terrorist camps in Afghanistan and had asked the US to help him fight. Laila had learned that a month earlier, the Taliban had blown apart the giant Buddhas in Bamiyan, despite a worldwide outcry. Laila remembers standing atop one of them in 1987 with Tariq and Babi.

The Taliban's draconian laws seem to have developed into even more frightening policies—a Western reader may begin to notice more familiar talk of the Taliban's toleration of terrorism. For Laila, Buddhas have long symbolized the true Afghanistan, as well as a glimmer of happiness that remains from her past. The Taliban have refused to accept this rich cultural heritage as part of their Afghanistan.

Laila has told Aziza that she's going to a special school where the children stay to eat and sleep, rather than telling her the truth. Rasheed and Zalmai wait two blocks from the barracks-style building, and Rasheed carelessly holds out a piece of gum as a goodbye present. Laila reminds Aziza to say that the Mujahideen killed her father. She and Mariam assure Aziza that they'll come back to visit her all the time.

It seems as though the family's poverty is finally forcing them to sacrifice Aziza—a sacrifice that, of course, means little to Rasheed. The web of lies and truth is complex, since it isn't entirely false that the Mujahideen's violence has ultimately led to the situation in which Laila finds herself.

The orphanage director, Zaman, is kind-looking, though Laila catches a glimpse of children with disheveled hair in ragged clothes, and of a weedy lot with an old swing set in the yard. Zaman says that he can tell Mariam is from Herat—a city of artists and writers. Mariam and Aziza leave for a moment, and Laila tells the lie (which is, oddly, really the truth) about Aziza's father. Laila begins to cry, and Zaman comforts her, saying that they're underfunded but that they manage, with God's will.

Though the orphanage is far from what a mother would want for her child, Laila is slightly cheered by the kindness of Zaman, who treats Mariam and Laila as friends and seems to embrace Aziza into a place where she might find some kind of belonging. Laila's tears reveal both her sorrow and shame at having to give away her daughter.

When it's time to leave, Aziza panics, and on the way home Laila can't get her cries or desperation out of her head. At first, Rasheed accompanies her, Mariam, and Zalmai to the orphanage for visits, though he makes sure Laila knows how much trouble it is. He never lets them stay more than fifteen minutes. Mariam also misses Aziza deeply, though she bears it quietly, and Zalmai asks for his sister every day.

Laila applies her general stubbornness to her determination to see Aziza as much as she can. However, a mother's love is not necessarily the strongest kind: Mariam, too, as Laila's closest friend, suffers Aziza's absence, and Zalmai misses her with the love of a child.

One day Rasheed says he won't accompany Laila anymore. She keeps trying to visit the orphanage, though half the time she is stopped by the Taliban and sent home, often with a beating. But usually she finds another route. If she makes it past the Taliban, it's worth it—she can spend all the time she wants with Aziza. Aziza says that Zaman teaches them something every day, pulling the curtains so the Taliban don't see them and pretending to knit if there's a Taliban inspection. On one visit, Laila recognizes a middle-aged woman visiting with three boys and a girl. She realizes it's Khala Rangmaal, her progressive teacher, but she doesn't seem to recognize Laila.

Under the Taliban, women are forbidden from traveling alone—meaning that Laila has been more dependent on Rasheed than ever. She willingly suffers beatings, however, for the chance to see her daughter, who seems to be gradually gaining the type of education that Babi wished for Laila. When Laila was a child, Khala Rangmaal was simply one character of many, an enthusiastic communist teacher who stuck to the Party line—now Laila understands her to be a true person, and a mother.

On one visit in June 2001, Rasheed relents, as he does rarely, and accompanies all of them to the orphanage. Aziza tells them all about tectonic plates and oxygen atoms, which she's learning about with Zaman. Aziza is always chatty during visits, laughing in a new way—meant to reassure, Laila thinks. She can tell Aziza is embarrassed by the dirt under her fingernails, or if a naked little kid wanders past. She's also begun to stammer.

Laila pays close attention to Aziza, knowing that not all of her suffering will be expressed in words. Aziza is clearly growing more mature and adopting conventions of both her mother and of Mariam—enduring without complaining, putting the people she loves first.

That Friday, they leave with Aziza for a short outing—Rasheed soon has to return to work as a doorman for the Intercontinental. He's wearing his uniform and looks vulnerable and almost harmless. They all take the bus to Titanic City. Rasheed tells Zalmai and Aziza to pick something out, but after trying to haggle, he snaps at Aziza he can't afford both gifts, and she'll have to give hers back.

It is remarkable how someone as tyrannical as Rasheed in the home can be seen as a normal, subdued individual to others—revealing how difficult it is to fully grasp the suffering of others. As usual, Rasheed privileges Zalmai over Aziza by only allowing Zalmai to keep his gift.

As they approach the orphanage, Aziza grows quiet, and Laila has to be the chatty one. When she leaves, Laila thinks about Aziza's stutter, and about what she'd said about tectonic plates—there may be fractures deep down, but all we can see on the surface is a tremor.

This metaphor about the tectonic plates could be applied to other characters in the novel—especially to the women, who endure these fractures stoically while finding ways to manage the tremors.

When they arrive home, Zalmai yells at an unknown man to get away. Laila follows his pointing finger and sees a man at the front door, limping towards them. She stops, her knees weaken, and she stands stock still, fearing that it's an illusion that will be broken at the slightest movement. She closes her eyes, but when she opens them again Tariq is still there. She takes a step, then another, then runs towards him.

We first see Tariq through Zalmai's eyes, as a limping stranger of whom Zalmai, quite understandably, is suspicious. But for Laila, there is an entire history and saga contained in the figure. At this moment, though it makes no sense to see Tariq before her, she does not need an explanation.

PART III: CHAPTER 43

Mariam is looking after Zalmai upstairs, and he's in a troublemaking mood. He had looked at Tariq suspiciously, and soon descends into a crying tantrum, until Laila has to come upstairs to hold and rock him.

In Zalmai's well-ordered, well-loved life, comprising his parents, aunt, and sister, there is no place for another adult man.

Mariam realizes why the doorman at the Intercontinental looked so familiar that day—she remembered him from nine years earlier. Questions race through her head, as she wonders which of them had plotted the lie with all its details, and how much Rasheed had paid Abdul Sharif to tell Laila the story of Tariq's death.

As Laila simply embraces Tariq's presence, Mariam is left to piece together the mystery. Abdul Sharif's tale had been remarkably and brutally specific, meant to wound Laila as much as possible while ensuring that her love for Tariq would not become a threat.

PART III: CHAPTER 44

Tariq is telling Laila about one of the men in a jail cell with him, whose cousin had been beaten publicly for painting flamingos. Laila is still barely able to believe he's sitting in front of her. Tariq continues, saying that the Taliban were offended by the birds' long bare legs, and had told him either to destroy the paintings or make them decent. He painted pants on each bird: "Islamic flamingos," Tariq says. Laila wants to laugh but is ashamed of her yellowing teeth with one incisor missing. But she notices that Tariq has a missing tooth as well.

As they sit on the couch, Tariq attempts to strike the same kind of playful note as during their adolescent bantering so many years ago—here, he pokes fun at and makes light of the Taliban's strict Shari'a laws, showing how ridiculous they can be. Though Laila initially feels shame at how she's weathered the years, this shame is countered by the knowledge that the two of them have both suffered.

Laila marvels how adult Tariq seems. He is still handsome but with weathered instead of fair skin and his hair receding. She'd told Tariq what she thought had happened to him and his parents. He shook his head, but told her that they've both died. He now hands her a small paper bag, from "Alyona," he says—a block of cheese. She asks if that's his wife, her voice wavering, but he says it's her goat. She remembers that Alyona had been the protagonist of the Soviet film they'd watched, the day he'd worn the enormous Russian fur hat as the Soviets left Kabul.

Though many years have passed, Laila still thinks of Tariq as the teenager whom she kissed in secret, and now has to reconcile that image with the adult sitting before her. Tariq, though, has obviously also kept much of their past together alive in his memory, as his reference to the long-ago Russian film makes clear.

Tariq says that he lives in the foothills in Pakistan, near Islamabad, at a summer retreat called Murree built by the British. Tariq says he's sorry about Laila's parents—he talked to some neighbors earlier. He says he doesn't recognize Kabul, and Laila admits that she doesn't either, even though she's never left.

As Tariq and Laila catch up with each other, they each must adjust the way they've imagined the other over the years. They've changed just as Kabul has, becoming unrecognizably different from the Kabul of their youth.

That night, Zalmai will tell Rasheed that Mammy has a new friend—a man. "Does she, now?" Rasheed will reply.

Before Rasheed even knows of Tariq's return, he is quick to condemn Laila for flouting her place as a woman by welcoming a man.

Tariq tells Laila about his family's stay at a refugee camp in Pakistan with sixty thousand other Afghans. It had been a model camp during the Soviet war, but afterward the West lost interest and the camp became desolate and barren, with rampant sickness. Tariq's father died that first winter in his sleep. That same season, Tariq cornered a kid, holding a shard of glass to his throat until he gave Tariq his blanket, which Tariq gave to his mother suffering from pneumonia.

During the Soviet occupation, Americans had a vested interest in Afghanistan, as it was a proxy war for their Cold War battles with the Soviet Union. The camp's disintegration reflects how regular Afghans have suffered the brunt of international powers' use of Afghanistan as part of a political chess game.

Tariq vowed to get his family out of the camp. In fall 1993 he met a shopkeeper, who offered to pay him to take a leather coat to Lahore. He said that if Tariq got caught, he'd be on his own. He didn't get far—a policeman cut open the coat at the bus station and hashish spilled out.

Tariq's loyalty to his family, and their increasing desperation, made him willing to take wild risks in order to have a chance to provide for them.

Back to dinner that night: Zalmai says the man has a limp. Rasheed, stony-faced, says that Laila let Tariq into his home, with his son. Laila says that he lied to her, and Rasheed roars that it was Laila who lied to him—he knew all about her *harami*.	*Until now, Laila and Rasheed have maintained an uneasy truce regarding her past—now he is willing to hurl the shame of the word "harami" at her, whereas earlier Aziza's status could have shamed him as well.* 
That afternoon: Tariq doesn't mention much about his years in prison. His mother tried to see him but never was allowed to. He wrote Laila tons of letters, he says, even though he doubted she'd receive them. At that moment, Zalmai starts crying upstairs.	*As the narrative toggles back and forth between Tariq's visit and Laila's confrontation with Rasheed later that night, the tensions between Laila's feelings for Tariq and the needs of her family grow increasingly apparent.* 
That night: Rasheed asks if Laila let Tariq see her face, and Zalmai pipes in that she did.	*Laila has clearly flouted the norms set for her by Rasheed as well as the Taliban.* 
That afternoon: Tariq says that her son doesn't like her much. Laila feels guilty, knowing that Zalmai is simply a child who loves his father, and his dislike of a male stranger is understandable.	*Laila is torn before the pure love she feels for Tariq, and the more complicated guilt and responsibility she feels for allowing him into her home.* 
Tariq says that he befriended a Pakistani named Salim, who had plenty of contacts. Salim found out that Tariq's mother died of exposure. Tariq spent seven years in prison, and when he got out Salim gave him the phone number of his brother Sayeed, who owned a hotel in Murree. Tariq immediately liked Murree—it seemed like a place that had never known violence. He got a job as a janitor and handyman.	*Even though he had to endure years in prison, Tariq was able to establish a loyal friendship while there. A "place that had never known violence" is foreign to Tariq—as well as to Laila—contrasting with the tumultuousness of their upbringing in Afghanistan.* 
Laila says, again, that she thought Tariq was dead. She asks for his forgiveness for having married Rasheed. Tariq doesn't blame her. But Laila continues, saying that there's something—someone—he doesn't know about.	*Laila feels guilty for not remaining loyal to Tariq—though she did believe she was staying loyal by marrying Rasheed, and thus ensuring the safety of his daughter.* 
That night: Rasheed asks Zalmai if he talked to the man too, and Zalmai seems uncertain, aware that he's stumbled into something bigger than he thought.	*Zalmai, who loves both his parents, is caught between them in a way he is too young to understand.*

As Tariq leaves, he says he wants to meet Aziza. Laila thinks back to the times they'd met in secret in the alley, ten years before. But at that moment, it seems as if all the time, and the violence that's filled it, are nothing. Then Tariq turns serious, touching her split lower lip and saying that her husband did this to her. He says he wishes he'd taken her with him—that he'd tried harder to marry her when he could. But Laila begs him not to talk that way. She tells him to return the next day, and she'll take him to Aziza.

Laila and Tariq have both suffered in different ways through these ten years, and both feel regret and guilt for different reasons, but they are confident that their love for each other can overcome such pain. Still, Tariq's return is too overwhelming for Laila to do more than make a smaller plan, for the next day.

PART III: CHAPTER 45

After Rasheed extracts the final parts of the story from Zalmai, he accompanies him upstairs. Zalmai shoots a sorrowful, contrite glance at Mariam and Laila before leaving. Mariam can see how Rasheed is thinking—as he was toiling as a lowly baggage handler, his wives were conspiring behind his back.

As when she felt sympathy for the Mujahideen occupying Tariq's old home, Mariam is able to see the humanity in all sides of battle, even though she remains unceasingly loyal to Laila.

Rasheed returns with a belt, and swings it at Laila, hitting her temple. He lashes her again and again. Laila tries to defend herself, and Mariam cries out pleadingly at Rasheed. Mariam claws at his face and hair, and Rasheed turns on her. Mariam recalls the first time they looked at each other under the wedding veil—his eyes indifferent, hers apologetic. She realizes how foolish she'd been. She's done nothing to deserve his malice and physical assaults. She's endured it and taken care of him all the same.

Rasheed has beaten both his wives before, but this time seems different: he is more vicious, and both Laila and Mariam are more willing to defend themselves and each other. For the first time, Mariam understands that she had accepted the view of herself as a shameful harami: now she sees herself as the strong, enduring woman she is.

As Rasheed approaches Mariam with his belt, Laila picks up a drinking glass from the ground, and hits it against the side of his face. Blood pours from his cheek and her hands. Rasheed turns back around snarling, and pins Laila under him on the ground, his hands wrapping around her neck. Mariam sees that he means to suffocate her. She races out of the room to the toolshed, where she grabs the shovel. When she returns, Laila's face is turning blue, and she's stopped struggling. Mariam has seen Rasheed take so much from her in the past 27 years—he can't take Laila too.

While Rasheed has threatened to kill Laila before, this is the first time he seems like he'll carry through with it—he is described almost as a feral creature. Mariam's actions stem from intuition and immediate reaction rather than from measured thought, as is understandable for the situation: her fierce loyalty and friendship for Laila leads her to do anything for her.

Mariam raises the shovel, says his name, so that he'll see, and when he looks up, she hits him across the temple. Rasheed touches his head and his gaze almost seems to soften—maybe, Mariam thinks, he sees something in her face of all her self-sacrifice and strength. But then he begins to sneer, and Mariam realizes that it is futile not to finish now—she knows that Rasheed will want to murder them both. She raises the shovel high above her head, and as she brings it down, she realizes that for the first time, she is deciding her life path herself.

Even just before the final blow, Mariam is willing to accept any subtle show of regret or compassion in Rasheed's eyes—but she sees none. Murdering Rasheed is, to her, the only way she can protect Laila and her family. Though she knows she will have to face the consequences of her action, she takes solace in the fact that her act stems from her own desires and feelings rather than those of another.

PART III: CHAPTER 46

Rasheed is lying over Laila, and she begins to see stars. As darkness falls, she vaguely makes out the faces of her children. But suddenly, the darkness starts to lift, and Mariam is shaking her, asking If she's alright. It burns to breathe, but Laila continues to inhale, and then is coughing, gasping. She sits up and sees Rasheed lying on his back, unblinking. Then she sees the shovel, and lets out a deep groan. She starts trembling and stammering. Mariam, though, seems thoughtful. She tells Laila to sit down. They have to move him, she says—Zalmai can't see him like this.

For Laila, the last few moments have brought her perilously close to death, though they have not constituted the kind of radical turning point that they were for Mariam. Although Laila is strong-minded too, here it is Mariam who keeps it together for Laila's sake. As always, she thinks of Laila's children first.

They wrap Rasheed in a bedsheet and carry him into the yard, though at one point Laila collapses and cries. They leave him in the toolshed, and Mariam says she needs to tend to Laila's wounds. She tells Laila she needs the night to devise a plan. Mariam, still calm, says that she, Laila, Tariq, and the children will leave Kabul and go somewhere remote and safe. Mariam says they'll go to a small village, maybe with a grass field or lake with trout, where they can lead peaceful, quiet lives. Laila is grateful that Mariam has taken charge, and trusts her that there is a way out.

Following the action-packed climax of the previous chapter, the protagonists are left to pick up the pieces of Mariam's choice. Once more, Mariam takes on the role not just of a friend but of a mother figure. And once again she takes care of Laila physically. She consoles her and helps her to visualize a peaceful, hopeful future where Laila is now only able to see despair.

Laila finds Zalmai waiting for Rasheed to say his prayers with them. He asks where his father is, and Laila tells him he's gone away—the first of many times she'll have to tell this lie. She is stricken with shame. Zalmai asks if Baba has left because of what he, Zalmai, said, about Laila and the man downstairs, but as she starts to reassure him she sees he's asleep.

While Laila understands the sacrifice that Mariam has made for her, she also knows that this sacrifice has certain costs, and that she will never be able to fully overcome the shame at taking away Zalmai's father.

When Laila wakes up, the fog from the night before has lifted. She goes into Mariam's room and says she knows what Mariam means to do. The story about the remote village, she sees now, was a lie meant to soothe. But Mariam says she meant it—for Laila. Laila starts stammering, pleading with Mariam. But Mariam tells her they'll find them sooner or later, and she won't have Laila and Tariq living like fugitives too, especially with their children. It isn't fair, Laila says. But it is, Mariam responds—she's killed their husband, so it isn't right that she run. She can never face Zalmai's grief.

Mariam's motherly care for Laila soothed her at the time, but with a new day Laila is truly no longer a child herself, and must face the consequences of Mariam's actions. Knowing that she and her family are responsible for what Mariam has done, she cannot bring herself to agree with Mariam—even though she knows that she would have made a similar sacrifice if she had been in Mariam's place.

Mariam says that there's nothing more she wants than for Laila and her children to have a future. Laila and her children have made her happier than she ever could have imagined. But Laila can't bring herself to agree—she rambles on with childish storybook fantasies about the new life they could make for themselves, until she finally buries herself against Mariam's shoulder and cries.

Mariam has been more of a parent to Laila's children than Rasheed ever was. Unable to fully face what will happen to Mariam, Laila again reverts to a childlike state, allowing Mariam to comfort her and, one more time, take on the role of caretaker.

Mariam packs a lunch for Aziza and Zalmai, and tells Laila to kiss Aziza for her. Laila says she wants to see Mariam before she testifies, and will explain to them that it wasn't their fault. As Laila and Zalmai leave, Laila looks back to see Mariam, with her white scarf, blue sweater, and sunlight across her face. She'll never see Mariam again.

Up until the final moment, Laila deludes herself into thinking that there is a way out for Mariam and not just for her. The final description of Mariam will be the way Laila will remember her friend, just as she remembers Babi from the day at the Bamiyan Valley.

PART III: CHAPTER 47

Mariam is placed in the Walayat women's prison near Chicken Street. There are no curtains or glass on the windows, so there's no privacy from the Talib guards. She's in a cell with five women and four children: many of the children have been born here, and have never seen the world outside. All the other women are there for having run away from home, so Mariam has a certain notoriety and the women compete to share food and blankets with her.

The women's prison is filled with prisoners who have, in one way or another, flouted the strict laws put in place by the Taliban that have limited women's freedoms and movements. Mariam is one of the only ones to have committed a true crime, though her case, of course, is more nuanced than that.

One of the women, Naghma, tried to elope with a mullah's son. When they were caught, he was flogged until he said that Naghma had cast a spell on him. He was freed and Naghma jailed. Mariam recalls Nana's warning: men can always find a woman to blame.

Mariam hadn't listened to Nana as a child, still unquestionably loyal to Jalil, but now she understands just how harsh repressive cultural norms can be towards women.

At Mariam's trial, there had been no cross-examination, no legal council or appeals. One elderly judge spoke to Mariam with apology rather than accusation. Another, younger, judge claimed that women's brains are made differently than men's, which is why a woman's word is worth less. The elderly judge then said that he had only a few months to live. Though he was not frightened to die, he was frightened to be summoned to God and have to explain why he did not obey God's laws. He understood Mariam's cause, but was disturbed by her brutality—even if Mariam did not seem to be a wicked woman. He said he must sentence her to death, as Shari'a law requires. She was given a document to sign, remembering the last time she'd signed her name to a document, 27 years before.

The way in which Mariam's trial was conducted reveals how unfairly Taliban law treats women—one judge even claims that women's testimony isn't worth as much as men's. The older judge, however, seemed to wrestle honestly with the meaning and the implications of Shari'a law. His speech helps to create nuance in the novel between a modern, perhaps more Western, conception of justice and a traditional one. This, the second time Mariam signed a document, also submitted her to the rules of another—though this time she actively chose this submission.

On the last of Mariam's ten days in prison, she watches children below her barred window, singing a rhyme Jalil had taught her. That night she'd dreamed of eleven pebbles, arranged vertically; of a young Jalil; of Mullah Faizullah playing with her in the stream; and of Nana calling her to dinner in the *kolba*.

On Mariam's last night, her dreams consist of her earliest memories, both of joy and love—her relationship with Mullah Faizullah and Nana—and of her longing for acceptance, as shown through the eleven pebbles she once arranged.

On the way to Ghazi Stadium, the young Talib across from her in the bus asks if she's hungry. When she refuses, he asks if she's afraid. She says she is, and the Talib says that his own father, according to his mother, was the bravest man she knew—and yet he still was crying the day the communists took him. For the first time, Mariam cries a little.

This is another case in which the novel complicates the notion that Talibs as uniformly evil. As the story of this Talib shows, all Afghans have suffered in some way through the tumultuousness of the past several decades.

As she enters Ghazi stadium, thousands of people look down at her. Earlier, she had feared she would panic or weep, but she thinks of Zalmai, of the father she took from him, and she's able to walk steadily. She knows she has had a difficult, painful life, but she finds herself, in these last seconds, wishing for more of it—more time with Laila, the ability to see Aziza grown up, to play with her children.

Mariam goes to her death consciously aware of the sacrifice she made for Laila and her family, but also of the suffering she has caused for Zalmai, which allows her to embrace the ultimate suffering for herself. As strong as Mariam is, her love for Laila and Aziza cannot entirely stop her desire to see them again.

But at the last moment, as she closes her eyes and the guard lifts his Kalashnikov, she feels not regret but peace. She came into the world as a *harami*, an unwanted, shameful presence, but since then she has loved and been loved. Her final thoughts are from the Koran, about God, the Mighty, the Great Forgiver. The guard asks her to kneel, and one last time she does as she's told.

Mariam's life trajectory has been one of near-constant suffering but also triumph and love. Though she did not find belonging where she expected to, her relationship with Laila ultimately allowed her to find meaning and a place of significance in the world, and to finally make her own choices.

PART IV: CHAPTER 48

The narrator shifts into the present tense in Part IV, as Laila and Tariq have made it to Murree, They had married the day the arrived. Sayeed brought a friend and mullah for the ceremony, and they married after the children had gone to bed at night. As their eyes met in the mirror under the veil, Laila looked at their faces marked with age and suffering, no longer the eager youths they'd once been. But their first night as a married couple, she considered it a blessing just to be beside him.

This shift into the present tense creates a greater immediacy to the plot: after the dramatic arc of the narrative ending with Mariam's execution, Laila still must find a way to survive day by day. Laila's marriage has little to do with her and Tariq's eager youthfulness—that time has long passed, but instead is replaced with a deeper, more stable kind of love.

Laila likes living in Murree, with its tourist attractions and natural beauty, though the locals bemoan the constant construction—in Kabul construction would be celebrated. They have a real bathroom, not an outhouse. Laila cleans the hotel rooms with Tariq, and Aziza helps out with spraying the windows.

Kabul is never far from Laila's mind, even when it doesn't compare favorably to her new surroundings—Murree has largely been spared the destruction of multiple wars and battles.

Laila had told Aziza about her real father a few days after the wedding ceremony, and already she and Tariq are finishing each other's sentences and seem to share a constant private conversation. Aziza asks Laila if he'll leave, but Laila says he'll never hurt her and never leave, and Aziza looks deeply relieved.

Aziza had never been treated like a real daughter by Rasheed, so it is easy for her to embrace her true father. Still, she has had a difficult enough childhood to doubt that such love is stable and here to stay.

Zalmai, on the other hand, is sullen and rebels against Tariq, saying he's not his real father. Every night, Laila tells him the same lie about Baba jan (Rasheed) having gone away. She knows that little by little, the questions will end. Though she is happy in Murree, she's aware of the cost of this happiness.

From the first time Laila told this lie, she has been aware that there was no choice she or Mariam could have made that would leave no room for grief and suffering.

Sometimes, they all take the bus to Kashmir Point, where Tariq shows them the Jhelum River valley, or to Nathia Gali and the Governor's House. When Laila catches their reflections in a store window, she thinks how normal and content they must seem to outsiders. Aziza sometimes wakes up screaming from nightmares. Laila always dreams she's at the house in Kabul, listening to the sound of a woman's chores. When she walks in, the room is always empty.

As Laila and her family attempt to construct a life for themselves in Murree, their painful history seems far away and remote. However, Aziza's and Laila's dreams reveal that the past is still an acute, significant part of the present. For Laila, this past also takes the form of missing her closest friend, Mariam.

PART IV: CHAPTER 49

One day that September, Tariq races into the bungalow to announce that Ahmad Shah Massoud is dead. He was giving an interview to a pair of supposed journalists, when a bomb hidden in their video camera went off —they were probably from Al-Qaeda. Laila recalls how Mammy had always refused to blame Massoud, even after the warring between factions. Laila, though, remembers the gratuitous violence under Massoud's watch—she remembers, though she's tried to forget, Babi's headless torso hitting the ground beside her after the rocket.

Massoud has been a constant presence in Afghan affairs for decades, most recently as an agent attempting to rally the West against the Taliban. Laila's recollections, however, make it clear that no one in Afghanistan's past is either entirely guilty or entirely blameless (including herself). The brutal way her parents died is still blazed into her memory.

Two days later, they're cleaning a room when they hear a commotion. In the hotel lobby, everyone's crowded around the TV, which is tuned to BBC and shows a tower with black smoke billowing out. Suddenly, a plane appears and crashes into the tower next to them. Soon, all the TV stations are talking about Afghanistan, the Taliban, and bin Laden.

September 11, 2001 is the first time internal Afghan affairs—which the Western reader has come to know intimately through the story—intersect explicitly with a piece of American history, though the reader is meant to understand the long and complex history behind this one terrorist event.

Tariq says that the Taliban have announced they won't hand over bin Laden because he's a guest in Afghanistan, and it would be against the *Pashtunwali* code of ethics to turn him in. Tariq laughs bitterly: he's dismayed by this perversion of the Pashtun custom. A few days later, they see the American president Bush on TV, declaring war.

Though Tariq is Pashtun as well, his dismay at the Taliban's interpretation of this code of ethics reveals that ethnic identity is far from the only possible source of loyalty for Afghans.

Tariq suggests that war with the Americans might not be so bad in the end. Laila is shocked, asking him how he can say such a thing. Her voice rising, she says that he wasn't around for the Mujahideen battles that killed her parents—he wouldn't know. He apologizes, saying that he just thought that there might be hope at the end of this for the first time in a long while. Laila begins to soften, but she is still not convinced that any new war is "worth it," and she cannot bring herself to celebrate.

Tariq, unlike Laila, is able to consider war in a more geopolitical, strategic sense. Laila, though, has seen what war has wrought directly—just as she could not abort her child, and thus abide by the Mujahideen laws of sacrificing the innocent, she cannot live by a law in which suffering can validate a greater good.

That night, Zalmai wakes up coughing, and Tariq rocks him back and forth. When he comes back to bed, they're silent, but Laila reaches over and sees that Tariq has been crying.

Zalmai and Tariq have had a complex relationship, but Tariq's tears serve as a wordless symbol of his love for Zalmai, even if he's not his son.

PART IV: CHAPTER 50

Life in Murree is comfortable and calm, the kind that Laila used to dream of when she was with Rasheed. She is thankful for it, but one night in July 2002, she and Tariq are talking about how the coalition forces have driven the Taliban out of every major city, and there's now an interim president, Harmid Karzai. She decides it's time to tell Tariq how she misses Kabul, but also feels restless when she hears about schools and roads being rebuilt. She hears Babi in her head telling her she can do anything she wants; she hears Mammy saying she wants to be in Afghanistan when her sons' dream of a new country come true; and finally, she can't think that Mariam died so that Laila could live comfortably as a maid in a foreign place.

After so many decades of war and day-to-day danger, it finally seems as though Afghanistan may be entering a period of rebuilding rather than further destruction. Laila is acutely aware of how much others have sacrificed in order to allow her to survive, and how she has been equipped—despite the strict, anti-progressive laws of the last few years—with the tools to be a strong female leader. Returning to Afghanistan is the only way Laila can imagine repaying these debts.

When she tells Tariq, he asks if she's not happy in Murree. Though she is, she tells him that she wants to be a part of what's happening in Kabul. She says it's only if he wants to go to, and Tariq smiles and says he'll follow her to the end of the world. But first, she says, she wants to go to Herat.

Laila has followed Tariq to Murree, where he had already established a job and a life. Now, he is willing to be similarly loyal to Laila—a reminder of how he's remained loyal to her even while they were apart.

Laila has to convince Aziza, who still has nightmares, that Kabul is safer now. As Sayeed drives them to the station, Laila herself wonders if they're really right to leave the safety of Murree. But she recalls Babi's ode by Saib-e-Tabrizi to Kabul, about the thousand splendid suns, and she's convinced that they're making the right decision.

Laila has lived through enough political coups and transitions to know that in Afghanistan, safety and security are never a sure thing. But Babi's poem convinces her, knowing as she does that there is a true Kabul, the one from the ode, to be rebuilt.

They pass through Iran on the way to Herat, since the Afghan roads have been decimated. They pass an Afghan refugee camp, all black tents and sheets of corrugated steel. But in Herat, most of the streets are paved and lined with trees, with steady electricity and parks under construction. Ismail Khan, the warlord who controls Herat, collects customs at the Afghan-Iranian border that Kabul says is meant for the central government, to invest in the city. Their taxi driver speaks in awe and a bit of fear of Ismail Khan.

As the family drives back towards the Afghan border, they are met with the physical evidence of the destruction wrought by the Soviets, Mujahideen, Taliban, and other leaders. Ismail Khan is an ambivalent figure, maintaining order and security but also affirming his own individual power rather than participating in the democratic process.

After a night in a hotel, Tariq finds Laila a taxi, since she wants to go alone. Zalmai starts to cry when she leaves, but then he reaches for Tariq, which both comforts and devastates Laila.

Laila is obviously happy that Zalmai has grown to love Tariq, but she also feels renewed shame at her and Mariam's actions.

The taxi driver says he's lived in Herat his whole life, and has seen everything—even the March 1979 uprising, when a couple of Heratis killed a few Soviet advisers and the Soviets bombed the city in retaliation. Thousands were killed, including the driver's two sisters. Laila marvels at the grief and loss that is present in every Afghan's story, but also at the Afghan people's survival—including her own.

This taxi driver recalls the one on the way to the Bamiyan Valley, who said Afghanistan has endured through so many invasions. In this case, it becomes clear how personal Afghan stories are inextricable with the broader Afghan tragedy.

They drive through the village of Gul Daman, and the driver asks for directions from a boy playing by a windmill, before stopping in front of a walled one-story house. A middle-aged man opens the door. When Laila asks for Mullah Faizullah's house, he says that he is his son Hamza. She's come about Jalil Khan's daughter, Mariam, Laila says. At once, Hamza's face lights up, and he asks if Mariam's also come. He seems to deflate when Laila says she's passed on, but he invites her in anyway.

This time, we see the village of Gul Daman through the eyes of Laila, a girl who grew up in cosmopolitan Kabul, rather than in a village. Hamza clearly knows who Mariam is—the close relationship between Mariam and Mullah Faizullah has somehow brought Laila and Hamza, an unlikely pair, together.

Laila tells Hamza everything. Near the end she struggles to stay composed. After a long silence, Hamza says his father was incredibly fond of Mariam, and was upset when Jalil sent her away. But Mullah Faizullah lived to an old age, he says.

Hamza gives Laila a sense of someone else who loved Mariam fiercely, and who understood the profound suffering that she experienced throughout her life.

Laila asks Hamza to show her where Mariam lived. They walk fifteen minutes downhill, and then up a grassy path until they reach a clearing and a streambed now dried up. Laila hurries up until she reaches the willows and sees that the *kolba* is still there. The interior is tiny, dark, and dim. Laila tries to imagine Mariam living fifteen years in this place. Here, though, unlike in Pakistan, it's easy to summon the details of her face. She pictures the *kolba* at the time of Miriam's childhood, with tea on the stove and chickens clucking outside. She pictures Mariam as a child, knowing that in a few years she will become a woman who will endure without complaining, never burdening others despite her own sorrows. Weeping now, Laila says goodbye to Mariam.

This is the reason Laila wanted to visit Herat: to be able to gain a more whole picture of Mariam, who was initially no more than the burqa-clad wife of Rasheed, and yet who became Laila's closest friend. By visiting the kolba, Laila realizes how much she didn't know about Mariam. But the visit also confirms for Laila just how admirable of a person Mariam was. By imagining and visualizing her here, Laila pays homage to the woman she would become, and attempts to give some kind of thanks for the enormous sacrifice Mariam made for her.

Upon their return, Hamza gives Laila a box, which Jalil had given to his father before he died, asking him to keep it for Mariam. His father never unlocked it, he says, so it is God's will for it to be Laila.

Mullah Faizullah is clearly not the only person from Mariam's past who continued to think of her after she left.

Back at the hotel, Laila opens the box to find an envelope, a burlap sack, and a videocassette. Laila asks the clerk to allow Laila to use the videocassette in the hotel's one TV. She's confused, and doesn't understand—the film is Disney's *Pinocchio*.

Though Laila does not understand the significance of the film, we are meant to recall the cartoon that Mariam begged Jalil to take her to see—and his refusal.

The envelope holds a letter dated May 13, 1987. In it, Jalil tells how disappointed he was that Mariam did not come out to speak with him in Kabul a month earlier, but he can't blame her. He tells of all his family sorrows, and hopes she has been spared the same. He says he misses Mariam, and feels constant shame and regret for how he treated her. He regrets he didn't let her in the day she visited him in Herat, and that he didn't make her a real daughter. Honor, now, means little to him, after all the terrible things he's seen in war. Now he can only ask for her forgiveness. He is no longer wealthy, but has enclosed Mariam's share of his inheritance. He knows death is coming, and he hopes that she will be more charitable to him than he ever was to her. He hopes she will come and see him one last time, and give him the chance to welcome her like he never did before.

For much of her life, Mariam was convinced that she was loved by no one, belonged nowhere, and deserved nothing—she simply had to endure the shame of being a harami. This letter—as well as the way Hamza speaks of Mariam—shows that nothing could be further from the truth, and that Jalil, like Mullah Faizullah and Laila, was full of admiration for Mariam's strength of spirit. Jalil's letter shows the power of love and forgiveness, though it is also bittersweet: while Laila is able to see Jalil's regret, and we also know Mariam felt regret for not forgiving him, neither Jalil or Mariam would ever know how the other felt.

That night, after they've eaten dinner and returned to the hotel, Laila tells Tariq about the letter and shows him the money in the sack. He holds her as she cries.

Mariam has given Laila one final gift, but her visit also has given her one more opportunity to grieve.

PART IV: CHAPTER 51

Finally, in April 2003, the drought has ended. Laila and Tariq have rented a house in Deh-Mazang, and Tariq has built a slide and swing set in the yard. Aziza turned ten last week, and they took her to Cinema Park to see *Titanic*, which is now playing in the open.

While the inhabitants of Kabul had been able to subvert the strict rules of the Taliban, it is now gratifying for Kabulis to be able to enjoy simple joys without fearing punishment.

Aziza and Laila wake up at five every morning for prayers—Aziza's way of staying close to Mariam. Tariq now works with a French NGO that fits land mine survivors with prosthetic limbs. Laila heads out with Aziza and Zalmai. The streets are busy with rickshaws and UN trucks. Flowers are potted in the empty shells of old rockets—"rocket flowers," they're called—and music can again be heard at the street corners. Laila wishes that, like Jalil's letter, Kabul's rebirth hadn't arrived too late for Mammy and Babi.

The Kabul of 2003 bears little resemblance to the bombed-out shell that Mariam and Laila once attempted to escape. However, there remain reminders of the past—Kabulis do not want to forget the devastation of the rockets, just as Aziza does not want to forget Mariam, and their small acts serve to pay homage to those who suffered before Kabul's revitalization.

As they cross the street, a black Land Cruiser blows by, splashing them. The warlords have been allowed back to Kabul—Laila's parents' murderers live in fancy homes and have important ministry jobs. But she thinks of Mariam, and commits to not be resentful. She has to move on, and continue to hope.

Though the previous section painted an idyllic image of Kabul, Laila knows that remnants of past ethnic tensions and the unfairness of power in Afghanistan remain.

They arrive at the orphanage, greeting Zaman. There is new playground equipment and much of the interior has been renovated. A newspaper in Kabul published a piece recently about the renovation. As she looks at the picture of Zaman, Tariq, Laila, and another attendant behind the children, Laila thinks about Giti and Hasina, and Hasina's prediction that they'd be seeing Laila's photo in a newspaper some day.

The last time Laila was at the orphanage, Aziza was attempting to stay strong even while suffering hunger and poverty. Now, it is suggested that Laila has put Mariam's inheritance to a use she would have wanted. Laila thus pays tribute to both her memory and that of Giti and Hasina.

The walls are covered with posters and artwork by the orphans—some of it depictions of men with AK-47s or refugee camp tents. The children run to greet Laila, sometimes calling her Mother. In the classroom, she tells the children to open their Farsi books, while she moves to the window, lost in thought.

Again, while Kabul may be changing, the memories of war and trauma remain. All Laila can do is attempt to move forward, preparing the next generation of Afghans to rebuild their country through her role as teacher.

When they first returned to Kabul, Laila hated that she didn't know where Mariam was buried. Now, though, she knows Mariam is present in the orphanage, in the children's laughter and in the verses Aziza can recite.

This is another hint that Laila has used the inheritance money for the orphanage, but her thoughts also reflect how none of this would have been possible without Mariam's sacrifice.

Laila realizes Aziza has been calling to her while she's been thinking. As she's walking to her desk in the front of the classroom, she feels a slight movement in her belly. The night before, they'd played the naming game over dinner. Laila had only let the children debate names for a boy—if it's a girl, Laila already knows what her name will be.

Laila's pregnancy with Aziza allowed her to keep what she thought was only a memory of Tariq alive. Now, she hopes to honor Mariam's memory, and death, through the promise of life, by naming her third child after Mariam.

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