

The Breadwinner



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DEBORAH ELLIS

Born in Cochrane, Ontario, Deborah Ellis decided at age 11 that she wanted to write. She moved to Toronto at age 17 to work as an activist advocating for nonviolence. Ellis's first novel, *Looking for X*, won the Governor General's Literary Award for children's literature in 2000. However, Ellis is best known for the Breadwinner series. In 1997, she traveled to Pakistan to interview Afghan women in refugee camps. Though she had a different book in mind when she went, an interview with a woman whose daughter dressed as a boy so she could feed the family caught her attention and resulted in *The Breadwinner*. Since then, Ellis has traveled to Africa, South America, and throughout the Middle East to interview women and children for her novels and nonfiction works. All the royalties she receives from her books go to organizations like Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan and UNICEF.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Afghanistan, as Parvana notes, has a long history of strife and conquest, but *The Breadwinner* focuses mainly on the events of the late 20th century. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979; the resulting conflict was one of the final Cold War proxy wars. The United States, along with Pakistan, China, the UK, and other countries, supported insurgent groups known collectively as the *mujahideen*. Following the Soviet retreat in 1989, Afghanistan fell into civil war—and in 1996, the Taliban (an Islamist fundamentalist organization) took control of the country. They were internationally reprimanded for their harsh laws, refusal of international aid for displaced civilians, and their treatment of women in particular. The Taliban were removed from power by the U.S. late in 2001, after the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City. As Ellis writes in the forward to *The Breadwinner*, these conflicts killed or negatively affected more civilians than soldiers. The Soviet-Afghan war had a death toll of anywhere between half a million and two million civilians, depending on the model. During their time in power, the Taliban conducted massacres, razed entire towns and agricultural areas, and committed a number of war crimes.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Breadwinner is the first in a series. Parvana's story continues in *Parvana's Journey*, while Ellis follows Shauzia in *Mud City*. In 2011, Ellis picked Parvana's story up again when Parvana is 15 and captured by the U.S. military in *My Name is*

Parvana. Many of Ellis's children's books, like *The Breadwinner*, begin with a visit to a country experiencing a humanitarian crisis and then focus on the resilience of the children caught up in that crisis. *The Heaven Shop* is based in Southern Africa and is about the AIDS crisis; *Sacred Leaf* follows children involved in the production of coca, the plant from which cocaine is derived. Similar books for young readers include N.H. Senzai's *Shooting Kabul*, which follows an Afghan family as they escape Afghanistan and the Taliban in 2001; and Suzanne Staples's *Under the Persimmon Tree*, which follows an Afghan refugee and an American teacher as they set up a school in a refugee camp in Pakistan. Though not a young adult novel, Khaled Hosseini's 2007 novel [A Thousand Splendid Suns](#) focuses on an overlapping time period and some of the same issues facing women in Afghanistan as *The Breadwinner* does.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Breadwinner
- **When Written:** 1997–2000
- **Where Written:** Pakistan and Canada
- **When Published:** 2001
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Novel
- **Setting:** Kabul, Afghanistan in 2000
- **Climax:** Father is released from prison.
- **Antagonist:** The Taliban
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Girl Power. Father's story of Malali (or Malalai) is tweaked a bit in *The Breadwinner*, but it is based on a real person. During the Afghan war with the British, an 18- or 19-year-old young woman named Malalai waved the Afghan flag, recited poetry, and inspired the Afghan troops to victory. Often referred to as the Afghan Joan of Arc, she's the namesake of women's rights activist Malala Yousafzai and of the activist and politician Malalai Joya.

One of the Boys. The practice of Afghan girls dressing as boys—known as *bacha posh*—is relatively common. The goal isn't usually deception, as it is for Parvana, but families do often turn a daughter into a *bacha posh* so that she can help support the family or alleviate societal pressure for the parents to have a son. Most *bacha posh* revert to presenting as women when they reach marriageable age, a transition that many former *bacha posh* find difficult.



PLOT SUMMARY

Eleven-year-old Parvana sits with Father in the market. He's reading a letter for a customer. Until a year ago, when the Taliban took control of Kabul, Parvana was a happy student. She wasn't particularly concerned when the Taliban closed schools and insisted girls couldn't learn. She figured the Taliban would let them go back soon, but her older sister, Nooria, was distraught. A year later, nothing has changed. Parvana isn't even supposed to be out of the house, but since Father is missing part of his lower leg and sold his prosthesis, he needs her help to walk. Though Parvana's family used to be well off, the constant bombing of Kabul over the last 20 years has made her family increasingly poorer. Now, all six of them live in a single room.

Father suggests they end their day, so Parvana gathers the household items they're trying to sell and helps him walk back home. The road is bumpy and many buildings have been destroyed. Nooria remembers when Kabul had traffic lights and cinemas. At home, Mother and Nooria are cleaning out the cupboard. Since they can't work or go to school, they busy themselves cleaning. Parvana resents this, as she's responsible for fetching water—and cleaning uses a lot of water. Though they have neighbors, Parvana hasn't met them. The Taliban encourages neighbors to spy on each other, so it's unsafe for Parvana to befriend any neighbor children. Mother gives Parvana a pile of items to sell, including Parvana's good red shalwar kameez. Parvana is incensed, but when Mother puts Hossain's clothes back in the cupboard, Parvana drops her attitude. Hossain was her older brother; a land mine killed him when he was 14.

After supper, Father tells the story of **Malali**. During the war with the British, Malali inspired the Afghan troops to victory by waving her veil like a flag and reciting poetry. Father insists that Afghanistan's women are the bravest in the world. Just as Mother and Nooria start to clean up, several Taliban soldiers burst in and arrest Father. When the soldiers look through the cupboard and get dangerously close to Father's hidden English books, Parvana hits them. They leave. Once five-year-old Maryam and toddler Ali fall asleep, Mother, Nooria, and Parvana clean up and try to sleep. Parvana suggests they light a lamp in case Father needs to find his way home, but Mother refuses.

The next morning, Mother and Parvana set off for the prison. As they walk, Mother shows people a photo of Father. At the prison, Parvana remembers Malali and helps her mother yell at the soldiers. They beat Mother until Parvana agrees to go. When they get home, Parvana realizes that Mother's feet are bleeding—she hasn't been out since the Taliban arrived. Nooria tends to Mother while Maryam washes Parvana's blistered feet. Mother cries and lies on a toshak for days. The food runs out, and since Parvana and Nooria are too afraid to fetch water,

they stop washing Ali's diapers. On the fourth day, Nooria tells Parvana to buy food in the market.

Women can't enter shops, but Parvana isn't sure if she counts as a woman yet. If she stays outside, though, she might get in trouble for not wearing a burqa. She buys nan and then heads for a produce stand. A Taliban soldier shouts at Parvana, so she runs and rams into a woman carrying a toddler. The woman turns out to be Mrs. Weera, a former gym teacher. Mrs. Weera invites herself to Parvana's house to convince Mother to work on a magazine. As soon as she sees the situation, Mrs. Weera gets Mother cleaned up. The next morning, the adults tell Parvana their plan: they'll cut Parvana's **hair** and dress her as a boy so she can work and shop in the market. Parvana insists that Nooria should do it, but Nooria is already too curvy to pass for male. After Mrs. Weera convinces Parvana to agree, Mother cuts Parvana's hair and Parvana changes into Hossain's shalwar kameez. In the market she discovers that as a boy, she's invisible.

The next day, Parvana goes to the market with Father's writing things and sets up her blanket in his spot. Her first customer is a Taliban soldier. He cries as Parvana reads a letter written to his late wife on the occasion of her wedding. Parvana is shocked that the soldiers have feelings. That afternoon, Parvana helps Mrs. Weera and her granddaughter move in with Parvana's family. Then, Mrs. Weera wraps Maryam's feet in cloth so she can accompany Parvana to the tap. Over the next week, Parvana escorts Nooria, Maryam, and Ali on afternoon walks. Parvana enjoys work. One afternoon she thinks she sees Father in the market, but it's not him. Another day, Parvana notices a scrap of embroidered wool on her blanket and realizes it came from the window above. A few days later, she finds another offering and catches sight of the Window Woman.

One day, when a tea boy spills cups on Parvana's blanket, Parvana is shocked: the tea boy is her former classmate, Shauzia. At the end of the day, Shauzia walks home with Parvana. She shares that she and her mother have been living with her paternal grandparents. Shauzia has been working as a tea boy for six months, but she'd rather sell things off a tray. Over supper later, Mother and Mrs. Weera discuss the magazine, which they're printing in Pakistan with help from their secret women's group. Later, Shauzia comes to Parvana with a plan to make money: digging up bones. Parvana reluctantly follows Shauzia across Kabul. Bones stick up out of the graveyard, and the bone broker sits at one end. The girls begin to dig. Parvana unearths a skull, names him Mr. Skull, and sets him on the gravestone. When the girls have exhumed five skeletons, they take turns watching over the bones while they pee in a bombed-out building. Parvana is terrified she'll find a land mine. Then, the girls take the bones to the broker. They're shocked; it takes Parvana three days to make this much money. The girls dig for the rest of the afternoon and agree that they

don't want to tell their families what they've done.

When Parvana gets home, however, she can't get the image of Mr. Skull out of her mind. She falls into Mother's arms, sobs, and tells everyone everything. Mother insists that they don't need money badly enough to dig up bones, but Parvana insists she's going to dig until she has enough money to buy a tray and items to sell. Nooria backs Parvana up and notes that they don't have money for rent, kerosene, or much food. Mother relents when Mrs. Weera points out that people have to do "unusual things" to survive. After a week, Parvana and Shauzia have enough money for their trays.

Parvana spends her first morning back in the market writing letters. The Window Woman drops a bead for Parvana. As Parvana studies it, she thinks that she and Nooria don't fight anymore. Fighting doesn't make sense now. In the afternoons, Parvana and Shauzia sell cigarettes and gum. One Friday afternoon, the girls see men entering a stadium. Expecting to make a fortune during a soccer game, the girls follow the crowd inside, but they soon become fearful. No one seems happy, and there are Taliban soldiers and prisoners on the field. Shauzia screams when a soldier cuts off a prisoner's hand. The girls huddle on the floor as a kind man sitting above them tells them to stay down and not look. Other men help them gather their scattered gum and cigarettes as the Taliban cut off six more hands, and when it's over, they escort the girls out. For the next two days, Parvana stays home from the market. Mother and Mrs. Weera know what happens at the stadium thanks to women in their women's group. When the family runs out of bread, Parvana goes back to work. Shauzia is thrilled to have Parvana back. She tells Parvana a secret: she's saving money to run away to France. When Parvana asks about Shauzia's family, Shauzia says she knows leaving her family makes her a bad person, but she'll die if she stays.

Spring turns to summer. The market ceases to interest Parvana, though the tribal people who sell fruit share their stories, which Parvana then shares with her family. Mother and Mrs. Weera start a school for girls. Nooria teaches, but it's hard with limited time and resources. The Window Woman continues to drop gifts, but one day, Parvana hears the woman's husband beating her. She plans to tell her family, but Mother announces that Nooria is getting married. Later, Nooria tells Parvana that this is a great opportunity—her new in-laws will send her to university, and the Taliban doesn't control Mazar-e-Sharif, where her future husband lives. Mother decides that they'll all go to Mazar for the wedding, but Parvana refuses. She's afraid that Father will get out of prison and no one will be home. Incensed, Mother decides to leave Parvana.

Mrs. Weera encourages Parvana to keep some pocket money. Near the end of August, Parvana gets caught in a rainstorm, takes shelter in a bombed-out building, and wakes up hearing a woman crying. The woman is terrified and she isn't wearing a burqa. Parvana waits until dark to dash home, hoping that the

Taliban won't find them. They make it. Mrs. Weera cleans the woman up; she's not much younger than Nooria. A day later, the woman introduces herself as Homa. She fled Mazar when the Taliban took the city. The soldiers shot Homa's entire family and wouldn't let the living bury or cover their dead. When Homa left, dogs were eating the bodies. Parvana is terrified that Mother and Nooria are dead, so she lies on the toshak for days. Shauzia stops by and asks Parvana to come back to work.

Life feels like a nightmare until Parvana gets home to find Father entering the apartment. Father slowly improves. Homa is educated, so she and Father practice speaking English together. Parvana begins to feel hopeful again and shares this with Shauzia. Shauzia says that she's feeling hopeful, too: she's working to leave Afghanistan, as she heard that her grandfather is looking for a husband for her. When Mrs. Weera gets the news that many people from Mazar are in refugee camps, Father and Parvana make plans to go look for Mother and Nooria. Mrs. Weera makes plans to go with Homa to Pakistan, where she can meet up with her women's group and start a school. Mrs. Weera refuses to take Shauzia, though, believing that the girl should stay with her family.

A few days before she leaves Kabul, Parvana receives another gift from the Window Woman. To say goodbye to her friend, Parvana digs up some wildflowers to plant in her spot. An old man helps her and scolds other men who insist it's silly to plant flowers. Two days later, Parvana bids Mrs. Weera, Homa, and Shauzia goodbye. Shauzia says she's leaving soon, too, and she suggests that she and Parvana should meet in Paris on the first day of spring, 20 years from now. Parvana wonders what her future will look like and feels ready to meet it.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Parvana – Parvana is the novel's 11-year-old protagonist. She's proud of being Afghan and adores Afghan history. She's particularly fond of the historical figure **Malali**, who led Afghan troops to victory during the war with the British. Thinking of Malali often reminds Parvana to be brave. In many ways, Parvana is still a child, even though she has a lot of responsibility. Since she's a young girl and not yet a woman, she can still go to the market to help Father walk (he lost a leg in a bombing and has since sold his prosthesis). It's also Parvana's sole responsibility to carry water for the family, as she's the only one in the family who can go to the tap alone without attracting unwanted attention from the Taliban. At times, Parvana resents this, but she also cares deeply for her family, so sometimes she's proud. When the Taliban arrest Father, Parvana must draw on all of these qualities to survive in the difficult situation she finds herself in. She accepts Mother and Mrs. Weera's plan to cut her **hair** and make her look like a boy

so she can go out and earn money for the family and buy them food. She accepts grudgingly at first, but she soon discovers that life as a boy gives her a sense of invisibility that she craved as a girl. It also gives her more agency, as she spends her days alone in the market and has to make choices for herself. Best of all, while working in the market, Parvana stumbles upon an old school friend, Shauzia, who is able to provide Parvana support and camaraderie, as she's also masquerading as a boy to feed her family. As Parvana grows up over the course of the novel, her childish bickering with her older sister, Nooria, gradually stops, and Parvana becomes more confident and secure in her own choices. However, she never stops being a child and regularly stumbles into situations that betray her youth and her emotional immaturity, as when she and Shauzia find themselves in a stadium where the Taliban cut off prisoners' hands. However, by the end of the novel, Parvana stands firm in her belief that it's her duty to care for her family to the best of her ability, no matter what that entails.

Nooria – Nooria is Parvana's 17-year-old sister. Nooria and Parvana's relationship is strained because of their age difference and because Nooria seems, to Parvana, to be a fully-fledged adult—and a beautiful one at that. The girls often insult each other's intelligence or appearance. Seemingly unbeknownst to Parvana, however, Nooria is under a great deal of pressure to care for the family, long before Parvana masquerades as a boy and takes on a bigger role within the family herself. Even though she's a teenager, Nooria functions as an adult, caring for little Maryam and Ali and helping to maintain the house. This is understandably frustrating for Nooria, as she was a high school student before the Taliban took Kabul, and she wanted to become a teacher. Under the Taliban, her dream no longer seems possible, so Nooria is bitter and even snappier than she used to be. However, as Parvana makes the shift to dressing like a boy and earning money, Nooria surprisingly comes to Parvana's rescue and backs her up on several occasions. She recognizes, as Parvana does, that the family needs to find a way to make more money, so she wholeheartedly supports Parvana's plan to dig up bones and come up with the cash to start selling small items off of a tray in the market. Nooria teaches in Mother and Mrs. Weera's secret school, but her big opportunity to resist the Taliban comes with a marriage proposal from an old neighbor. By marrying this man, Nooria will marry into a family that will pay for her education and allow her to work after she finishes university, all in a city that the Taliban doesn't occupy. She understands that this is her only way out. However when she, Mother, and the little ones head for Mazar for the wedding, the Taliban take the city. Nooria's fate is unknown at the end of the novel, but Parvana and Father set out to try to find them.

Father – During the bombing in Kabul, Parvana's father lost one of his legs and suffered internal damage that Parvana doesn't entirely understand, so he is often tired. Because he

sold his prosthesis, he relies on a walking stick to travel short distances and Parvana to help him travel longer distances. Though the novel never explains what Father did before Kabul fell to the Taliban, he now earns money writing and reading letters for the many illiterate people in the market. He's highly educated and earned his degrees abroad, so the Taliban target and ultimately arrest him. His focus was on Afghan history, so he often tells the family stories from history in the evenings. One of his favorites is the story of **Malali**, a young Afghan girl who led Afghan troops to victory against the British. He tells his daughters her story to inspire them to be brave and to figure out ways to resist oppression. In this way, Father is very progressive. He doesn't believe in taking away women's agency, so he encourages Mother to work despite the Taliban's ban on women working. He also thinks that it's their responsibility as educated Afghans to remain in the country and rebuild it into something better, so he and Mother often fight about whether to leave Afghanistan or stay. The entire family is distraught after his arrest, but Parvana often thinks of Father and of Malali as she navigates the market undercover as a boy and takes over Father's reading and writing business. He's finally released from prison at the end of the novel and soon regains his sense of humor. Since he's extremely loyal to his family, he and Parvana set out to find Mother, Nooria, and the little ones in refugee camps outside Mazar, even though Father fully admits that he'll never be well enough to travel.

Mrs. Weera – Mrs. Weera, an older woman, is a friend of Parvana's family. A former gym teacher, Mrs. Weera is tall and athletic, and she insists that she's not afraid of the Taliban because she could outrun the soldiers—and outfight them if necessary. In her youth she was a runner and earned medals for her speed, though she lost most of them in Kabul's many bombings over the last decade. When Parvana runs into her in the market, Mrs. Weera and her toddler granddaughter are the last Weeras left. Mrs. Weera doesn't let the Taliban's oppressive rule make her sad or despondent, so she throws herself into getting Mother back up and feeling strong again. She's a welcome presence in Parvana's home, as she's another adult who can relieve Nooria of some of her duties and inspires Mother to work on a magazine with her. Mrs. Weera is part of a secret women's group and takes pride in being able to resist the Taliban in these underground, quiet ways. She's also very respectful of Parvana and her budding maturity, making it clear that she wants Parvana to forge her own path, but that she'll always be around if Parvana needs or wants support. Despite this seeming support for young girls' independence, Mrs. Weera does take offense when she learns that Shauzia wants to run away from her family. As far as Mrs. Weera is concerned, people have a responsibility to care for their families, even when it's hard or means making sacrifices. At the end of the novel, Mrs. Weera is prepared to take Homa with her to a refugee camp in Pakistan, where she plans to start a school and work on more resistance efforts with her women's group.

Shauzia – Shauzia is an old school acquaintance of Parvana’s. She quickly becomes a close friend when Parvana discovers that Shauzia is working as a tea boy in the market, disguised as a boy named Shafiq. The girls soon grow extremely close, as they both understand the toll that working as a boy takes on them—and they both see disturbing things in the course of their work. Shauzia is always the one to come up with new ideas, such as selling small items off of trays and digging up bones to sell. However, she’s just as disturbed by the moral implications of digging up graves as Parvana is. Shauzia is fiercely independent and since her father is dead, she doesn’t feel all that loyal to her family. She lives with her mother and her paternal grandparents, and her grandparents don’t believe women should be educated. Thus, if she remains with her family, Shauzia’s future will entail getting married in a year or two—and Shauzia wants to remain a boy for longer. She thrives on living independently and comes to believe that it’s her right to seek a better life for herself, which is why she hatches her plan to save money and run away to Paris before her family can marry her off. Her plan, however, is very simplistic and reveals her youth and her innocence. Regardless, she makes plans to leave with nomads not long after Parvana and Father leave for the refugee camp outside of Mazar.

Mother – Parvana’s mother used to write for a local Kabul radio station, but since the Taliban took over, she hasn’t been able to work. Even though Father encourages her to work secretly and to get out and observe what’s going on in the city, Mother refuses on the grounds that she doesn’t want to have to go out with an escort. She also believes that the family should leave Afghanistan, though she never does. Despite these constant arguments, Mother and Father have a close, loving relationship, and Mother is distraught when the Taliban arrests her husband. She spends four days sleeping and only gets up when an old friend, Mrs. Weera, arrives to help share the work load around the house. A proud and righteous woman, Mother doesn’t want Parvana to dig up bones in the graveyard. It’s especially difficult for her when both Parvana and Nooria refuse to listen to her or take her advice when it comes to making more much-needed money, but the novel implies that Mother is being prideful to the point of possibly hurting her family. With Mrs. Weera around, however, Mother begrudgingly agrees to begin writing again, and the two women work together to produce a magazine telling Afghan women’s stories. This gives Mother a sense of purpose and gives her a means to resist the Taliban in her own way. Near the end of the novel, Mother leaves with Nooria and the little ones to attend Nooria’s wedding in Mazar, but the Taliban take the city while they’re traveling. It’s unknown where they are or whether they’re even alive, but Parvana and Father leave to search for them at the end of the novel.

Homa / The Woman – Homa is a teenager a little younger than Nooria whom Parvana finds in a bombed-out building in the

Kabul marketplace. When Parvana meets Homa, the girl is too afraid, exhausted, and hungry to speak, so Parvana refers to her just as “the woman.” Once Homa is well enough to share her name, she also shares her story: she snuck onto a truck bed after the Taliban took her home city of Mazar-e-Sharif. The Taliban shot and killed her parents and brother, and they wouldn’t allow anyone to cover or bury the bodies. Homa remains in Kabul with Parvana, Mrs. Weera, and eventually, Father. She’s kind and helpful, and she’s educated, so she and Father practice their English together. Homa plans to accompany Mrs. Weera to a refugee camp in Pakistan to start a school and work more closely with Mrs. Weera’s secret women’s group.

The Window Woman – The window woman is a mysterious woman who lives in an apartment right above where Parvana sits in the market. Parvana only sees the woman once and never learns her name, but they form a friendship of sorts as the Window Woman drops occasional gifts onto Parvana’s blanket below, such as pieces of embroidery or painted beads. Parvana can tell that the Window Woman’s life isn’t safe or pleasant; she once hears what sounds like the woman’s husband beating her. When Parvana and Father leave Kabul, Parvana plants flowers where she usually puts her blanket so the Window Woman knows she’s not coming back.

Hossain – Hossain is Parvana’s deceased older brother who died at age 14 when he stepped on a land mine. Parvana was still a toddler at the time, so she has no memory of him. He and Nooria were close, though, and Nooria shares that Hossain adored baby Parvana. In the novel’s present, Mother and Father are still grieving his death and so still hold onto his belongings, almost a decade after his death. Mother has a hard time when Parvana has to wear Hossain’s old shalwar kameez to pass as a boy.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Maryam – Maryam is Parvana’s five-year-old little sister. She’s a sweet and happy child, and she and Parvana have a good relationship.

Ali – Ali is Parvana’s toddler brother. The Taliban took over when he was only a few months old, so he’s never been outside.

Mrs. Weera’s Granddaughter – Mrs. Weera’s granddaughter is toddler about Ali’s age. She is the last surviving member of Mrs. Weera’s family.

TERMS

Burqa – A burqa is a long black garment that covers a woman’s body entirely from head to toe. For women in the novel, going out without wearing a burqa is illegal. Burqas also make it hard to see and navigate the streets without tripping.

Chador – A chador is a scarf or cloth that women and girls wear to cover their hair.

Nan – Flatbread.

Shalwar Kameez – Shalwar kameez are garments worn by both men and women, consisting of long trousers and a long top. Men’s shalwar kameez are all one color and have pockets; women’s versions are often patterned and embellished with embroidery or beading.

Sharia – In Islam, sharia is a body of teachings and Quran-based guidance that helps Muslims live in accordance with God’s will. While Sharia is commonly mistaken for a kind of law in itself, *fiqh* is the body of law that are based on those religious tenets of Islam. Such law is based upon guidance found in the Quran (Islam’s holy book) and the Sunnah (a collection of sayings from the Prophet Muhammad) that scholars then interpret into laws about individuals’ appearance. In the novel, under the Taliban’s strict interpretation, this includes the mandate that men must grow beards and women must wear burqas, as well as laws forbidding women to work, receive education, or leave the house without a male family member as an escort—but it’s crucial to note these laws are fallible human *interpretations* of what is otherwise considered the divine, philosophical teachings of scripture.

Taliban / Talib – The Taliban is a Sunni Islamic fundamentalist military group and political movement that controls Afghanistan. The group is referred to as the Taliban; an individual member is a Talib. Their name means “religious scholar,” and part of their rule entails enforcing their version of Sharia law on Afghanistan. This means, in part, that Afghan women are required to stay inside and only venture out with a male escort, while wearing burqas. They deny women educational opportunities and violently maintain their power. They arrest and release **Father** for no reason, and **Parvana** has seen them beat people in the streets for minor infractions.

Toshak – A toshak is a narrow mattress that take the place of seating or beds.

gripped by conflict that hasn’t changed life for the better: the Soviets invaded in 1979, left a decade later, and the country then fell into civil war. In the novel’s present, the Taliban controls the country—and Kabul, a once-thriving metropolis, is now mostly rubble and poverty. Though Parvana’s family very clearly sees these conflicts as wholly negative, their pride in their country, their city, and in their identity as Afghans shines through the novel. Thus, *The Breadwinner* proposes that even as war and conflict dramatically change what Afghanistan looks like and how its people live, people must maintain their sense of pride in themselves and in their country if they wish to survive and stay true to their identity as Afghans.

As Parvana and Father explain, Afghanistan’s long history is marked by conflict and invasion—but every time, the Afghans expelled their invaders and emerged stronger and prouder than ever before. This is a point of pride for Parvana and her family in particular, but it’s also a pride that she suggests is shared by all Afghans. Parvana’s family, which was upper-middle class before bombings decimated the city of Kabul, is also proud of their educational achievements. Both Mother and Father are highly educated and spent time abroad to earn their degrees. For a long time, the family saw itself as a proud and essential part of the modern, intellectual world. In the present, however, Parvana must grapple with the knowledge that the current invaders aren’t invaders in the same sense as historical invaders like Alexander the Great—the Taliban are Afghans, just ones with “very definite ideas about how things should be run.” Their assumption of power, which began about a year before Parvana’s story picks up, resulted in girls being kicked out of school, women being forced to wear burqas (long garments that cover the wearer from head to toe) and give up agency and jobs, and many families descending into poverty. For Parvana, the issue is as much that the invaders are her own countrymen as it is that everything she once took pride in about her country no longer exists.

Despite this, though, Parvana and her family learn that through telling stories that help them remember their history and by undertaking small acts of resistance, they can continue the legacy of their predecessors and maintain their pride in their country and cultural identity. For Mother; Parvana’s older sister Nooria; and Mrs. Weera, an old friend with whom they reconnect, this means outwardly obeying the Taliban—while secretly starting a school for girls and putting together a magazine chronicling the experiences of Afghan women under the Taliban. With this, they can recreate the sense that Afghanistan values its women for their intelligence, their drive, and their stories, with the added bonus that the magazine will enlighten others worldwide as to what’s really going on in the country. For Parvana, resistance takes a different form. Following Father’s arrest, which leaves them with no man able to support the family, Parvana assumes the identity of a made-up cousin, Kaseem, and takes over her father’s spot in the



THEMES

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AFGHANISTAN, HISTORY, AND PRIDE

The Breadwinner takes place in Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan, around the year 2000. It follows 11-year-old Parvana and her family as they attempt to survive in a city that has, for the last 20 years, been

market to write and read letters for people who are illiterate. As Kaseem, Parvana is understandably terrified of being found out—but she also realizes that assuming this identity is the only way she can keep her family alive and enable her other family members to engage in their own acts of resistance. Survival, and all the actions and deceptions that survival entails, becomes its own act of resistance. Though Parvana seems to understand on some level that Afghanistan is never going to be the same country that Nooria or their parents remember from their childhoods, she nevertheless has the power to resist the Taliban—and in doing so, she can discover a sense of purpose and pride in her nationality.



GENDER RELATIONS

The Breadwinner takes place when the Taliban controls Afghanistan, meaning that the country operates under Sharia law (religious laws that govern all aspects of one's life). Especially as Parvana and her mostly female family members see and experience it, this is disastrous: the Taliban, to supposedly protect women, mandates that they cannot leave the house except with a male family member as an escort and cannot attend school or work. This poses a number of issues for Parvana's family—her father, like many Afghans both male and female, lost part of his lower leg in the bombings of Kabul, and so he struggles to provide for his family. The situation becomes even more dire when the Taliban arrests him, leaving the family without a male breadwinner. Though the novel is firm in its stance that the Taliban enforcement of Sharia law harms women and does little to protect them, it also suggests that in circumstances like these, it's essential for women to find new ways to leverage or subvert the restrictive gender roles imposed upon them.

The Taliban's takeover of the Afghan government about a year before Parvana's story begins brought many changes for Afghan women, none of them good. Before the takeover, both Parvana and her older sister, Nooria, happily attended school while both their parents worked. The Taliban, however, closed schools for girls, and now Nooria and Mother busy themselves at home cleaning while Parvana supports Father in his work reading and writing letters for people in the market—something that, technically speaking, isn't allowed. The Taliban also mandates that when women leave the house, they must wear burqas that cover them from head to toe and be accompanied by a male relative, thereby depriving women of any power or agency. Parvana notes that while these changes don't affect how Mother and Father interact with each other (given their progressive politics), for many couples, women's lives turn upside-down as their fathers or husbands lean into the new restrictions placed on women. If a man's wife or daughter has lost a leg like Father, some even go so far as to sell those prosthetic legs. These changes paint a picture of female life in Afghanistan that's heavily policed, dangerous, and at the

mercy of the Taliban or one's male family members.

However, when the Taliban arrest Father, Parvana discovers that she doesn't have to play by the Taliban's rules and take them at face value. Rather, she only needs to give the *appearance* that she's following the rules—and for her, this means cutting her **hair** and dressing as a boy so she can make money. Because Parvana is so young and still has the androgynous body of a child, she discovers that she can manipulate her appearance and now others perceive her, all through her clothing choices. If she wears her chador (head scarf) around her hair, people on street perceive her as female; if she dresses in boys' clothes, people perceive her as a young boy. With this discovery comes immense freedom—the freedom to feed and support her family, the freedom to move through crowds without fear of persecution, and the freedom to rediscover the city she loves.

For adult women in Parvana's life, however, finding freedom must take a different form, as they cannot pass for male just by cutting their hair and changing their clothes. At times, women in Parvana's life discover that the burqa can be both a blessing and a curse: it may make it hard to walk and obscure their identity, but if one is *trying* to hide, a burqa allows women to hide in plain sight. Nooria leverages her femininity in a different way by agreeing to marry a cousin. The cousin lives in a northern city that the Taliban doesn't yet occupy, so the marriage won't trap Nooria as it traps other young women. Rather, in the letter proposing the marriage, the relative writing promises that Nooria can finish school and earn her degree if she agrees to the marriage. While the Taliban does eventually intervene and take the northern city, Nooria's plan nevertheless speaks to the ways in which women are forced to assert their agency in subtle, creative ways. And with this, *The Breadwinner* ultimately makes the case that in the face of oppression and strict rules, women certainly have less power—but it's still possible to work within the system or subvert it to better their lives and gain a sense of agency and control.



FAMILY AND FRIENDSHIP

At its heart, *The Breadwinner* is a testament to the power of family and friendship. Parvana's family is close-knit, and her family members do everything they can to support one another, even with the presence of normal bickering between siblings. Friendship is an important source of support too—when Parvana is traversing Kabul disguised as the boy Kaseem, it's her rediscovered friendship with an old school friend, Shauzia, that keeps her going and helps her feel safe in the world. With this, the novel positions caring for and serving one's family and friends as the most motivating and fulfilling thing a person can do—and in the case of Parvana's family in particular, it's the only way to guarantee the family's survival.

As Parvana explains early in the novel, in her world, family members are the only people that a person can trust. This hasn't always been true, however—it's the new way of life since the Taliban came to power, as they encourage neighbors to spy on each other. For safety, people can only trust their families. While relying on family isn't necessarily a bad thing, it soon becomes clear that supportive relationships with family aren't enough to keep a family fed in Afghanistan—especially when the only family members a person has are female. Only men and boys are allowed to leave the home, move freely, and earn money—so without a man or a boy in the family capable of working, families have no way to financially support themselves. Parvana finds herself in this situation after the Taliban arrests Father, thereby putting Parvana, Mother, 17-year-old Nooria, five-year-old Maryam, and toddler Ali (the only boy) in danger of starvation, deeper poverty, or even arrest for not having a man to look after the women, as is mandated by the Taliban's rules.

Despite the Taliban's work to sow suspicion and distrust among friends and neighbors, friendship nevertheless emerges as a more than passable alternative to family. A stroke of luck allows Parvana and her family to turn to an old friend, former gym teacher Mrs. Weera. With her guidance and her unwillingness to simply sit and wallow in their poor fortune, they hatch the plan to dress Parvana as a boy so she can earn money in the market. At the same time, Mrs. Weera provides Mother and Nooria with much-needed emotional support. Whereas Father couldn't convince Mother to continue writing or resisting the Taliban through her work, Mrs. Weera manages to do so—speaking again to the power of friends to perform the kind of emotional labor that family members sometimes cannot.

Meanwhile, Parvana's friendship with Shauzia becomes something even more meaningful: it means safety and solidarity, and Shauzia gives Parvana the courage to take steps she'd never have been brave enough to take alone. Like Parvana, Shauzia is young enough that she can successfully pose as a boy in order to work in the market. Because of this, the girls become especially close—they both understand the danger they're in and bond over it as they protect and encourage each other. Shauzia is the one to push Parvana to dig up and sell bones to earn the capital they need to purchase cigarettes, fruit, and gum to then sell; selling small items off of trays is far more lucrative than Shauzia's job at the tea stand or Parvana's job writing letters. It's possible, then, to credit Parvana's family's friends—both Mrs. Weera and Shauzia—for the family's continued survival.

Even though Parvana's experiences speak to the power of supporting one's family, the novel also makes it clear that staying loyal to one's friends can sometimes be even more important. Shauzia lives in fear that her paternal grandparents, whom she and her mother live with and who dislike her mother, will soon marry her off. This will allow her grandparents to live

more comfortably on her bride price than they currently do on her earnings from cigarette sales. For Shauzia, then, family isn't a supportive unit worth remaining loyal to—it's something to escape. By contrast, when Father is released from prison, he and Parvana turn their attention to figuring out what happened to Mother and Nooria, who traveled north so that Nooria could marry—but the Taliban took their destination city. For them, their strong family bonds make it worth it to strike out without their friends in service of their family. Shauzia, however, she prepares to take a different journey away from her family—one that Shauzia hopes ends in France and will allow her to do more with her life than simply be a bargaining chip. With this, the novel makes the case that while both family and friends are important and can help an individual survive, it's important to identify who in one's life is truly supportive and target one's attention there.



AGENCY, MATURITY, AND CHILDHOOD

The novel's protagonist, Parvana, is on the brink of puberty at 11 years old. In this state between child and adult, she has both more freedom and more responsibility than the female adults or near-adults in her life—the Taliban isn't as interested in policing the activities of prepubescent girls as they are adult women, so she can usually get away with being out in the city. However, this also means that many tasks that are forbidden to adult women fall to Parvana. By exploring how Parvana deals with simultaneously being asked to emotionally mature long before she's ready and hold onto her childish appearance as long as possible, the novel makes the case that growing up becomes far more complicated in situations like Parvana experiences. While the physical indicators that Parvana is still a child protect her and enable her to support her family, her emotional maturity is what allows her to thrive.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator focuses primarily on Parvana's actions that reflect her childishness. As she helps Father in the market, she grouses and squirms about having to sit still and about how uncomfortable she is, and she stamps her feet childishly when Mother and Nooria ask her to get water and help them clean. When the Taliban arrest Father, Parvana feels powerless and childish. However, up until Father's arrest, Parvana has been able to be a child for the most part. She's mature enough to have certain responsibilities, like fetching water and helping Father in the market, but she's young enough that her parents and Nooria still enable her to have as carefree of a childhood as possible. Thus, it's a shock for Parvana when, after Father's arrest, Mrs. Weera and Mother hatch a plan to save them: Parvana will cut her **hair**, dress as a boy, and make money in the market to feed the family. For Parvana, this is an affront to the agency and the safety she thought she had as a child. As far as she's concerned, she shouldn't have to do these things because she's so young—but she soon realizes that Mrs.

Weera and Mother are right. Parvana, because of where she is in her development, is the only one of them who has a body that's still androgynous enough to pass for male yet is mature enough to function independently in the market.

Though Parvana initially chafes at her increased responsibility and her new adult role, she eventually comes to realize that the responsibility gives her a great deal of freedom and agency. At first, she does exactly as she's told: she returns to Father's regular spot in the market to read and write letters for people who aren't literate. However, when she discovers that an old school acquaintance, Shauzia, is also posing as a boy to work in the market, she begins to take advantage of her new, adult freedom. With Shauzia's encouragement, Parvana feels safe and comfortable making the choice to disobey her mother when she and Shauzia learn that they can make a great deal of money by digging up bones in a graveyard. This is no easy choice for the girls: they know their parents won't approve, they feel uncomfortable disturbing the dead, and they're afraid of being found out by the other boys who are also out digging. But they also realize that this is the only way they'll ever make enough money to provide more than bread and tea for their families. By making choices like this and experimenting with their new responsibilities, the girls find more freedom and agency than they ever thought possible.

However, the novel continuously reminds the reader that Parvana and Shauzia's independence and maturity will be short-lived, and they're only barely in charge of their own lives—in many ways, they're still children. Shauzia in particular lives in fear that the family members she lives with will marry her off as soon as she's old enough, which will mean that they can live off her bride price rather than her meager earnings from selling cigarettes. Though Parvana's family is far more progressive and believes that women should have agency, not just be married off, Parvana also knows that her ability to pass for a boy will soon disappear as she enters puberty—and with it, she'll be even more powerless than she was before she started dressing as a boy. Additionally, Parvana and Shauzia often find themselves in situations that are far beyond their comprehension as immature 11-year-olds. They're shocked and disturbed when they enter a soccer stadium, expecting to sell cigarettes at a game, and instead find themselves watching the Taliban publically torture prisoners. Shauzia later insists that her plan to run away to France will be easy; she'll simply join nomads until she gets to the sea and then take a boat, a childish simple plan that showcases a huge lack in understanding of how the world works. Their innocence and naïveté isn't something they can shake off just because they're forced to act like adults in some ways; the world is still beyond their comprehension in a variety of ways.

As the first book in a series, *The Breadwinner* doesn't entirely solve these problems—but it does suggest that if the girls continue to believe that they have power and agency, they can

exert some control over their lives. For Shauzia, this takes the form of running away so her family cannot marry her off, an undoubtedly difficult decision. Because Parvana doesn't face the same kind of opposition at home, she may have more options when it comes to what actual maturity looks like for her. However, she ends the novel understanding that if she continues to advocate for herself and make her own decisions, she'll be able to mature on her own terms.



SYMBOLS

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



HAIR

Hair, Parvana's in particular, represents both Parvana's changing identity and her dreams for the future. At the beginning of the novel, Parvana mentions that she has to cover her hair with her chador at all times, per the Taliban's orders; her inability to show her hair mirrors her powerlessness under the Taliban. She also describes her sister Nooria's hair as gorgeous and silky, and the narrator notes that Parvana would like to have hair like Nooria's—in this instance, Nooria's hair represents a beautiful version of femininity that Parvana aspires to. However, when Mother and Mrs. Weera ask Parvana to cut her hair so she can pose as a boy, Parvana discovers that whereas her long hair trapped her, having her hair cut short frees her. With her hair short, Parvana can see a future that offers her agency and choice, something she didn't get with long hair that she was required to cover.



MALALI

The historical figure Malali symbolizes Parvana's vision of how she'd like to be seen as an Afghan woman: strong, courageous, and capable of creating change in her country. Malali was a 19th-century young woman who inspired Afghan troops and led them to victory during the war with the British, and Father tells Malali's story often to inspire his daughters to be brave and take on challenges. For Parvana, thinking of Malali connects her to her father, the supportive person in her life who encourages her to bravely face everything that comes her way. Malali's story also reminds Parvana that it's possible to resist oppression and hopelessness and in the future, make Afghanistan a place that once again celebrates women like Malali—and possibly, women like Parvana as well.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the

Oxford University Press edition of *The Breadwinner* published in 2014.

Chapter 1 Quotes

History was her favorite subject, especially Afghan history. Everybody had come to Afghanistan. The Persians came four thousand years ago. Alexander the Great came too, followed by the Greeks, Arabs, Turks, British, and finally the Soviets. One of the conquerors, Tamerlane from Samarkand, cut off the heads of his enemies and stacked them in huge piles, like melons at a fruit stand. All these people had come to Parvana's beautiful country to try to take it over, and the Afghans had kicked them all out again!

Related Characters: Father, Parvana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

While Parvana thinks about missing school, she gives the reader a brief overview of Afghanistan's history. Her description suggests that Afghanistan's history centers around conquest—and that, historically, the Afghans always come out on top. For Parvana, this is a point of pride. She's proud to live in a country that has fought for its independence and autonomy for millennia, especially against such vast and intimidating powers as Alexander the Great and the British. However, this all changes in Parvana's present, as the current invaders, the Taliban, are Afghans. This makes it much harder for Parvana to fit what's going on in her life into this idea she has of Afghan history and identity. Essentially, she's faced with the question of how to think about conquest and victory when the aggressors are her own countrymen, not foreigners from across the continent or the globe. This means that she has to begin to come up with a more nuanced view of Afghanistan and her identity as a young Afghan woman as she comes of age and grapples with these questions.

There were a lot of false legs for sale in the market now. Since the Taliban decreed that women must stay inside, many husbands took their wives' false legs away. "You're not going anywhere, so why do you need a leg?" they asked.

Related Characters: Father, Parvana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator explains that Father, who's missing part of his lower leg, sold his prosthesis—but he, unlike many women, had a say in the matter. This observation helps detail for the reader the kind of economic situation Kabul's population is in, as well as the issues that women face under the Taliban. To be without a prosthesis means that a person is extremely vulnerable. It's harder to make money without being mobile, and it makes it necessary for Father to rely more on others to help him—something he suggests at times isn't wise, given that the Taliban encourages people to spy on each other. Father, as a man, is less vulnerable than a woman is, however. Though his mobility is fairly limited (he needs a walking stick, and Parvana often has to help him get around), he has rights and privileges as a man that the women the narrator references do not. The women who have lost prosthetics are at the mercy of their husbands, in addition to having lost the one thing that gave them agency. That people would sell prosthetics at all speaks to just how poor everyone in Kabul is. For some, like Father, it's worth giving up the freedom to move around in order to feed one's family.

For most of Parvana's life, the city had been in ruins, and it was hard for her to imagine it another way. It hurt her to hear stories of old Kabul before the bombing. She didn't want to think about everything the bombs had taken away, including her father's health and their beautiful home. It made her angry, and since she could do nothing with her anger, it made her sad.

Related Characters: Father, Parvana

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 22-23

Explanation and Analysis

On Parvana and Father's walk home, the narrator explains that Kabul has been rubble almost as long as Parvana has been alive. One of the problems Parvana faces here is that, in her mind, Afghanistan is a proud, beautiful place. While in many ways Afghanistan is still that place, it's much harder to believe that when the city is in shambles. It's also understandably hard for her to know that along with bringing about Afghanistan's decline, the bombings have also hurt Father physically—and their family in a variety of other, less obvious ways. At this point in the novel, seeing her beloved country in such a state just makes Parvana sad.

She doesn't believe there's anything she can do to improve it, so she feels impotent and helpless. However, this is a product of Parvana's immaturity. The novel makes it clear that there are many ways to resist, revolt, and wage war, and that by engaging in meaningful resistance, Parvana can begin to figure out where she fits in this new landscape.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ Parvana knew she had to fetch the water because there was nobody else in the family who could do it. Sometimes this made her resentful. Sometimes it made her proud. One thing she knew—it didn't matter how she felt. Good mood or bad, the water had to be fetched, and she had to fetch it.

Related Characters: Maryam, Nooria, Mother, Parvana

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mother and Nooria ask Parvana to fetch water, even though she's just spent a long day in the market. Since there's no one else who can safely accomplish this task, it falls to Parvana. This speaks to the precarious state that women find themselves in under the Taliban. Mother and Nooria, as an adult and a young adult, can't safely leave their homes alone to fetch water for their family, simply because they're women. The Taliban may seek to protect women by mandating that they stay inside, but in practice, this only pushes families even deeper into poverty.

At the same time, children Parvana's age, who aren't policed as heavily by the Taliban, must take on many household duties that their parents or older siblings cannot do. It's not legal or entirely safe for Parvana to leave the apartment alone to fetch water, but her chances of having a soldier stop her are much less than Nooria or Mother's chances. All of this shows that the Taliban's rules force children to grow up much faster than they would otherwise.

☞ Other people lived in the part of the building that was still standing. Parvana saw them as she went to fetch water or went out with her father to the marketplace. "We must keep our distance," Father told her. "The Taliban encourage neighbor to spy on neighbor. It is safer to keep to ourselves."

Related Characters: Father (speaker), Maryam, Nooria,

Mother, Parvana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Parvana thinks about how lonely she is in her new home; all her other siblings tend to pair up with each other, leaving her alone—and Parvana can't safely befriend any neighbor children either, since the Taliban encourages neighbors to spy on one another. This shows that the Taliban have created a culture of fear that discourages people from forming strong connections with each other and consequently makes them isolated and suspicious of outsiders. It forces people, in other words, to rely only on family. However, this is challenging for someone like Parvana, who doesn't have any siblings her age and who is therefore on her own to fill her time. And by depriving people in Kabul of their friends, the Taliban essentially leave families to their own devices to survive, which the novel makes clear doesn't work—after all, Parvana and her family survive largely thanks to kind friends and strangers. Here, Parvana is taking on chores that Nooria and Mother cannot do, and Father can only make so much in the market. Families on their own in this system are liable to fail as soon as disaster strikes or something changes, because there's no one else for them to rely on.

☞ "How can we be brave?" Nooria asked. "We can't even go outside. How can we lead men into battle? I've seen enough war. I don't want to see any more."

"There are many types of battles," Father said quietly.

Related Characters: Father, Nooria (speaker), Parvana

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

While telling Malali's story after dinner, Father emphasizes Malali's bravery, as well as that of his own daughters and of Afghan women more generally. Having spent a year living under the Taliban's oppressive rule, Nooria is understandably hopeless and isn't sure how to be brave in the world she inhabits. As far as she sees it, she's isolated and helpless—from her perspective, there's not much she

can actually do to make a difference. Father, however, alludes to the possibility that there are more ways to resist and be brave than actually leading men into battle, as Malali did. Resistance can take many forms, from the magazine that Mother later works on to Nooria's teaching in a secret school. Even Parvana's choice to turn into a boy and work for her family is a form of resistance. All of these things take a significant amount of bravery and are certainly risky, but none of them are flashy actions that would attract much attention. Father wants to impress on his daughters that Malali is still a good example of bravery, but she's more of an archetype or an idea than an example to follow literally.

Chapter 4 Quotes

“You are a writer. You must do your work.”

“If we had left Afghanistan when we had the chance, I could be doing my work!”

“We are Afghans. This is our home. If all the educated people leave, who will rebuild the country?”

Related Characters: Mother, Father (speaker), Parvana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

After Father is arrested, Parvana remembers arguments her parents had about whether or not to leave Afghanistan; Mother wanted to leave while they still had the opportunity to do so, while Father insisted they had a responsibility to their country to stay. Here, Father is demonstrating the kind of resistance he wants his daughters to learn to engage in and appreciate. To him, staying rather than fleeing in fear is its own quiet form of resistance. By staying, he may have the opportunity to work for a better future in his home country, something they wouldn't have as refugees or immigrants in another country. Mother, however, refuses to do her work as a writer and a reporter while the Taliban are in charge. Instead, she wants to be able to write about Afghanistan and its issues from afar. As far as Father is concerned, Mother doesn't yet understand the value of standing up to the Taliban by writing now, when it's illegal and dangerous to do so. As the novel unfolds, Mother indeed comes to see the value in this with help from Mrs. Weera.

“Nooria looked terrified. If Parvana didn't obey her, she would have to go for food herself.”

Now I've got her, Parvana thought. I can make her as miserable as she makes me. But she was surprised to find that this thought gave her no pleasure. Maybe she was too tired and too hungry. Instead of turning her back, she took the money from her sister's hand.

Related Characters: Mother, Nooria, Parvana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

When Nooria decides to send Parvana, disguised as a boy, to buy food in the market for the family, Parvana realizes she can refuse and force Nooria to go herself. Surprisingly, though, having this power over Nooria doesn't feel very satisfying. In this moment, Parvana begins to come of age in a big way. She realizes that there are far more pressing and more important things in life—like feeding her younger siblings and Mother—than engaging in a petty fight with her big sister. She's beginning to think of people other than herself, and decides to accept the responsibility she has to care for her family. Though family has always been important to Parvana, it's gradually becoming the most important thing to her and, therefore, something she's willing to sacrifice and do scary things in order to support.

It's telling, though, that Parvana's seemingly mature perspective might just come from exhaustion and hunger. The Taliban arrested Father for seemingly no reason, and in essence did nothing more than terrorize Parvana's family and deprive them of their sole breadwinner. In a situation like this, Parvana really has no choice but to grow up sooner than she might otherwise and shoulder more responsibility. She must, if she wants to survive.

Chapter 5 Quotes

“Mrs. Weera!” Nooria exclaimed. Relief washed over her face. Here was someone who could take charge, who could take some of the responsibility off of her shoulders.

Related Characters: Nooria (speaker), Mother, Parvana, Mrs. Weera

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 56-57

Explanation and Analysis

When Parvana returns home from the market with Mrs. Weera, Nooria is relieved and ecstatic to have another adult around to help her. This drives home the fact that though Nooria is 17 and in many ways is treated like an adult, she's still a child. In this sense, she's not all that different from Parvana—she just has different constraints on what she can do and how she's expected to act.

With this, the novel highlights how war and conflict tragically robs children of their childhoods and forces them to grow up much earlier than they should. Over the last four days while Mother remained on the toshak, Nooria has had to manage the little ones, prepare meals, and make choices about how to allocate their dwindling resources. This is a lot to ask of anyone, let alone someone so young. Mrs. Weera, then, looks like a savior as she walks in the door. This, of course, has to do in part with Mrs. Weera's confident, no-nonsense demeanor and her willingness to step in and commandeer a situation—but in this situation, that's entirely a good thing, as it allows Nooria to feel like someone is caring for her again, something she clearly craves.

☝ She kept hauling water. Her arms were sore, and the blisters on her feet started to bleed again, but she didn't think about that. She fetched water because her family needed it, because her father would have expected her to. Now that Mrs. Weera was there and her mother was up, things were going to get easier, and she would do her part.

Related Characters: Father, Mother, Mrs. Weera, Parvana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

While Mrs. Weera attends to Mother and Ali's dirty diapers, Parvana carries bucket after bucket of water from the tap to the apartment. It's important to keep in mind just how treacherous of a journey this is—the apartment is on the third floor, and the steps going up are unstable and don't have safe railings. Parvana has to work hard not just because the bucket is heavy, but because the path from the tap to home is so dangerous—although Parvana is a young girl and not technically a woman yet, a Taliban soldier could certainly take offense to her being out alone and stop her at any minute.

However, what's more important to Parvana at this moment

is caring for her family. She knows that Mrs. Weera can't help them unless Parvana pulls her weight and gives Mrs. Weera what she needs to get Mother and the apartment cleaned up. At this moment, it doesn't matter that her feet are bleeding or the buckets are heavy. What matters is getting her family to a place that doesn't feel quite so dirty, desperate, and terrifying.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝ “You're not cutting my hair!” Parvana's hands flew up to her head.

“How else will you look like a boy?” Mother asked.

“Cut Nooria's hair! She's the oldest! It's her responsibility to look after me, not my responsibility to look after her!”

“No one would believe me to be a boy,” Nooria said calmly, looking down at her body.

Related Characters: Nooria, Mother, Parvana (speaker), Mrs. Weera

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

After Mother and Mrs. Weera propose their plan to turn Parvana into a boy to Parvana, Parvana is angry and terrified. At this point, Parvana's hair is long. Though she described it earlier in the novel as stringy, it's still a point of pride for her. It's a symbol of her femininity, and she's proud of how long she's gotten it to grow. Because of this, it's upsetting to be asked to cut it all off—it's like being asked to cut off a major part of her identity. However, even more than being asked to give up her femininity, Parvana keys in on the fact that being turned into a boy means that the adults are also effectively asking her to give up her childhood. She needs to look like a boy so she can work and feed the family, something she cannot do as a girl. And for Parvana, this is both insulting and unthinkable. In her mind, adults and older children are supposed to care for those younger than they are, not the other way around. This is why she suggests that Nooria dress as a boy instead. But because Parvana is at a place in her development where she can pass as male and Nooria isn't, the responsibility falls to Parvana, whether she likes it or not.

“It has to be your decision,” Mrs. Weera said. “We can force you to cut off your hair, but you’re still the one who has to go outside and act the part. We know this is a big thing we’re asking, but I think you can do it. How about it?”

Parvana realized Mrs. Weera was right. They could hold her down and cut off her hair, but for anything more, they needed her cooperation. In the end, it really was her decision.

Somehow, knowing that made it easier to agree.

Related Characters: Mrs. Weera (speaker), Nooria, Mother, Parvana

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

During the discussion about turning Parvana into a boy by cutting her hair, Mrs. Weera makes the point that Parvana has to agree to this plan or it won't work. For Parvana, this makes all the difference. In this moment, then, Parvana begins to see that while being made to resemble a boy certainly will force her to mature more quickly, it will also give her more agency over her life. All she has to do is exercise that agency the first time, by agreeing to let the adults cut her hair.

Mrs. Weera clearly understands that they need Parvana's blessing in order to make this work. This is why she appeals to Parvana's feelings of being responsible to her family, and it's also why she's encouraging. She knows that Parvana is capable of acting the part of a young boy, and it's important that Parvana hear that from someone she respects and trusts. This begins to illustrate the importance of friends—at times, friends can sometimes convince a person to make the right choice where their family cannot.

When she had gone into the market with her father, she had kept silent and covered up her face as much as possible. She had tried her best to be invisible. Now, with her face open to the sunshine, she was invisible in another way. She was just one more boy on the street. She was nothing worth paying attention to.

Related Characters: Father, Parvana

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

During Parvana's first trip to the market as a boy, she's terrified that someone will identify her as a girl. However, she soon discovers that as a boy, she's invisible—no one cares about another boy running about the market and shopping. This gives Parvana the sense that being a boy will give her freedom. Though she attempted to achieve visibility in another way while she presented as a girl, what she was going for then was to not be noticed. However, in a society that strictly polices girls and women, it's far more difficult for a young girl like Parvana to achieve that invisibility. She's not supposed to be in the market anyway, so she sticks out no matter how hard she tries to cover up her face and hair. But posing as a boy, Parvana is able to blend in with the crowd. This begins to show her that if she continues to run around in this disguise, she can make different decisions than she would as a girl. She can make decisions that will help her family and continue to give her more agency—far more than she ever had as a girl.

Chapter 7 Quotes

Parvana took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Up until then, she had seen Talibs only as men who beat women and arrested her father. Could they have feelings of sorrow, like other human beings?

Parvana found it all very confusing. [...] All day long, though, her thoughts kept floating back to the Talib who missed his wife.

Related Characters: Father, Parvana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

On Parvana's first morning working alone in the market, a Taliban soldier comes to her with a letter written to his late wife. Parvana is shocked when the soldier sheds a tear and is visibly moved to hear the contents of the letter. In her mind, the soldiers are single-minded—in her experience, Talibs are interested in policing women, beating people for infractions both minor and major, and arresting people for no reason as they arrested Father. There's no room in her understanding of what the Taliban is for the possibility that its members also have families whom they love and grieve

for when they die.

This, of course, isn't to excuse the Taliban's actions. Rather, Parvana's newfound understanding of this particular Taliban's humanity shows Parvana's growth as she comes of age. It takes significant maturity and strength to be able to recognize another person's humanity, especially when that other person is one's enemy. As she mulls over what it means that the soldier cried and misses his wife, her ability to empathize with others grows and she takes a significant step towards maturity.

Chapter 10 Quotes

💬 “Do you think they'd mind us doing this?” Parvana asked.
“Who?”

“The people who are buried here. Do you think they'd mind us digging them up?”

Shauzia leaned on her board. “Depends on the type of people they were. If they were nasty, stingy people, they wouldn't like it. If they were kind and generous people, they wouldn't mind.”

“Would you mind?”

Shauzia looked at her, opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again and returned to her digging. Parvana didn't ask her again.

Related Characters: Shauzia, Parvana (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 96-97

Explanation and Analysis

While Shauzia and Parvana dig up bones in the graveyard, they discuss whether the people whose graves they're digging up would mind. Parvana's question reveals her discomfort with the whole thing. Digging up graves is unsettling for her—it feels disrespectful, and she's likely not certain whether or not she'd be okay with it if she were one of the dead people whose graves are being disturbed. While perhaps anyone would feel uncomfortable with this, Parvana's discomfort with the situation is a clear reminder that she's still a young girl, no matter how much responsibility she's been forced to take on. The fact that the girls are digging up the bones regardless of their moral qualms speaks to the desperate situation in Kabul at this time. This is a time that's so lean and difficult for families that children have to dig up the dead to bring home enough food, as there are no other ways to make money that are as lucrative and accessible to children.

Chapter 11 Quotes

💬 “No,” Parvana told her mother.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I don't want to quit yet. Shauzia and I want to buy trays, and things to sell from the trays. I can follow the crowd that way, instead of waiting for the crowd to come to me. I can make more money.”

“We are managing fine on what you earn reading letters.”

“No, Mother, we're not,” Nooria said.

Mother spun around to scold Nooria for talking back, but Nooria kept talking.

Related Characters: Nooria, Mother, Parvana (speaker), Shauzia

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 103-104

Explanation and Analysis

After Mother learns that Parvana earned a lot of money digging up bones in a graveyard, she insists that they don't need that kind of money—but both Parvana and Nooria push back on Mother. In this moment, both Parvana and Nooria begin to assume more agency and responsibility than they have in the past. Both girls have, for the most part, deferred to their mother and acted the part of mostly obedient children. In these difficult times, however, both girls have had to grow up before they're truly ready to do so—and this gives them the courage to stand up to Mother.

For Parvana, having had the experience of moving through the market independently as a boy makes her feel far more mature and independent. Now that she's seen how the world actually works out there, it makes more sense for her to push back on Mother and advocate for something that she knows will help the family. In the same vein, Nooria sees exactly what's going on at home and therefore can support Parvana in her request. Just as Parvana sees how much more lucrative selling off of trays will be, Nooria sees that the family needs the money, no matter what Mother says. Mother's refusal is likely an attempt to hold onto her pride and to an idea of Afghanistan where people don't need to dig up graves to get by—and while admirable in some sense, clinging to the past in this way isn't helpful when it comes to the family's survival.

Chapter 12 Quotes

“I need a break,” she told her mother. “I don’t want to see anything ugly for a little while.”

Mother and Mrs. Weera had heard about the events at the stadium from other women’s group mothers. Some had husbands or brothers who had been there. “This goes on every Friday,” Mother said. “What century are we living in?”

Related Characters: Mother, Parvana (speaker), Shauzia, Mrs. Weera

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

Following Parvana’s horrifying experience at the stadium, where she witnessed Taliban soldiers cutting off prisoners’ hands, she decides to stay home for several days to recover from the experience. It’s important to keep in mind that while what Parvana witnessed in the stadium would be horrifying and difficult for anyone to process and move on from, it’s especially hard because of her youth and her innocence. Though she already saw the Taliban as oppressors who are violent and lash out nonsensically, seeing them make such a spectacle out of cutting people’s hands off is uniquely damaging for her—especially when Father is in prison and may find himself in the soccer stadium to be tortured.

The fact that Mother and Mrs. Weera already knew what was happening in the stadium speaks to the power of friendship and connections amongst people who aren’t related to each other. Having this kind of understanding doesn’t make the public torture any less horrifying, but it helps the women grapple with what’s going on in their world. And because they know what’s happening and even have eyes in the stadium, watching for them, they can make plans to expose these events through the magazine. Since Mother and Mrs. Weera are women, the Taliban would never expect this, so this becomes another way that the women can resist in this setting.

“Do you think we’ll still have to be boys in the spring? That’s a long time from now.”

“I want to still be a boy then,” Shauzia insisted. “If I turn back into a girl, I’ll be stuck at home. I couldn’t stand that.”

“Where will you go?”

“France. I’ll get on a boat and go to France.”

Related Characters: Shauzia, Parvana (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

Shauzia shares with Parvana that she’s secretly planning to run away to France as a boy so she can maintain some agency over her life. Parvana’s initial question shows that while Parvana can appreciate the freedom that being a boy gives her, it’s not something she wants to do forever. She fundamentally wants to identify as female and be treated as a young woman, so she looks forward to the day when she can go back to dressing as a girl. For Shauzia, though, being a girl condemns her to a life at home, at the mercy of relatives who either don’t like her, can’t advocate for her, or see her as a bargaining chip. Being a boy out in public is the only way that Shauzia has any say over her life, while in Parvana’s more progressive household that believes in educating women and giving them some say in what happens to them, she doesn’t feel the need to remain a boy forever.

Then, Shauzia’s declaration that she’s going to get on a boat and go to France betrays her youth and naïveté. Though she goes on to provide a more in-depth explanation of how exactly she’s going to get to France, it really goes no deeper than what she says here. She doesn’t understand how the world works or how a young person, male or female, is going to be treated in the wider world. Part of this has to do with the fact that for her, the point is just to get away. In her choice to focus so much on the act of leaving Kabul, she hasn’t had the time or the energy to focus as much on the how. This narrow view still drives home how young and immature she is despite her fierce independence and all of the responsibility she has to shoulder.

Parvana remembered arguments between her father and mother—her mother insisting they leave Afghanistan, her father insisting they stay. For the first time, Parvana wondered why her mother didn’t just leave. In an instant, she answered her own question. She couldn’t sneak away with four children to take care of.

Related Characters: Father, Mother, Shauzia, Parvana

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

As she listens to Shauzia talk about leaving Afghanistan, Parvana understands why Mother never just left the family even though she desperately wanted to leave the country—she didn't feel she could leave her loved ones behind. In this moment, Parvana realizes that while Shauzia prizes her independence and agency over everything else, Parvana's true loyalty is to her family. And presumably, this is the case for the rest of Parvana's family as well; this is, after all, why Parvana believes Mother didn't abandon the family to chase a better life elsewhere in the world.

Alongside her independence, this shows that Shauzia also values her friendship with Parvana highly. She's willing to share this secret with Parvana, even though wanting to abandon her family goes against everything that both Shauzia and Parvana have ever been told about how to think of their relationships and their responsibilities to their families. It's a testament to how good and supportive of a friend Parvana is that Shauzia feels comfortable sharing this with her, even if Parvana's loyalties do still lie with her family.

☝ Parvana was tired. She wanted to sit in a classroom and be bored by a geography lesson. She wanted to be with her friends and talk about homework and games and what to do on school holidays. She didn't want to know any more about death or blood or pain.

Related Characters: Parvana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

As the weeks wear on, Parvana grows increasingly despondent and isn't amused anymore by her new life as a boy, even if it does offer her freedom. With this, the novel makes it clear that Parvana is truly a child. The thrill of navigating the market alone and making her own choices was certainly real and fun, but it's starting to lose its appeal. It's telling, then, that what Parvana craves is to be a bored student who doesn't have to think about how to make a little more money so she can feed her family. She'd like to have the adults in her life take on those difficult questions so she can go back to being a child whose concerns are no bigger than boring school lessons. This speaks to the way that the war and conflict raging in Afghanistan have stolen Parvana's

childhood, in addition to the childhoods of countless other children. Due to the conflicts, financial troubles, and fear that permeate life in Afghanistan, Parvana isn't the only child who has to take on far more responsibility than she ever wanted or expected to.

☝ The little gifts from the window kept landing on Parvana's blanket every couple of weeks. Sometimes it was a piece of embroidery. Sometimes it was a piece of candy or a single bead. It was as if the Window Woman was saying, "I'm still here," in the only way she could.

Related Characters: The Window Woman, Parvana

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Parvana happily gathers up the offerings from the Window Woman when they land on her blanket in the market, and she comes to realize that these gifts are probably a way for the Window Woman to assert her existence. Though Parvana might not be able to fully make the connection, the Window Woman's gifts are a way for her to resist the Taliban's rule in a quiet way. Through the narrator and Parvana's descriptions of how the Taliban want women to live their lives, it seems that they essentially want women to be invisible, though this is ostensibly for the women's own protection. This is why women can't go out, why windows must be painted black so that no one can see women inside, and why women must wear burqas when they do leave the house. By dropping gifts down to Parvana, this woman can tell someone—even if that someone is just a little boy—that she exists, even though the forces in power want to hide her away and deny her agency.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ "Do you really want to do this?"

Nooria nodded. "Look at my life here, Parvana. I hate living under the Taliban. I'm tired of looking after the little ones. My school classes happen so seldom, they're of almost no value. There's no future for me here. At least in Mazar I can go to school, walk the streets without having to wear a burqa, and get a job when I've completed school. Maybe in Mazar I can have some kind of life. Yes, I want to do this."

Related Characters: Nooria, Parvana (speaker), Shauzia

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

Nooria and Parvana discuss the proposal of marriage that arrived for Nooria, and Nooria lists her reasons for wanting to accept the proposal. As Nooria sees it, marriage—at least this particular marriage—won't trap her. Rather, it will give her the freedom to more or less conduct her life as she might have before the Taliban took over. She'll be able to go to school, earn her own money, and regain some sense of agency over her life. This is one way that Nooria can leverage her femininity in a way that works for her. Because of her curvy body, she doesn't have the option of dressing like a boy like her younger sister Parvana does, so she has to figure out other ways to resist and use what she does have to her advantage. It's important to note, however, that marriage certainly doesn't guarantee these things to all women. For instance, Shauzia begins to hear at about this time that her grandfather is looking for a husband for her—and the implication is that Shauzia will have no say in the matter of her marriage. Nooria is able to see that marriage can equal freedom because her family believes in giving women agency, but this is something that Shauzia's family doesn't agree with.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ “I don't like working alone. The marketplace isn't the same when you're not there. Won't you come back?”

Put to her like that, Parvana knew she could not refuse. [...] Part of her wanted to slip away from everything, but another part wanted to get up and stay alive and continue to be Shauzia's friend. With a little prodding from Shauzia, that was the part that won.

Related Characters: Shauzia (speaker), Homa / The Woman, Nooria, Mother, Parvana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

After Parvana spends two days on the toshak, grieving for the possibility that Mother and Nooria died in Mazar, Shauzia stops by and convinces Parvana to go back to work in the market. This speaks to the power of friendship to

motivate people to keep going when times are tough. The possibility that her family is all gone is too much for Parvana to bear—but Shauzia's appearance and plea shows Parvana that she's not alone. She has friends, including Shauzia and Mrs. Weera, who are there to help her get through, even in the absence of the rest of her family. Though the Taliban, according to Father, encourages neighbors and friends to spy on each other, the effect that Shauzia has on Parvana makes it clear that it's simply a matter of discovering those friends who are truly supportive. Shauzia chafes under the Taliban's rule just as much as Parvana does, so she fully supports Parvana in her acts of resistance.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ “Shauzia has family here. Do you mean to say she would just leave her family? Desert the team just because the game is rough?”

Parvana said no more. In a way, Mrs. Weera was right. That was what Shauzia was doing. But Shauzia was also right. Didn't she have a right to seek out a better life? Parvana couldn't decide who was more right.

Related Characters: Mrs. Weera (speaker), Shauzia, Parvana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

As Mrs. Weera and Father make their respective plans to leave Kabul, Parvana suggests that Mrs. Weera take Shauzia with her. Mrs. Weera, however, refuses on the grounds that Shauzia has a responsibility to remain in Kabul and care for her family to the best of her ability. It's a testament to Parvana's growing maturity that she can see both sides of this argument and doesn't unthinkingly come down on one side or the other. She's becoming more comfortable with this moral gray area, and she's able to recognize that she and Shauzia can make different choices when it comes to their families—and both of those choices can be right. Mrs. Weera, meanwhile, represents a more narrow view of right and wrong. In her mind, it's unthinkable that a child would abandon their family like this. She doesn't acknowledge the fact that Shauzia's family plans to marry her off soon, a prospect that Shauzia finds abhorrent—and that gives her no agency. In this situation, the children involved are possibly better able to see the nuance of the situation, if only because they're the ones who will have to live with the

most important major consequences of the choices.

●● “Do none of you appreciate nature? This boy has undertaken to bring a bit of beauty into our gray marketplace, and do you thank him? Do you help him?” An old man pushed his way to the front of the little gathering. With difficulty, he knelt down to help Parvana plant the flowers. “Afghans love beautiful things,” he said, “but we have seen so much ugliness, we sometimes forget how wonderful a thing like a flower is.”

Related Characters: The Window Woman, Parvana

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

When Parvana attempts to plant some wildflowers in the

market to show the Window Woman that she’s not coming back, only one old man in the market steps forward to help and support her. What this man says speaks to the way that the Afghan people have become bitter and changed for the worse over the last 20 years of conflict. They’re no longer able to take pride in their identity as Afghans, people who, according to this man, appreciate beautiful things and the natural world. The violence and conflict, this suggests, not only robs children of their childhoods. It also has the potential to rob an entire people of their identities and of a way of thinking about the world that honors beauty, kindness, and service.

In addition, this man recognizes that planting flowers is an act of resistance. Planting the flowers is an assertion that Parvana cares about her city and her people enough to try to make it a beautiful place—a radical position, given that most of Kabul is rubble right now. But the novel suggests that it’s through these acts of resistance that Afghanistan will ever start to resemble the thriving, proud country it once was.



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.

CHAPTER 1

Under her breath, Parvana whispers that she can read the letter almost as well as Father can. She says it quietly because no one in the Kabul market wants to hear her say something like this; she's just in the market to help Father walk there and back. Really, she shouldn't be outside at all. The Taliban order all girls and women to stay in their homes, and girls can't even attend school. Mother was fired from her job as a writer for a radio station. The family has been stuck in a one-room apartment for over a year now. Because Parvana is a small girl, though, she can get away with being outside. This is why she helps Father walk. If a Talib ever asks, Father points to his missing lower leg while Parvana tries to make herself look small and invisible. She's seen the way the Taliban beats women.

The customer asks Father to read his letter one more time. Parvana muses that *she'd* love to receive a letter. There's mail service in Afghanistan again, but most of her friends left the country to Pakistan or elsewhere. Parvana's family has moved so often to escape bombing that none of Parvana's friends know where she lives. The customer thanks Father and walks away. Parvana is lucky. Most people in Afghanistan can't read or write, but both her parents have college degrees and believe that everyone, even girls, should be educated. Throughout the afternoon, Parvana listens to Father and customers speak Dari (her first language) and Pashtu, Afghanistan's other official language, which she doesn't know as well. Her parents also speak English.

In the market, men shop and vendors sell their wares and services. Parvana pays special attention to the tea shop. It employs boys to run through the marketplace taking cups of tea to customers who can't leave their own shops. Parvana whispers that she could perform that job, and she'd love to get to know the market. Father hears her and grouses that he'd rather Parvana run around at school, which makes Parvana frown. She'd *also* rather be at school. She misses her uniform, her friends, and her favorite subject, Afghan history. Seemingly everyone has come to Afghanistan over the years—the Persians, Alexander the Great, the British, the Greeks, the Turks—and the Afghans expelled all of them. Now, the Taliban rules. They're Afghans, but they have very specific ideas about how life should be lived.

Parvana's fear in the marketplace paints a picture of life in Kabul that's terrifying for girls and women. They have no agency and aren't even technically allowed to do things that help their families—such as Parvana helping Father walk to and from the market. Parvana's muttering that she can read the letter speaks to the fact that she's educated, something that may be a liability to her now that the Taliban have forbidden women from going to school. Her education might give her more freedom in other circumstances, but not as a woman in Kabul living under the Taliban.



The way that Parvana describes her scattered friend group suggests that Afghanistan is no longer a safe place to live. The constant conflict and danger may be part of the reason why so few people are educated in Parvana's community—they have more immediate needs, like mere survival, to think about. It's significant that Parvana's family believes in educating and respecting women's intellect. Her family values women first for their intellectual capabilities and what they can bring to the world in that regard, something the narration implies isn't widespread.



Parvana's pride in Afghanistan's history shines through when she lists all the former conquerors who came to Afghanistan and who were expelled. For her, attending school is a way to meaningfully connect with this history. The Taliban have not only denied Parvana the ability to go to school, but they've taken over Afghanistan from within. They're Afghans, which makes it harder for Parvana to figure out how to think of them. In her mind, Afghans are all brave and proud, but the Taliban forces her to question this assessment.



When the Taliban first took Kabul, they shut down the schools. Parvana wasn't sad then, because she didn't want to take a math test she hadn't prepared for, and she didn't want her teacher to send a note home scolding her for talking. Nooria, however, sobbed and called Parvana stupid when Parvana suggested that the Taliban would let them go back soon. Parvana and Nooria's relationship is difficult anyway—and living in a single room, they can't escape each other. It didn't used to be this way. Parvana's parents had high-paying jobs and the family lived in a big house with servants, a fridge, and a car. Parvana shared a room with Maryam, but there was enough space. A bomb destroyed that house, and several of their increasingly smaller houses after that. Every time a bomb hit, the family got poorer.

Afghanistan has been in wars for over 20 years. The Soviets came first to drop bombs. Parvana was born a month before the Soviets withdrew; according to Nooria, they couldn't stand to be in the same country as such an ugly baby. Following the Soviets' departure, groups in Afghanistan began to fight each other and drop more bombs on Kabul. Parvana has spent her whole life listening to bombs and running from them. Now, the Taliban controls most of the country. Though the Taliban's name means that they're religious scholars, Father insists that religion is about teaching kindness and how to be a better person—and the Taliban isn't doing that. These days, Kabul doesn't suffer as many bombs. The bombs are in the northern part of the country.

When Father suggests they end their day, Parvana gathers up the small household items and ornaments they're trying to sell. Mother and Nooria regularly go through the family's belongings to come up with more things to send with Father. Father slowly stands, takes Parvana's arm, and they begin to hobble for home. He used to have a prosthetic leg, but he sold it when a customer made a lucrative offer that Father simply couldn't turn down. Since the Taliban ordered women to stay inside, there are now lots of prosthetic legs for sale. Many husbands decided that if their wives couldn't go anywhere, they didn't need their prosthetics.

When Parvana doesn't grasp what's going on at first, it speaks to her immaturity and her naïveté—in her mind, the worst thing that could happen is that her teacher will send a note home and she'll fail her math test. In reality, as Nooria's reaction reveals, the situation is far more dire than Parvana realizes. Her family is now in extreme poverty, as evidenced by the fact that they now live in a single room. The fact that they used to be so wealthy speaks to the way that major conflicts like the wars in Afghanistan can fundamentally change life in a country for the worse.



The Soviets arrived in Afghanistan in 1979 and left a decade later; after several years of civil war, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 1996. Nooria's comment highlights the sibling tensions between her and suggesting that, despite their extreme circumstances, this is a family like any other. Now, Parvana doesn't feel as proud of her country because the Taliban is in charge.



The narrator's discussion of the prosthetic legs for sale in the market makes it clear that Father is one of many who suffered a lost limb as a result of the bombs. However, because he's a man, he doesn't suffer in quite the same way that women do. The women the narrator refers to are at the mercy of their husbands or fathers when it comes to their mobility, which makes it harder to find ways to resist.



Parvana and Father wander through Kabul. Many buildings have been bombed, though the city was once beautiful. Nooria is old enough to remember restaurants, cinemas, and traffic lights. Parvana remembers none of this, so hearing about the old Kabul hurts her and makes her sad. They turn down the side street to their building and Parvana asks how women in burqas manage to navigate the streets. Father notes that they fall often. Parvana looks up to her favorite mountain, which she can see at the end of her street. Right after the family first moved to this building, Father insisted that since people name mountains, he's going to call the mountain Mount Parvana.

It hurts Parvana to think about Kabul as a bright, bustling city because that version of Kabul represents an idealized time that she doesn't remember. The Kabul in front of her is fundamentally different and makes it clear to her that Kabul (and Afghanistan more broadly) is in deep trouble and will have to work hard to regain its sense of pride and agency. The recollection of Father naming Mount Parvana reveals one way that people can gain agency: they can focus on good, hopeful things that make others in their family happy.



CHAPTER 2

Mother and Nooria are immersed in cleaning projects. Parvana begins to take off her chador, but Nooria and Mother tell her to fetch water first. It takes six trips to fill their water tank, and Parvana hates the heavy work. Nooria quips that Parvana wouldn't have so many trips if she'd done it yesterday and flips her beautiful **hair**. Parvana grumbles as she hauls buckets up the stairs. No one helps her with her chores and that annoys her, but she knows that Mother and Nooria *can't* help—they'd never make it up the dangerous, uneven stairs to their third-floor apartment in burqas, and they can't go out safely without a man. Parvana is the only person in the family who can do it. Sometimes she's proud of this; sometimes she resents it. But she knows that someone has to do the work.

It's telling that Parvana is also the only one who can safely fetch water for the family. Since Parvana is such a young girl and not yet a woman, the Taliban aren't as interested in policing her appearance or her movements—but this will certainly change as she matures. However, even as her youth protects her in this way, she seems to long to be more mature like Nooria—especially when she seems to envy Nooria's beautiful long hair.



When Parvana is done, she joins Maryam on the floor and compliments Maryam's drawing. Mother and Nooria call Parvana to help them clean out the cupboard. They just did it three days ago, but with no work or school, there isn't anything else to do. Parvana hates all the cleaning—it uses up water quickly. Parvana looks around the tiny room, which contains only a tall cupboard and their two toshaks. The lavatory is just a small room with a platform toilet, the water tank, and the propane cookstove. The stove is there because the room has a vent. Though they have neighbors in the part of the building that's still standing, Father insists they keep their distance. The Taliban encourages neighbors to spy on each other. Because of this, Parvana is lonely.

Given Parvana's youth, it's understandable that she's not entirely sympathetic to Mother and Nooria's attempts to keep busy. Even if Parvana just has to sit still, she still gets to leave the house and see more than the four walls that Nooria and Mother do. In this sense, her lack of sympathy comes from the tiny bit of privilege that she has over Nooria and Mother. Her inability to make friends with neighbors exposes another way that the Taliban have curtailed Parvana's life, as they've effectively made people isolated from and suspicious of one another.



Mother and Nooria begin to put things back in the cupboard, and Mother hands Parvana new items to sell. Parvana is enraged that Mother is selling Parvana's good shalwar kameez, but Mother insists there's no need for it. Parvana asks why they don't sell Nooria's clothes, but Mother insists that Nooria will need them when she gets married. When Nooria makes faces at Parvana, Parvana insists that Nooria's husband will be marrying a stuck-up snob. Mother shuts down Parvana's tirade. Parvana hates Nooria and if her mother weren't her mother, she'd hate her too.

The fact that Nooria needs to keep all her good clothes for her future marriage emphasizes the age gap between the girls. While Parvana wants to be seen as more adult (and therefore, be able to keep clothes she loves), she cannot escape the reality that she's only 11, while marriage and adulthood are rapidly approaching for Nooria.



Parvana's anger disappears when Mother puts the parcel of Hossain's clothes away in the cupboard. Hossain used to be the oldest child, but a land mine killed him when he was 14. Mother and Father refuse to talk about Hossain, but according to Nooria, he was a happy, laughing person and often played with Nooria and baby Parvana. Parvana helps prepare supper, and after the meal, the family sits together. Parvana keeps a close eye on Nooria and Mother for the silent signal that passes between them that starts the cleanup process, but she can never catch it.

Father, dressed in his good white shalwar kameez and with a freshly combed beard, looks rested and handsome. He tells the story of **Malali**. In 1880, the British invaded Afghanistan. During one terrible battle, the British were winning, and the Afghans were feeling increasingly hopeless. But then a young girl ripped off her veil, ran to the front of the battle, and waved her veil like a battle flag. She led the Afghan soldiers into battle and victory. Father says the moral of the story is that Afghanistan's women are the bravest in the world, as they've inherited Malali's courage. Maryam waves her arm, but Nooria insists they can't be brave if they can't go out and lead men into war. Father says there are many different kinds of battles as Mother insists it's time to clean up.

Parvana makes a face that causes the whole family to laugh. Suddenly, four Taliban soldiers burst in. Ali screams and Nooria covers herself with her chador—the Taliban sometimes steal young women. Frozen from fear, Parvana watches the soldiers grab Father. Mother screams at them as they tell Father that Afghanistan “doesn't need [his] foreign ideas.” Mother hits the soldiers, but a soldier beats her with his rifle. Parvana flies at the soldiers as they drag Father out and down the stairs. Two more soldiers dig through the cupboard and slash the toshaks. Parvana is terrified—Father has English books hidden in the bottom of the cupboard, and the Taliban often burns books. Parvana screams at the soldiers to leave until they turn to beating her. When the soldiers finally leave, Mother gathers Ali and Maryam comforts Parvana.

CHAPTER 3

Once Ali and Maryam fall asleep, Mother settles them on the floor. Quietly, Mother, Nooria, and Parvana clean up and lie down to sleep. Parvana can't sleep. To her, every noise is either the Taliban or Father returning, and she wonders what prison is like. She remembers Mother saying that a person isn't truly Afghan if they don't know someone who's been to prison; Afghanistan regularly puts enemies in prison. Suddenly, Parvana bolts upright and tells Mother they must light a lamp for Father so he can get home. Mother, however, points out that Father doesn't have his walking stick and can't walk home.

Hossain's death likely feels even weightier now, when the family could really use another man to help support them. As women, Nooria and Parvana can only do so much to help out under the Taliban's rules. Parvana's inability to catch the signals between Mother and Nooria speaks again to her youth, as she doesn't yet have to tend to the family like an adult would. The secret signal also seems to show that Mother and Nooria have become much closer due to their circumstances.



It seems likely that Father intends Malali's story to inspire his daughters to find ways to be brave, even if they can't heroically charge into battle. Maryam, being so young, doesn't understand enough about what's going on to share Nooria's sense of hopelessness. Especially since Nooria can't leave the house these days, it's hard for her to formulate any feasible plans to resist. It's also important to note that Father also wants his daughters to learn to take pride in their identity as Afghan women, something that may be harder now under the Taliban.



Father is well educated, so his ideas represent a kind of free-thinking, broad-minded Afghanistan that the Taliban sees as a threat. Parvana's choice to fling herself at the soldiers makes it clear that she is, above all else, loyal to her family and willing to put herself in danger to protect people she loves. Especially given how snippy she and Nooria have been, it's important to see her dedication to saving Father. It suggests that when things get rough, Parvana will rise to the occasion to protect family members and the kind of Afghanistan she wants to live in—as represented by the books.



Even when things are objectively bad, Mother suggests that Afghans can still find ways to take pride in their country. She suggests that resistance is, in a way, part of the Afghan experience. This helps Parvana begin to think of other ways to resist, and it helps her start to make sense of Father's arrest.



Parvana stays awake all night, staring at the one small window. It's high on the wall, so Father refused to paint it black when the Taliban ordered everyone paint their windows to obscure the women inside. Finally, at dawn, she, Mother, and Nooria get up quietly. Nooria begins to heat water for tea, but Mother stops her—she and Parvana are going to get Father out of jail. Since buses can't carry women without a male escort, Mother and Parvana must walk the whole way. The Taliban might still stop them, though, so Parvana asks Nooria to write Mother a note. Mother refuses to carry it so Parvana tucks it in her sleeve. Nooria whispers that she's not sure it will help, since most of the Taliban can't read. Nooria uncharacteristically hugs Parvana.

Parvana wraps her chador around her head and follows Mother outside. She helps Mother down the stairs and Mother takes off into the streets. Parvana rushes behind; all the women look the same in their burqas and she doesn't want to lose Mother. Occasionally, Mother stops and shows people a photo of Father. Photographs are illegal, but people just shake their heads. Lots have people have been arrested; they know what she's asking.

Finally, after a long walk, Mother and Parvana reach Pul-i-Charkhi Prison. It's a scary place. Parvana reminds herself that **Malali** wouldn't be afraid and notes that Mother at least *looks* unafraid. Mother marches up to a guard and says she's here for her husband. She brandishes her photograph and though the guards say nothing, more gather. Parvana hears Father's voice in her head calling her Malali, and she begins to shout for Father as well. Finally, a soldier snatches the photograph and tears it up and another begins beating Mother. He tells her to go home. Another soldier hits Parvana. When Parvana falls to the ground, she quickly gathers the pieces of the photograph. She then leaps up, says they'll go, and helps Mother up. They hobble home.

CHAPTER 4

Parvana and Mother get home late. Parvana is exhausted and in excruciating pain. When she takes off her sandals, she sees that her feet are bloody and covered in blisters. Mother's feet are worse; she hasn't been out since the Taliban took over a year and a half ago. She could've gone out—Father would've taken her any time—but Mother refused. She insisted that the Afghan people would kick the Taliban out in no time and she'd stay in until then. She also snapped that if they'd left Afghanistan when they had the chance, she could still be working. She and Father had this fight often, and Father always said they had a responsibility to stay and rebuild their country.

The revelation that most of the Taliban cannot read makes it clear that the Taliban rule through fear and violence, not through reason. They and Parvana's family are, in many ways, speaking entirely different languages. Mother's unwillingness to take the note speaks to her pride and her unwillingness to bend to the Taliban's demands. While this may make her feel revolutionary and rebellious, however, her daughters are aware that this puts them all in danger of arrest or worse. Nooria and Parvana may be better at working within the system to get by.



The reactions of everyone who sees the photograph drives home just how common it is for men like Father to be arrested. This passage implies that Mother is one of many women on the lookout for a lost husband or family member. This has become part of the Afghan experience.



Mother is in a burqa, so it's impossible to see her facial expression and to fully gauge her body language, but her bravery and boldness nevertheless shines through. Her bravery—plus the story of Malali—is what emboldens Parvana to fight back against the soldiers.



The fight that Parvana remembers her parents having suggests that Father feels more of a duty to his country than Mother does. For Father, it's essential to stay so that he's around to rebuild and advocate for the kind of Afghanistan he wants to live in. He understands that if they leave, they'll have no say in the country's direction if the Taliban is overthrown. Mother, however, chafes too much under the Taliban's rules and under Father's refusal to leave to be willing to find other ways to perform her work.



Mother refuses Nooria's help as she tears off her burqa and collapses onto a toshak. She sobs and allows Nooria to wash her dusty face and feet. Eventually, Mother falls asleep. Maryam turns to Parvana and does the same thing, wiping Parvana's face and soaking her feet. Nooria prepares supper and Parvana shares that the guards wouldn't tell them anything about Father. Before Parvana has a chance to eat, she falls asleep. She wakes in the morning and can't bring herself to move. All night, she dreamed about soldiers hitting her and yelling her. She also watched the soldiers beating Mother in her dream. Parvana jerks upright but relaxes when she sees that Mother is still here.

Nooria offers to help Parvana to the washroom. Parvana accepts when she discovers how much her feet hurt. Parvana comments that in their family, everyone leans on someone, but Nooria snaps that *she* has no one to lean on. This is normal Nooria behavior, which makes Parvana feel better. As Parvana washes and eats, Nooria offers Mother food. Mother refuses and spends the next two days lying down, only sitting up to drink tea or getting up to go to the washroom. Ali is distraught. Nooria and Parvana distract the younger kids as best they can. Parvana and Maryam reconstruct the photo of Father and decide to tape it back together once they have tape.

On the third day, Parvana considers doing housework, but she doesn't want to disturb Mother. She and Nooria discuss that Mother has to get up soon, but nothing changes. Parvana wants to read Father's secret books but is afraid that the Taliban will return. She also notices Ali growing quiet and withdrawn. Nooria says he misses Mother. The room begins to smell when Nooria decides to skip laundry to conserve water. Ali's diapers pile up. On the fourth day, they run out of food. Parvana gently shakes Mother, but Mother refuses to get up. Nooria snaps that Mother is depressed, but Parvana points out that they're all depressed—and hungry. The next day, Nooria insists that Parvana go out and buy food. Nooria looks terrified; she'll have to go if Parvana won't. Strangely, having this power over Nooria doesn't make Parvana happy, so she accepts Nooria's money.

In difficult times, Parvana's siblings are capable of putting aside their differences to care for each other. Maryam and Nooria help Mother and Parvana transition to being home again among people who love them, which is important as Parvana works through what happened. Parvana's bad dreams highlight just how terrifying her experience at the prison was. No child should have to see their mother beaten in front of them, and it's understandably difficult for Parvana to process this.



At this point, it's still disconcerting to have so much familial support. Parvana is so used to fighting with Nooria that it feels very wrong when Nooria helps her so much. However, it's worth considering Nooria's words more closely. Remember that Nooria is only 17, and yet she's taking on lots of responsibility at home. She may feel overwhelmed and out of her depth because she takes on so much and is treated like an adult.



Parvana's family is in a difficult place because everyone who's old enough to go outside and function in society is female. It's illegal and dangerous for them to go out, and for a long time, it feels safer to stay home and try to conserve resources than to go out and try to find more. However, when Mother continues to be unable to care for her children, both Nooria and Parvana must grow up almost instantly. And as they do this, it doesn't make sense to fight or one-up each other, especially when the stakes are so high. In this moment, Parvana realizes that it's more important to care for her family, even if it's scary, than it is to engage in petty fights with Nooria.



CHAPTER 5

It's odd to be in the market without Father. Men are supposed to do all the shopping, but if women shop, they're supposed to stand outside and yell for what they need. Parvana isn't sure if she's considered a woman or not. If she stands outside, she might get in trouble for not wearing a burqa; if she goes in, she might get in trouble for not acting like a woman. She decides to buy her 10 loaves of nan first, since the baker's stall opens onto the street. After, she heads for the produce stand. Suddenly, she hears a voice shouting and turns to see a Taliban soldier. He asks where Parvana's father or husband is and hits her with a stick. She shouts for the man to stop hitting her, which surprises him enough that she's able to run away.

Parvana holds the nan to her chest and runs as fast as she can. She runs straight into a woman carrying a child. The woman catches her arm and asks if she's Parvana. The voice is familiar; Parvana realizes it's Mrs. Weera. Mrs. Weera grouses that she keeps forgetting that her face is covered and then asks why Parvana is running. Through tears, Parvana says that a soldier was chasing her. Mrs. Weera praises Parvana for running and says she'd like to come visit Mother—she's starting a magazine and she needs Mother's help. She ignores Parvana's insistence that Mother doesn't want company. Parvana obediently leads the way home and outside the apartment, she warns Mrs. Weera that Mother isn't well.

Nooria takes the nan and asks why Parvana didn't buy anything else, but Mrs. Weera throws off her burqa and tells Nooria that the Taliban chased Parvana out of the market. Nooria looks relieved to see Mrs. Weera, an adult to take on some responsibility. Mrs. Weera puts her granddaughter down, looks around, and asks what's going on and why there are so many dirty diapers. Nooria explains that they're afraid to go out and get water. Mrs. Weera insists that Parvana isn't afraid and tells Parvana to "do [her] bit for the team" and fetch water, sounding like the physical education teacher she was before the Taliban made her quit. Parvana motions to where Mother is and Nooria explains that she's been there for four days, since Father was arrested.

The confusion about whether Parvana is considered a woman or not speaks to where she is in her physical development. In many ways, she still looks like an androgynous child—but it's impossible to confuse her for a boy since she dresses like a girl and covers her hair. The scolding from the Taliban soldier suggests that Parvana may have gotten by with Father because she was with a man; out alone, she's far more vulnerable. However, because she's a quick child, she's able to successfully make her escape.



Mrs. Weera is clearly succeeding where Mother isn't. Though she wears the burqa like all other women, it obscures the fact that she's still coming up with meaningful ways to resist, like starting a magazine. Her appearance also offers hope that Parvana's family will now be able to draw on a friend for support, since their family is unable to survive by itself with Father gone.



Again, it's telling that Nooria is so relieved to see Mrs. Weera. It drives home that Nooria may look like an adult to Parvana, but she's really a child who's out of her depth. On another note, it's telling that Mrs. Weera focuses on working for the team. For her, it's essential to pitch in and help out wherever she's needed. All Afghans are on her proverbial team, and if she doesn't help, the entire team is never going to get anywhere.



Mrs. Weera takes the first two buckets and washes Mother. Parvana ignores her bleeding, blistered feet, thinking that she has to help her family. She believes things will get better with Mother up and Mrs. Weera around. Mrs. Weera stops Parvana after the seventh bucket. Thirsty and exhausted, Parvana lifts a cup of unboiled water to her lips. Nooria snaps that Parvana is stupid and snatches the cup away—unboiled water is dangerous. Mrs. Weera reprimands Nooria for her behavior but tells Nooria to bathe the little ones in cold water and boil water for drinking first. Parvana sits next to Mother, who looks better but tired. When Mrs. Weera offers Parvana a cup of hot water, Parvana drinks it as fast as she can. Mrs. Weera and her granddaughter stay the night. The adults and Nooria stay up late talking.

Mrs. Weera gives Parvana hope that not all is lost. She reminds Parvana that the family does have friends in the world, if only they're willing to look for them. And further, Mrs. Weera seems very in tune with how to manage the tense relationship between Parvana and Nooria. She understands that it's essential to thank Parvana for her hard work by getting her water as soon as possible—and Nooria's mean scolding isn't going to help morale at home. Rather, if the family intends to get through this, they'll need to find healthier and kinder ways to communicate with each other.



CHAPTER 6

The next day, Mrs. Weera, Mother, and Nooria tell Parvana their plan: they'll turn Parvana into a boy. Posing as their male cousin from Jalalabad, Parvana will be able to work and shop in the market. Nooria nastily says that no one will ask about Parvana, but Parvana knows it's true—none of her friends have seen her since the Taliban closed the schools, and her relatives are scattered. Mother's voice catches as she says that Parvana will wear Hossain's clothes. Parvana says this won't work since she has long **hair**, but Nooria pulls out the sewing kit and snaps the scissors open and closed. Parvana shrieks that they can't cut her hair. She says they can cut Nooria's hair, since Nooria is the oldest and it's Nooria's responsibility to look after her, but Nooria looks at her adult body and points out that no one will believe she's a boy.

The suggestion that Parvana allow the adults to turn her into a boy is offensive to Parvana because in her mind, it means giving up everything she knows and loves about herself. Even if her hair isn't as beautiful as Nooria's, it's still something that makes Parvana who she is. Further, the frantic suggestion that Nooria turn into a boy instead reveals that Parvana believes this is too much to ask. And indeed, it's a lot of responsibility to place on an 11-year-old. But given the circumstances, there's little else the family can do to make ends meet.



Parvana snaps that she'll be curvy soon, but Mother heads off the fight by saying they'll deal with that later. For now, the fact remains that Parvana is the only one who can play the part. Mrs. Weera says that this has to be Parvana's decision. They can force her to cut her **hair**, but Parvana has to be willing and able to play the part in the market. Realizing that Mrs. Weera is right, Parvana agrees. Knowing it's her choice makes it easier. Nooria announces that she'll cut Parvana's hair, but Mother takes the scissors and Hossain's clothes and leads Parvana into the washroom. Parvana watches in the mirror as Mother cuts her hair off at her neck. Mother holds the chunk up and suggests they keep it tied with a ribbon, but Parvana refuses. Her hair doesn't seem important anymore.

Mrs. Weera's ability to present this to Parvana as a choice helps Parvana see that she does have a choice—and if she chooses not to play along, the fact remains that her family will starve. Knowing this, the choice becomes clear. And with that choice, the lopped-off hair comes to represent a younger, more immature version of Parvana. Cutting off her hair helps Parvana see that she can mold herself to become the kind of person she wants to be—and her willingness to agree to the plan suggests she wants to be someone who cares for her family and makes the necessary sacrifices to do so.



Mother continues to cut. Parvana starts to feel like a different person as her forehead gets bigger and her ears stick out. Her **hair** curls, and the short cut makes her eyes look bigger. Parvana decides she has a nice face. When Mother announces that she's done, she leaves Parvana alone to change. Parvana rubs her hands over her head and decides she likes it. She pulls on Hossain's pale green shalwar kameez. Though the trousers are too long, if she rolls them up they fit okay. The shirt has pockets, which is a nice change from girls' clothes. When Mother asks if Parvana is finished, Parvana steps out. Maryam looks confused until she realizes it's Parvana. Mother says "Hossain" and looks ready to cry, so Nooria insults Parvana as a distraction.

Mother hands Parvana a white cap with beautiful embroidery, gives Parvana money and a scarf, and then sends her out. Parvana reaches for her chador, but Nooria reminds her she won't need it. Suddenly terrified that someone will recognize her, Parvana pleads with Mother to not force her to go out. Nooria nastily accuses Parvana of being scared, but Parvana spits that it's easy to call her scared when Nooria is safe inside. Parvana slams the door on her way out. At first, she's nervous, but no one pays her any attention. She realizes that while she tried to act invisible as a girl in the market, now, she's actually invisible—she's just another boy in the market.

Parvana boldly purchases tea and rice from a grocer who's grumpy, but not because Parvana is a girl. She then buys onions. When she returns home, Parvana proudly and excitedly announces that she was successful, but Maryam is the only one who seems excited. Mother is back on the toshak and Ali sits next to her, trying to get her attention. Nooria hands Parvana the bucket; she has laundry to catch up on. She explains that Mother is sad after seeing Hossain's clothes and because Mrs. Weera went home. When Parvana finishes, Nooria suggests that Parvana stay in her boys' clothes in case someone comes by. She says that Mother will have to get used to it. Parvana notices how old and tired Nooria looks and offers to help with supper, but Nooria nastily refuses. Mother tries to be cheerful at supper but has a hard time looking at Parvana.

Simply experiencing what it's like to wear boys' clothes gives Parvana a sense of what's possible now that people don't see her as a girl. With pockets, she can carry money, candy, or whatever small items she finds—something she couldn't do before. This gives her more control over how she conducts her life. It's also telling that it's only once her hair is gone that Parvana decides she has a nice face. This suggests that her hair and the immaturity it represented is what was holding her back before.



It's worth considering that while Parvana says that Nooria is safe inside, the Taliban arrived to arrest Father with no knock, warrant, or reason—and they could likely stop in to harass the women for no reason too. Being home may seem safer than being out, but it's not exactly safe. This speaks again to Parvana's immaturity. Her discovery that she's invisible as a boy, however, helps Parvana see that by changing her identity, she can find a sense of freedom and agency that's entirely new.



Even as Nooria seems to treat Parvana as more of an equal at times during this passage, she's still unable to let go of their childish feud. This speaks to how slow and difficult change within families can be—both Parvana and Nooria need to dedicate themselves to changing and focus on the bigger picture of the family's survival if they want to develop a better relationship. This passage also charts how Nooria is beginning to prioritize the family's wellbeing over Mother's comfort. This is why she suggests that Parvana stay in the boys' clothes, even though doing so is emotionally painful for Mother.



CHAPTER 7

After breakfast the next morning, Mother sends Parvana back to the market with Father's writing things. Parvana is excited; if she can make money, she might not have to do housework ever again. She spreads her blanket where Father always sat, next to a wall of a house. There's a window, painted black, above her spot. She remembers how Father said that if they sit in the same spot every day, people will remember them and come to them. Today, her name is Kaseem. She's Father's nephew, come to help since Father is ill—saying he's ill is safer than admitting he's in jail. Parvana spreads her blanket and waits for customers.

No one stops for the first hour. Men walk by and look at Parvana, and she fears someone will realize she's a girl. When someone finally stops, Parvana trembles with fear. It's a Taliban soldier. In Pashtu, he asks if she reads letters. Parvana says she reads and writes in Dari and Pashtu. The soldier pulls something out of his pocket and sits down beside her. He hands her an old letter to read. The stamp is German and it's addressed to Fatima Azima. The soldier says she was his wife. The writer, Fatima's aunt, writes that she won't be around for Fatima's wedding, but she's glad to be in Germany away from the fighting. She knows Fatima's father will have chosen a good husband and wishes Fatima happiness and sons. She asks that Fatima keep the letter once Fatima and her husband return to Afghanistan.

The soldier is silent. Parvana asks if she should read the letter again, but the soldier shakes his head and takes the letter back. Parvana notices a tear in the soldier's eye. He says that his wife is dead. He found the letter in her things and wanted to know what it said. Remembering what Father did, Parvana asks if she should write a reply. The soldier shakes his head and pays Parvana. He walks away. Parvana is confused. To her, the Taliban are just men who beat women and arrest people like Father. She wonders if they feel sorrow, too. It's very confusing. She thinks about the soldier throughout the day.

Just before lunch, a man stops and asks the price for the red shalwar kameez. Mother didn't tell Parvana what to ask, but Parvana remembers how Mother used to argue with vendors to get a lower price. Parvana thinks of all the hard work that her aunt put into the shalwar kameez and names a price. She and the customer haggle and finally agree on a price. It feels so good to make money that Parvana almost doesn't regret selling it. Parvana stays for a few more hours until she realizes she has to go to the bathroom. Since there's nowhere to safely go in the market, she packs up her things. She whispers to the sky for Father to come back and movement from the window above catches her eye. She heads home, proud of herself.

As the boy Kaseem, Parvana has to take on more responsibility than she ever has before—but when she realizes she'll get to make money and evade housework, her newfound responsibility doesn't seem so bad. With this, the novel begins to show that as Parvana gets practice making decisions for herself and being independent as Kaseem, she'll find a satisfying new sense of agency that's greater than she ever expected to get before.



This is a terrifying experience for Parvana. The Taliban, in her mind, aren't normal men with letters from loved ones—they're cutthroat, bloodthirsty soldiers who oppress, hurt, and kill people. This letter, however, helps Parvana see that the women in relationships with these soldiers share many of the same concerns Parvana and her family does. This writer left Afghanistan, just like many of Parvana's friends and family members did, presumably to escape the conflict and bombings in Afghanistan.



In this moment, the Taliban soldier begins to look a little more human to Parvana. This doesn't excuse the Taliban's actions, but it highlights Parvana's growing maturity and more nuanced understanding of the world. She begins to understand that families and love bind people together, no matter what their political or religious ideology may be.



Parvana has grown a lot over the course of her one day in the market. She's started to understand that everyone, no matter how seemingly evil they are, is human; she's learned that she's capable of passing as a boy; and she's learned that it's satisfying to make money and support her family even if doing so is a major risk. Through these leaps, she becomes more comfortable with her identity as Kaseem and in her newfound freedom. This doesn't mean she's entirely independent, but she's now more capable of acting independently.



CHAPTER 8

When Parvana gets home, Mrs. Weera is there and announces that she's moving in this afternoon. Parvana wants to return to the market, but she's happy to help Mrs. Weera move. Mother announces that she and Mrs. Weera are going to start a magazine and praises Parvana for her earnings. Nooria quips that Father would've made more but seems to immediately regret saying this. Parvana is too happy to care. After lunch, she follows Mrs. Weera through the city. Mrs. Weera still walks like a gym teacher, as though she's going to gather up stray students. She comments that the Taliban don't usually bother women alone with children, but she's not concerned if the Taliban *do* stop them—she can outrun and outfight them, and she'll lecture them if need be. Parvana mentions that she saw a Taliban cry earlier, but Mrs. Weera doesn't hear her.

In her basement apartment, Mrs. Weera explains that she and her granddaughter are the last of the Weeras. Everyone else died from bombs, war, or pneumonia. Parvana helps Mrs. Weera load her few items onto a loaned cart. Mrs. Weera shows Parvana a medal she managed to save. She proudly explains that she won the medal for being the fastest woman runner in Afghanistan. They finish the move quickly. Parvana, still energetic, offers to fetch water and take Maryam with her. Maryam is thrilled and Mrs. Weera insists that it's safe now that Parvana is a boy. Unfortunately, Maryam's sandals are too small, since she hasn't worn them in over a year. Since the sandals are plastic, Mrs. Weera decides they'll save them for Ali. She wraps Maryam's feet in cloth for today; tomorrow, Parvana will buy new sandals.

Mrs. Weera warns Parvana to be careful, since Maryam's feet will be tender. Before Mother can object, Maryam and Parvana hurry outside. Fetching water takes a long time. Maryam wants to look at everything, but she has little muscle after a year inside. Parvana helps her down the stairs and shows Maryam the tap. Maryam giggles as she washes her face and then follows Parvana back to the apartment. The next day, Parvana buys Maryam sandals and Maryam begins accompanying Parvana to the tap every afternoon. Though Parvana comes home at midday, she wishes there was a latrine in the market so she could stay out all day.

Father couldn't convince Mother to continue her writing, but Mrs. Weera is clearly making headway. This speaks to friendship's power to bring about positive change in people—sometimes, friends can have more of an effect than even close, loving family members. It's telling that Parvana notes Mrs. Weera's confident gait and attitude. By noticing Mrs. Weera's fearlessness, Parvana begins to see that there are more ways to resist the Taliban's rule—at least for Mrs. Weera, one of them is simply to act unafraid and as though nothing is different. The magazine, too, is a form of resistance.



Like Parvana's family, Mrs. Weera is mourning an Afghanistan that doesn't exist anymore. In that old Afghanistan, women were celebrated for their physical achievements in addition to their intellectual ones—but now, under the Taliban's rule, women are valued for neither. Parvana is so energetic and willing to take Maryam to fetch water in part because she feels like she now has purpose. Helping Father was also purposeful, but that help didn't give her the opportunity to move around independently like she gets to today.



Maryam's obvious shock and awe at the world outside illuminates another consequence of the conflicts in Afghanistan and the Taliban's rule in particular: young children like Maryam and Ali don't even know what Afghanistan is really like, since they're stuck inside. Because they don't have this information, it's harder for them to develop a sense of who they are and where they fit into the world. This also has potentially dire consequences for later, too: having never been outside, Maryam would never be able to do what Parvana is doing—going to the market, fetching water, and feeding the family—if the necessity for that were to arise.



A week after she begins working, Parvana suggests that she could escort Mother and Nooria so they can get fresh air, too. Mrs. Weera insists this is a grand idea, but Nooria snaps that she doesn't want Parvana to escort her. Mother cuts Nooria off and says that Ali needs to get out and Parvana can't manage both children at the same time. Mother ignores Mrs. Weera's insistence that she needs to get out too. So after this, every day after lunch, Parvana takes Nooria, Ali, and Maryam outside for an hour. Ali was only a few months old when the Taliban came, so he's never been outside. Nooria suns her face when there's no one around, and sometimes Nooria and Mrs. Weera wash the younger children in the tap.

Parvana makes less money than Father did, but she's able to feed the family. The younger children seem happier and livelier, but Nooria complains that they're harder to look after now that they've experienced the outdoors. Parvana hands over her earnings every day after work, and sometimes Mother accompanies Parvana to the market to shop. Parvana loves the time with Mother and she loves being in the market. She misses Father, but she gets used to his absence. One afternoon, however, she sees Father in the market. She races after him, shouting, and throws her arms around him—but looks up into a strange face. The man comforts Parvana as she cries and tells her not to give up hope.

Another afternoon, Parvana stands up to pack up and notices a small square of embroidered wool. She looks up to the black window above and wonders if it came from that apartment. Parvana decides the wind carried it to her blanket but a few days later, she discovers a beaded bracelet on her blanket. She looks up and sees that the window is open. Stepping closer, Parvana catches sight of the woman inside. The Window Woman smiles and shuts her window. A few days later, Parvana laughs as a tea boy almost collides with a donkey. Another tea boy trips and spills empty cups all over her blanket. As Parvana helps pick up the cups, she sees the boy's face and gasps. He's not a boy; he's a girl from Parvana's class.

Mother's pride and unwillingness to accept what's happening in her country means that she's still depriving herself the opportunity to get out. Though the novel never condemns Mother for her choice to stay inside, it is possible to read Mother's choice as giving in to the Taliban's demands. However, one must also balance this interpretation with the fact that she's still working on the magazine and turned Parvana into a boy, so it's possible to see that resistance can take many different forms.



Even though Parvana has a great deal of independence and agency in the market, her willingness to hand over all her earnings to Mother at the end of every day speaks to how young and dependent she still is on her mother for guidance. Mother's choice to go out with Parvana suggests that she's beginning to accept her new normal and figure out ways to work within this system. The heartbreaking brush with the man who looks like Father reinforces that though Parvana is growing, she's still a child who needs and wants her parents to care for her.



The Window Woman's offering helps Parvana see that friendship and camaraderie can take many different forms; it doesn't have to look like Mrs. Weera stampeding into Parvana's life to fix things. Rather, friendship can also be acts of quiet support and the recognition that another person is there. When Parvana runs into an old school friend, this shows her that she's not alone in having to shoulder so much responsibility.



CHAPTER 9

Parvana whispers and confirms that the girl is Shauzia. Shauzia says her name now is Shafiq and Parvana says that she's Kaseem. Shauzia says that she's working, the same as Parvana, and promises to come back later. Stunned, Parvana watches Shauzia for a while and then decides she could put Shauzia in danger by staring. Parvana and Shauzia were just acquaintances at school, but Parvana is thrilled to learn that there are other girls like her. At the end of the day, Shauzia offers Parvana some dried apricots and walks home with her. Shauzia has been working in the market for six months, since her brother went to Iran and her father died. Shauzia isn't convinced that Father is ever getting out of prison, but the girls change the subject and discuss work.

Shauzia says she'd like to sell things off a tray instead of carry tea; it's more lucrative. Parvana is intrigued, since her family seldom has money for kerosene and thus spends evenings in the dark. When they get to Parvana's apartment, Shauzia accompanies Parvana inside and Mother greets her warmly, though they've never met before. Mother assures Shauzia that she can visit any time, and Mrs. Weera wants to know if Shauzia has been keeping up with her studies. Unfortunately, the relatives Shauzia lives with don't believe girls should be educated, but they don't mind that Shauzia dresses like a boy to work—it's what allows them to eat. Mrs. Weera announces that she's thinking of starting a secret school and invites Shauzia to come. She assures the girls that the Taliban aren't invited.

After Shauzia leaves, Mother says she'd like to visit Shauzia's mother to get her story for her magazine. When Parvana asks, Mrs. Weera says that they're going to smuggle their stories to Pakistan, print the magazine there, and then smuggle the magazines back into Afghanistan. Suspicious that the women are going to turn *her* into a magazine smuggler, Parvana asks who's going to smuggle things. Mother says that they've connected with other women, some with sympathetic husbands. Nooria is very excited about the school. Parvana isn't excited about the prospect of having Nooria as a teacher, but she stays quiet. It's nice to see Nooria so excited.

Parvana and Shauzia see each other nearly every day in the market. Parvana always waits for Shauzia to come find her, since she's too afraid to venture into the crowded market. One afternoon during a lull, something lands on Parvana's head; it clearly came from the Window Woman. It's a beautiful embroidered handkerchief. Shauzia runs up before Parvana can look up at the Window Woman in thanks and says she found a way they can make money. She doesn't like it, and Parvana won't either—but it pays.

The recognition that staring at Shauzia could put her in danger speaks to how finely tuned Parvana's social skills are after spending several weeks working on her own in the market. She knows that given the tense climate, the Taliban will be on the lookout for anything suspicious—and she and Shauzia are clearly at risk. Shauzia's story is surprisingly similar to Parvana's, which suggests that their situations aren't so different from others in Kabul. There could be many little girls dressed as boys working to feed their families.



Mrs. Weera is able to pick out some hypocrisy on the part of Shauzia's relatives: they don't want girls to gain power through education, but they're fine giving Shauzia the power of being a boy if it means they can eat. In essence, they're fine with what Shauzia does as long as it benefits them—and in their mind, there's no way that education could do more than benefit Shauzia alone. This begins to suggest that sometimes, family isn't worth one's whole support or loyalty. To her family, Shauzia seems like little more than a bargaining chip, not a real person with thoughts and feelings of her own.



Both Mother and Nooria's excitement about the magazine and the school speak to how fulfilling it can be to come up with these ways to resist. It gives them purpose and something to work for, just as being a boy in the market gives Parvana something to work for. As they discover these different ways of resisting, they're also able to take more pride in who they are as individuals and as resilient Afghans.



Parvana's unwillingness to venture into the market speaks to the fact that while she does have a lot of freedom right now, she's not comfortable exercising those freedoms fully yet. Part of this is likely simply because her job doesn't require her to interact with too many people, and some of it likely has to do with having been socialized as a girl.



CHAPTER 10

Parvana doesn't tell Mother that Shauzia wants to go dig up bones. The next day at the market, Parvana worries that this is a horrible idea, but Shauzia only says that she's glad Parvana brought her blanket—they can use it to carry lots of bones. Nervously, Parvana follows Shauzia and a group of boys. They walk to a part of Kabul that rockets destroyed, about an hour away. Bombs didn't just fall on buildings, though—they also fell on the cemetery and disturbed the graves. Bones stick up from the earth, and Shauzia and Parvana can smell something rotting. They watch the other boys start digging and Shauzia points out the bone broker, the man who buys bones. She doesn't know what he does with them, but she doesn't care.

The girls decide to start with a grave that already has a bone sticking out to minimize the risk of discovering a decomposing body. They spread out their blanket and stare nervously at each other and the grave. Shauzia announces that they're here to make money and pulls out the bone sticking out of the ground. Parvana digs with a bit of board and starts pulling bones out too. She wonders aloud whether the dead would mind being dug up. Shauzia suggests that the dead wouldn't mind if they were generous in life. Parvana asks Shauzia if *she'd* mind, but Shauzia can't answer.

A minute later, Parvana digs up the skull and proudly holds it out to Shauzia. Shauzia and Parvana name the skull "Mr. Skull" and prop him on the gravestone to be their mascot. They take Mr. Skull with them to the next five graves and arrange the other skulls they find next to him. After a while, Parvana whispers that she has to pee. Shauzia points to a doorway in a ruined building and offers to keep watch over the bones. As Parvana starts to head for the doorway, Shauzia jokingly tells Parvana to watch out for land mines. Parvana remembers Father saying that "Kabul has more land mines than flowers," and she remembers a presentation in school about what land mines look like. Some are disguised as toys and are designed to blow up children.

The prospect of disturbing graves to sell the bones is understandably frightening to Parvana—the act of burying a body is, after all, meant to protect it from this kind of disturbance and most cultures see this as disrespectful. However, given the difficult times, this seems like one of the best ways for Shauzia and Parvana to make money—and given their families' poverty, it's imperative that they figure something out so everyone can continue to eat.



The discussion of whether the dead would mind being dug up betrays just how uncomfortable the girls are with what they're doing. Shauzia's unwillingness to answer whether she minds suggests that she probably would mind—even though she'd also probably consider herself kind and generous. Her clear discomfort with digging up the bones but her willingness to do so anyways highlights the lengths that people in situations like this must go in order to survive.



Naming and hanging onto Mr. Skull reads as somewhat immature. However, it's also a way for the girls to try to deal with the horrifying nature of what they're doing. As Mr. Skull, they can come up with a persona for the body they're exhuming and create a story that gives them permission to dig. Parvana's fear of land mines is understandable, especially given that a land mine tragically killed her older brother, Hossain.



Parvana nervously peers in the doorway and wonders if a land mine destroyed the building. She can't hold it until she gets home later, and she definitely can't pee outside the door—everyone in the graveyard will discover she's a girl. Her only option is to hope she doesn't explode. Though Parvana jokes with Shauzia upon her return that she kicked the land mines away, she's shaking. Once Shauzia uses the bathroom, the girls drag their bundle of bones to the broker. They silently accept the money, afraid that the broker made a mistake. When they're out of earshot, Parvana whispers that it took her three days last week to make this much money. Shauzia hands her half and they agree to keep digging. Parvana tries to come up with an excuse for Mother as to why she didn't come home in the afternoon.

A few hours later, the cloud cover clears and sunlight illuminates the graveyard. Parvana nudges Shauzia and they look out over the scene of dirty boys digging up gleaming white bones. Parvana says they must remember this in the future, even if no one believes it actually happened. They work for the rest of the afternoon. When they're finished, Shauzia says she's going to keep some of her money for herself so she can buy her trays; her family will just spend it if she hands it all over. Neither girl wants to tell their families what they did all day, but they agree to dig again tomorrow. Before heading home, Parvana washes herself in the tap, clothes and all. She hides her extra money in her pack and puts her head back under the tap, hoping to wash the image of Mr. Skull from her mind.

CHAPTER 11

Mother rushes to Parvana as soon as Parvana gets home. She's very concerned. Suddenly, Parvana feels overwhelmed by her day. She throws her arms around Mother's neck and sobs. When she's calm, she looks down and admits she dug up graves. She tells them everything. Mother is disgusted that Afghanistan has come to this point, but Mrs. Weera notes that she's heard of people using bones for chicken feed, soap, buttons, and cooking oil. Nooria asks if it was worth it and Parvana lays out all her money. Mrs. Weera is amazed, but Mother insists that they don't need money badly enough to justify digging up bones. Parvana tells Mother she's going to keep digging so that she and Shauzia can purchase trays and things to sell.

For Parvana, death is less terrifying than being found out to be a girl. This highlights how desperate she is to help her family by earning money. The money, however, makes the fear and the danger seem worth it—and makes lying to Mother about her whereabouts seem like a reasonable plan. In this moment, then, Parvana is learning to exercise her independence and her agency in a way that she knows Mother wouldn't approve of. She becomes more mature and adult as she does this, as she begins to see the sense in lying if it means the family can eat.



Even if Parvana is well aware that she made more money today than she ever dreamed of making, this doesn't mean that the experience of digging up bones wasn't horrifying and disturbing. This is why she tries to wash the image of Mr. Skull out of her mind in the tap; she's struggling to reconcile what she did with the knowledge that she can now feed her family for a while. Shauzia, however, shows that she's a bit more independent when she decides to save money for herself. To her, it's more important to move up in business than it is to demonstrate her loyalty to her family.



Mother's pride shines through again here. While it's perfectly reasonable for her to object to Parvana digging up bones on moral grounds, the fact remains that the family needs the money. When Parvana stand up to Mother and insist that she's not going to quit, Parvana attempts to recreate her sense of agency that she has out in the world at home. She essentially asks Mother to treat her like an adult capable of making decisions on her own, something that Mother understandably finds difficult.



Surprisingly, Nooria backs Parvana up. She points out that they can afford nan, rice, and tea, but they can't pay rent or buy fuel for the lamps. Mother snaps that she's glad Father isn't here to witness this disrespect, but Mrs. Weera points out that Father isn't here—and people have to do “unusual things” to get by right now. Mother finally relents and sends Parvana off with a packet of nan for lunch. Parvana can't bring herself to eat in the graveyards, so she always gives it to a beggar. After two weeks, she and Shauzia have enough money for trays and they decide to buy cigarettes, matches, and gum. Shauzia is elated to not have to work as a tea boy; Parvana is just glad to be done digging up bones.

Parvana spends her first morning back in the market writing letters. The Window Woman drops a red wooden bead. As Parvana rolls it between her fingers, she thinks of Nooria. Nooria hasn't been nasty to Parvana in a while. Parvana wonders if she's changed or if Nooria has. In any case, arguing with Nooria no longer makes sense. In the afternoon, Parvana meets up with Shauzia to wander the market. Selling off of the trays isn't as lucrative as digging up bones, but they make more than they did in their previous jobs.

One Friday afternoon, Shauzia points to a crowd of people entering a sports stadium. Parvana is elated; they can make a fortune selling to people who will want to smoke and chew gum while they watch a soccer game. They run to the entrance, dodge the Taliban guards at the door, and slip inside. The girls are intimidated by the full stands, so they stick together as they head up into the stands. Shauzia and Parvana note that nobody is cheering and nobody seems happy. It doesn't seem right. Frightened, the girls watch Taliban soldiers walk onto the field. They decide to leave once the game starts as to not draw attention to themselves, but then, men in handcuffs walk onto the field. Two soldiers carry on a heavy table. This looks nothing like a soccer game.

The girls are confused, especially when a soldier unties one of the prisoners and bends him over the table. Others hold him down. A soldier raises a sword and cuts off the prisoner's arm. Shauzia and the prisoner both scream. Parvana puts a hand over Shauzia's mouth and drags her to the floor. A kind voice above them murmurs to Shauzia and Parvana to keep their heads down; they're too young to see this. Other men around them help gather the scattered gum and cigarettes, and the girls huddle on the floor as the Taliban cuts off six more arms. The soldiers call out that the prisoners are thieves. Finally, the kind man tells the girls it's over. He and a few other men escort them out of the stadium. As she leaves, Parvana sees a young soldier proudly holding a rope with four severed hands tied to it.

When Nooria backs Parvana up, it reveals that, as the situation has gotten worse, Nooria and Parvana have formed an unlikely alliance. Nooria is far more willing to look for different ways to rebel and get by, so she feels she has little reason to object to Parvana's unconventional and questionably moral choices. And in the end, survival wins out and Mother relents.



Parvana's ability to reflect on her potential changes speaks to how much she's matured in the last few months. She now has the self-knowledge and insight to examine her own behavior and reactions to the circumstances, and she's able to see Nooria as more than just an obnoxious and bossy older sister. It's likely true that both girls are growing and maturing.



This incident betrays the girls' youth and their naiveté. There's no indication that soccer or sports of any kind are still on under the Taliban, and this should read as a red flag to the girls. However, once they're in the stadium and begin to see that this clearly isn't a sporting event, the girls realize they're stuck. Surrounded by the Taliban, it would be an especially horrible time for someone to see through their disguises. In this instance, their agency and ability to move freely through Kabul hasn't prepared them to witness some of the darker aspects of the city.



As horrifying as this experience is, it's important to pay attention to the kind men who protect Shauzia and Parvana, comfort them, and get them safely out of the stadium. Clearly, there are more friends in Kabul than the girls are aware of—and there are lots of people who don't agree with what the Taliban is doing. This suggests that if the girls and their families were perhaps more willing to trust their neighbors, they may find that their community is much bigger than they thought—and that the community cares deeply about preserving the innocence of youth in any way possible.



CHAPTER 12

For the next few days, Parvana stays home from the market. She takes Nooria and the little ones outside, but she tells Mother that she doesn't want to see anything ugly for a while. Mother and Mrs. Weera already know about what goes on at the stadium on Fridays from other people in their women's group. Mother asks what century they're living in. Parvana wants to ask if Father will end up in the stadium, but she stays quiet. Instead, she fills her time helping Maryam learn to count, listening to Mrs. Weera's stories, and trying to learn how to mend from Nooria. When the bread runs out, nobody says anything. Parvana gets up and goes to work anyway. She knows she must.

Shauzia is happy to see Parvana again and wishes she could get a few quiet days for herself—her grandparents don't like her mother, and her mother hates living with the grandparents, so everyone is grumpy at her house. Shauzia leads Parvana to a low wall to share a secret: she's saving money so she can escape. She explains that she'll stay until next spring, and she insists that she wants to still be a boy then—if she goes back to being a girl, she'll be stuck at home. She wants to go to France and says brightly that in all the pictures of France, there's sun and flowers. Bad days must not be so bad there. She'll get there by traveling to Pakistan with nomads and then getting on a boat when she reaches the Arabian Sea.

Parvana can't imagine going on a journey like this alone, but Shauzia insists that no one will pay attention to a little orphan boy. Her only concern is that she hasn't waited too long. Her body is already starting to change, and if she starts to look too much like a girl before she leaves, she'll be stuck here forever. Thinking hard, Parvana remembers how Nooria's body changed and says that she thinks Shauzia has time. She asks how Shauzia's family will eat without her. Shauzia is clearly upset, but she insists she *has* to escape—leaving might make her a bad person, but she'll die if she stays. Parvana remembers how her parents used to fight. Mother wanted to leave Afghanistan. Parvana wonders why Mother didn't just go, but then answers the question herself: Mother couldn't leave her four children.

Parvana laments that they can't be normal kids anymore. She wants to go to school and not have to work for her own food. Shauzia insists she could never go back and asks if Parvana wants to come with. Parvana declines—she doesn't think she can leave her family—but she tells Shauzia about the Window Woman and her gifts. Shauzia wonders if the woman is a princess and Parvana briefly imagines herself saving the princess and riding away with her to safety.

Mother and Mrs. Weera's willingness to let Parvana stay home shows that they're both learning to trust Parvana and respect her independence. They also understand that Parvana, as a child, never should've seen what she did—and so she needs time to process her trauma and recover from that ordeal. However, Parvana knows that she still has to care for her family and go back to work, even if she doesn't feel like it anymore.



Shauzia's plan to get to France is extremely simplistic and betrays just how young and innocent Shauzia is despite being so responsible and independent. It's also important to note that for Shauzia, she thrives on the freedom she has as a boy. For her, being a girl no longer seems interesting or worthwhile, given how limited of a life she'd have to leave. It's her sex itself, she sees, that's holding her back.



It's telling that Shauzia insists she's a bad person for wanting to leave. This drives home just how important it is in this community for children to care for their families. But Shauzia, being so independent, cannot abide by living her life as a girl when, in her experience, this means that she has no agency or say in her life. For Parvana, it's another major moment of growth when she realizes why Mother never chose to leave. While Parvana respects her friend's independence, Parvana also knows that for her—and for Mother—family comes first.



It's likely that Shauzia is a little further ahead of Parvana in her development, given that she has no interest in going back to being a child whom others care for. Parvana, however, also has guardians who care for her in a more respectful way than Shauzia's relatives seem to, so reverting to being a dependent student might not seem quite as stifling to her as it does to Shauzia.



As summer arrives, Parvana spends her days running through the market with Shauzia, selling dried fruit and nuts alongside her cigarettes. The girls are shy, so they prefer for their customers to notice them and don't like to get in people's way. Parvana is exhausted and wants to be a bored student again. The marketplace no longer seems interesting or funny, and everyone she sees is hungry and sick. Flowers bloom just like they used to, but Parvana's small apartment gets hot and stuffy. On days when Parvana makes a little extra, she purchases fruit from the fertile valleys that the Taliban hasn't bombed. As tribal people flood Kabul with goods to sell, some stop to purchase cigarettes or to have Parvana read or write a letter. She always asks them about their homes and tells their stories to her family when she gets home.

Mother and Mrs. Weera start their school and are very careful to avoid the Taliban. Nooria teaches five girls about Maryam's age, never in the same place or at the same time. However, Nooria can only do so much with her students with so little time and such limited supplies. Every few weeks, another gift from the Window Woman lands on Parvana's blanket. It's like she's telling Parvana that she's there in the only way she can. One afternoon, though, Parvana hears an angry man shouting and a woman screaming inside. When she hears thuds, she stands up but can't see through the painted window. A man behind Parvana holds out a letter and tells her to forget about what goes on in other people's homes. Though Parvana plans to tell her family about it that night, Mother announces that Nooria is getting married.

CHAPTER 13

The next afternoon, while Parvana and Nooria are out on a walk, Parvana points out that Nooria has never met the groom. Nooria reminds Parvana that the groom used to be their neighbor—and marrying will allow her to go back to school. She'll live in Mazar-e-Sharif, where the Taliban don't have control, and the groom's parents will even send her to university. The letter detailing all of this was passed from woman to woman through Mother and Mrs. Weera's women's group, but Parvana is still skeptical. Nooria notes that she hates living under the Taliban and doesn't feel like she can make a difference in Kabul. In Mazar, she can finish school, get a job, and go out without a burqa. This is what she wants.

It's hard for Parvana to find meaning and purpose now that she's seen so many awful things—and since nothing seems to change much. Because of this, she fixates on how good she had it when she was still in school and had competent, respected adults to care for her. This again reveals her immaturity. However, she still finds ways to look for beauty in her day-to-day life. She does this by asking for the tribal people's stories. As she does this, she also learns more about her country and what's going on far away from Kabul, which is important for her to learn as she figures out what it means to be an Afghan woman.



Hearing the Window Woman's husband beat her impresses upon Parvana that while she, Shauzia, and Nooria might have a degree of power in their homes for various reasons, not all women enjoy that kind of power. Many are at the mercy of their husbands, some of whom seem to support the Taliban's increased restrictions on women. The man who tells Parvana to not worry about the abuse happening inside essentially tells her that it's inappropriate to blend public and private life. It's not acceptable to take issue with what happens behind closed doors—even if what happens is dangerous or cruel.



For Nooria, marriage doesn't represent the same kind of oppression or violence as it does for the Window Woman, for instance. For Nooria, marriage will allow her to become more independent, not less. This illustrates how Nooria has to come up with different ways to leverage her femininity to make a better life for herself, just as Parvana has to transform herself into a boy to find any sense of agency. Marriage, for Nooria, is its own form of rebellion, just as Parvana's identity as Kaseem is for her.



Over the next few days while Parvana is out, the adults make plans. Parvana is indignant when Mother announces that they'll all go to Mazar for the wedding and then will return to Kabul in October, leaving Nooria with her husband. Parvana insists that they have to be home for Father, but Mrs. Weera assures Parvana that she'll stay and look after Father if he comes home. Unconvinced, Parvana stamps her feet and refuses to go. Mother says that Parvana must come since she's a child. When Parvana stamps her feet again, Mrs. Weera sends her to get water. After three days of glowering, Mother tells Parvana that they're leaving her behind. They can't trust everyone to keep Parvana's secret in Mazar—and though Parvana is getting her way, Mother reiterates that a child has no right to refuse to do as she's told.

Parvana's glad to stay, but she also sulks that she doesn't get to go. The next day, she tells Shauzia that nothing makes her happy anymore. Shauzia says that she feels the same way. She used to think that having the tray would fix her problems, but her family still goes hungry. Shauzia suggests that someone should bomb Afghanistan so they can all start over, but Parvana points out that they've already done that. It didn't work.

A woman and her husband from Mother's women's group will escort Mother, Nooria, and the younger children to Mazar. Nooria is nervous, but she happily tells Parvana that she's going to tear up her burqa as soon as she's out of Taliban territory. The next day, Parvana buys food for her family's journey and buys a fancy pen as a gift for Nooria. Mrs. Weera soothes Mother and assures her that she and Parvana will be fine in Kabul—and by the time Mother returns, the magazine will be ready to distribute. Early the next morning, Mother, Nooria, and the little ones settle in the bed of a pickup. With tears in their eyes, Nooria and Parvana say goodbye. Parvana assures Nooria they'll see each other soon—Nooria's new husband will send her back once he realizes how bossy she is.

With most of the family gone, there are fewer chores and more free time. Parvana begins taking Father's secret books out so she can read. Mrs. Weera believes it's important to trust Parvana and give her agency. She points out that in some parts of Afghanistan, girls are already married and having babies at age 11. She tells Parvana to keep some pocket money, so Parvana treats Shauzia to lunch some days. They guard each other while they use the bathroom and work through the day. Parvana prefers it that way. Near the end of August, Parvana gets caught in a rainstorm at the market. She races into a bombed-out building to keep her cigarettes dry. Not long after she finds a dry spot to sit, Parvana falls asleep. She wakes up much later and hears a woman crying.

Again, Parvana has now spent several months making her own decisions and dictating her own schedule. Therefore, it's offensive to her when Mother insists that Parvana needs to give up this freedom to accompany the rest of the family to Mazar. However, it's worth noting that Parvana doesn't want to stay just for her own gain. She wants to stay for Father, which reiterates that she's very focused on caring for her family by becoming more independent.



In this conversation, Shauzia and Parvana essentially come to the bleak conclusion that they can't win. Right now, Afghanistan isn't a place where they can easily feed their families and get ahead, no matter what they do to try and get there—but they also understand, on some level, that they have to work with what they have.



With the rest of Parvana's family leaving, Mrs. Weera now takes on the role of Parvana's sole guardian. In this moment, then, the novel shows clearly that friends can be just as important and meaningful as blood family—they can step in to help out where family can't manage on their own. The tearful goodbye between Parvana and Nooria speaks to how much their relationship has grown over the course of the novel. However, it's still a sibling relationship, filled with quips and insults, which is a reminder that the girls are still children no matter how grown-up they seem.



Mrs. Weera recognizes that at Parvana's age, she's ready to take on responsibility and think for herself. Mrs. Weera makes sure to give Parvana the tools she needs—a home, pocket money, emotional support—in order to be more independent. It's telling, too, that Parvana uses her pocket money to buy Shauzia lunch. With this, Parvana demonstrates that even as she becomes more independent, her friends will remain an important part of her life.



CHAPTER 14

Parvana cautiously calls out, but she can't see anything in the darkness. She lights three of her matches and finally finds the woman huddled against a wall. The woman is crying too hard to give her name, so Parvana introduces herself using both her female and male identities. Parvana invites the woman to come home with her, but she realizes they have a problem when she lights another match: the woman isn't wearing a burqa. Parvana offers to go fetch one so the woman can come home with her, but the woman grabs onto Parvana's arm. The woman doesn't let go, even when Parvana says she must go home so Mrs. Weera doesn't worry. Finally, Parvana offers the woman a snack and sits down to think.

Parvana decides that they should wait until dark and then head to her apartment together. The woman doesn't have a chador and Parvana doesn't have her scarf, so they'll have to hope no one sees them. They settle just inside the doorway so they can watch for the dark of night. Kabul has been under curfew for several decades and bombings destroyed most streetlights, so it's very dark at night. Mother used to lament that Kabul was once "the hot spot of central Asia" and reminisce about eating ice cream in the streets at midnight.

When it's dark, Parvana leads the woman out onto the street. She tells herself that she's **Malali**, though it's hard to feel the part with her tray of cigarettes. Parvana almost tells the woman to walk more quietly—the Taliban made it a crime for women to make noise while they walk—but she remembers that since this woman is out without a burqa and they're out after curfew, noise will be the least of their problems if they get caught. Parvana thinks back to the stadium and thinks she doesn't want to know what the Taliban might do to her. They avoid headlights, soldiers, and uneven pavement, but they finally reach the apartment.

Mrs. Weera hugs Parvana and the woman. Parvana quickly explains the situation and Mrs. Weera takes the woman to clean up. Parvana notices that the woman looks younger than Nooria. She sets out supper and finds clothes for the woman while Mrs. Weera and the woman are in the bathroom. When Mrs. Weera and the woman emerge, the woman looks exhausted but less terrified. She falls asleep quickly. It's not until the following night that the woman can speak. She introduces herself as Homa and says that she escaped from Mazar-e-Sharif just after the Taliban took the city. Homa explains that the Taliban went into every house looking for enemies. They took her father and brother outside and shot them, and then they shot Homa's mother when she hit the soldiers. Homa survived by hiding in a closet.

In this moment, Parvana has to use all the skills she's learned in order to figure out how to deal with this situation. It's important to recognize just how kind and caring Parvana is—it never occurs to her to abandon this woman, which is presumably what the Taliban would want her to do. Staying and trying to figure out how to help is a form of resistance that will help Parvana build up her community and make others feel safe and cared for.



Again, Mother's memories of what Kabul was once like make it even harder for Parvana to accept what Kabul is in the present. The city she knows definitely isn't one where it's possible or safe to eat ice cream in public at night, so while these memories help Parvana understand how Kabul has changed over the last few decades, they're less helpful as she tries to navigate the city now.



Reminding herself of Malali helps Parvana work up the courage to navigate the streets at night. Her understanding of just how dangerous this situation is and what the consequences might be if they're caught speak to her growing maturity and understanding of how this world works. In this sense, Parvana knows exactly who she is as an Afghan woman and what she must do to get by—and if she wants meaning in her life, she must resist the Taliban.



Once again, Mrs. Weera shows herself to be open and accepting of everyone who needs help. It's simply in her nature, the novel suggests, to do what she can to ease someone's way. Homa's story, however, makes it clear to Parvana her own family is in trouble—Homa came from the same city where Mother, Nooria, and the younger children are. That the Taliban has overtaken the city shows that this conflict is far from over, and it will be necessary for individuals like Parvana and Homa to continue to resist for some time.



Homa says that after a while, she went downstairs. Soldiers forbade her and others to move or cover their family members' bodies. They also told Homa to stay inside. She was so afraid that she left in the dark. As she ran, she saw wild dogs eating bodies. This was too much for her, so she hid in a truck among bundles. It stopped in Kabul, and she hid in the building where Parvana found her. Homa starts to sob and gasps that she left her family for the dogs to eat. Homa cries until she falls asleep.

Mrs. Weera assures Parvana that Mother and Nooria are safe, but Parvana feels hopeless. She crawls onto the toshak and stays there for two days. She insists to Mrs. Weera that the women in her family do this when they're sad, but Mrs. Weera points out that the women in Parvana's family *also* get up and fight back. Finally, late on the second day, Shauzia appears. Mrs. Weera takes Shauzia onto the landing and then, Shauzia sits beside Parvana. After talking for a bit, Shauzia says she doesn't like working alone and asks Parvana to come back. Parvana knows she can't refuse. Part of her wants to leave everything behind, but another part of her wants to be Shauzia's friend. Parvana returns to work, but she feels like she's living in a nightmare. Things start to look up when one afternoon, Parvana discovers two men helping Father to the apartment.

CHAPTER 15

Father is barely recognizable, but he's still Father. Parvana clings to him tightly. Mrs. Weera helps Father lie down and the two men who helped Father say that they found Father outside the prison, unable to go anywhere. They brought him in a cart. As the men have tea with Mrs. Weera, Parvana clings to Father and weeps, but she gets up and thanks the men before they leave. Over the next several days, Mrs. Weera nurses Father. He coughs and is very tired. Parvana feeds him warm broth, and eventually he grows strong enough to sit up, speak, and notice that Parvana is now a son. Parvana carries a lot of water too, since Father's body is covered in injuries and the dressings need constant washing. Homa keeps Mrs. Weera's granddaughter occupied so Father can rest.

Parvana is elated to have Father back. Homa has had some education, so one day, Parvana returns home to find Father and Homa speaking English to each other. Father jokingly asks Parvana if she brought another educated woman home. Everyone laughs when Parvana says she just brought home onions. This is the first time in a long time that people in Parvana's home have laughed. Now that Father is home, Parvana is hopeful that the rest of her family will return, too. She begins to chase after customers like the other boys and earns enough to purchase medicine for Father. She tells Shauzia one day that she feels like she's working for her family now.

While Parvana was capable of seeing the humanity in the Taliban soldier whose letter she read, the Taliban clearly have no interest in recognizing the humanity of the people they conquer. This makes it far easier for Parvana and Mrs. Weera to understand the necessity of continuing to resist.



Sometimes, Parvana suggests, people just need time to sit with their thoughts and grieve. While this is understandable, Mrs. Weera makes an important point: grieving is fine, but people cannot wallow in grief forever. Rather, they must get up and continue to fight back in every way they can. Shauzia's visit reminds Parvana that regardless of what happens to her family, she still has friends to fight for. Indeed, it's possible to credit Parvana's friends with her family's success and continued survival. Without Shauzia and Mrs. Weera, the family may have succumbed to hopelessness long ago.



Father's return reminds Parvana that it's possible—and necessary—to hope for the better. Sometimes, miracles do happen, and families can be reunited. And now that Parvana has Father to care for, it no longer seems like a burden to draw water. She's doing it to serve her family, and after being without for so long, this seems even more meaningful than it once did. Homa's behavior proves that there are many more helpful people in Kabul and Afghanistan, if only people are willing to trust each other.



With Father to care for, Parvana's sense of dignity and purpose returns. This again speaks to the power of familial relationships. Parvana's love for and loyalty to Father gives her the stamina and the drive to dedicate herself to her work, accept the responsibility and the independence, and do what she needs to do. And now that she's turned this corner, things seem much brighter at home, too. Laughing is, in its own way, a form of resistance—they can find joy where they may have thought before that there was just tragedy.



Shauzia says in reply that she's working to get away from Afghanistan. She recently heard her grandfather say that he's looking for a husband for her, and since Shauzia is so young, her bride price will be substantial. She says that her mother can't stand up for her, since her mother has nowhere else to go. Shauzia doesn't know what else she can do. Marriage will end her life, while getting out will give her a chance. Parvana doesn't know how to comfort Shauzia.

A few days later, a woman from the women's group visits Mrs. Weera with news that many people have fled Mazar and are living in refugee camps. Father says he'll never be truly well enough to go, but they should go look for Mother and the others anyway. They'll go as soon as he comes up with a way to travel. Father asks Parvana to carry a message to the men who helped him get home from prison. Parvana asks why the Taliban let Father go, but Father says he doesn't know—he doesn't even know why he was arrested in the first place.

Mrs. Weera, meanwhile, makes plans to go to Pakistan with Homa. She has a cousin in a refugee camp, and they'll meet up with other women's group members. If there's no school, they'll start one. Parvana suggests that Mrs. Weera take Shauzia, but Mrs. Weera is incredulous that Shauzia is going to abandon her family. Parvana half agrees with Mrs. Weera, but she also thinks that Shauzia has a right to look for a better life. She can't decide who's right.

Several days before she and Father leave, Parvana feels something hit her head. It's a tiny camel made of beads. Parvana is relieved that the Window Woman is alive and well enough to toss a gift down, and she tries to come up with a way to say goodbye. After lunch, she digs up wildflowers. She decides to plant them where she usually lays out her blanket; that way, the Window Woman will know she's not coming back. Parvana struggles to dig in the hard soil and several men watch and tease her. One old man helps Parvana plant the flowers and notes that Afghanistan has seen so much ugliness that Afghans have forgotten to enjoy beautiful things. He assures Parvana that though the plant looks scraggly now, it'll soon grow strong and healthy. When Parvana is certain that no one is watching, she waves at the window.

Unlike for Nooria, Shauzia's marriage would mean the end of her life and her independence as she knows it. Because of this, this is the final event that shows Shauzia that if she wants to maintain her independence, she must abandon her family and focus on friends instead. Even if Parvana doesn't know exactly how to comfort Shauzia, her attempts to do so are still more meaningful than what Shauzia's family is doing.



Because family is so important to Father and Parvana, they immediately resolve to go look for Mother and Nooria. There's simply no other option, since Mother, Nooria, and the children are some of the only people that Father and Parvana can trust. Father's lack of information about the Taliban's reasoning suggests that they're not acting on reason at all—they simply want to assert that they're powerful.



For as supportive as Mrs. Weera is of young girls having independence and say in their lives, it's somewhat surprising that she's so against taking Shauzia. However, Mrs. Weera reveals that she simply believes it's necessary to care for one's family instead. Parvana's willingness to not take a side shows that she's becoming more comfortable with situations that have moral questions with no clear answers.



While Mother and Nooria also often talk about how Afghanistan and Kabul used to be, this old man is the first to incorporate an older understanding of what the country is like with what it can be in the future. In helping Parvana plant the flowers and insisting that it's a very Afghan thing to do, the old man helps Parvana understand that as she grows up and becomes a proud, strong, confident Afghan woman, she needs to look for the beauty everywhere and spread beauty whenever she has the opportunity to do so. She also needs to care for her friends in every way possible, as she does here with the Window Woman.



Two days later, Parvana and Father are ready to leave. Father tells Parvana that whether she chooses to travel as a boy or a girl, she's still his "little **Malali**." Mrs. Weera shows Parvana Mother's magazine and asks Parvana to tell Mother that copies are headed all over the world. Parvana hugs Mrs. Weera and Homa and hops into the truck. Shauzia appears with apricots for Parvana. She announces that she met nomads who will take her to Pakistan. Panicked, Parvana asks when they'll see each other again. Shauzia says that in 20 years, they'll meet in Paris on the first day of spring. They hug and then the truck pulls out. Parvana wonders where she'll be in 20 years and what Afghanistan will look like then. The future stretches out before Parvana and Parvana feels ready to meet it. She watches Mount Parvana sparkling in the sun.

It's telling that Parvana's departure is one heavily attended by friends—final proof that friends can be just as meaningful and supportive as one's family. Now that Parvana has grown up and discovered a sense of agency, she's able to look to her future with more hope. This is because she now feels more prepared to meet that future after all she learned during her time as Kaseem. However mature she may seem here, though, Shauzia's insistence that they'll meet in Paris in 20 years drives home that no matter what the girls have experienced, they're still children—true maturity is still ahead.





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