

## CHAPTER 12

### Summary

In Afghan lore, *yelda* is the first night of winter and the longest night of the year. Amir remembers how he, Hassan, and Ali would observe this special day by staying up all night while staying warm under blankets. Ali would tell the boys stories about sultans and thieves. Later, in his poetry books, he learns that *yelda* is the starless night that "tormented lovers keep vigil, enduring the endless dark, waiting for the sun to rise and bring with it their loved one." After he meets Soraya, every night of the week is a *yelda* for him until the following Sunday when they go once again to the swap meet. He makes excuses to wander down the aisles to see her, but he never has the courage to speak to her even once.

One Sunday in the summer of 1985, Amir and his father are doing well enough at their sales that Amir can go buy a Coke. Baba warns him as he walks away to be careful, because the general has *nang* and *namoos*, or honor and pride. He is a pashtun to the root and will expect Amir to respect the chastity of a wife or a daughter. He warns Amir not to embarrass him. However, Amir can't help himself and stops to speak to Soraya when her father is not there as a chaperone. The whole market seems to be watching the two of them. Amir is aware of the double standard that favors Afghan men: if there is gossip it will be all about her and her behavior, not his. Nevertheless, he continues to converse with her about what she is reading and the fact that he is a writer. Then her mother approaches and smiles at the two of them. Her name is Jamila and she is pleased that Soraya seems to have a young man interested in her. She offers Amir a chair and some of the peaches she has just purchased, but Amir knows he is walking on thin ice and graciously leaves them to return to his own father.

Baba teases him a little when Amir returns and hands him the peaches. "I thought you were going for Cokes," he says. He is jesting with him, but behind the joke, Baba is deadly serious: he wants Amir to remember all that he said.

Amir's casual walks to see Soraya each Sunday go on for several weeks. Whenever he gets the chance, he speaks to her. On one such visit, she tells him that she is studying to be a teacher, just like her mother. Her desire to teach is based on her success at teaching an illiterate young girl to read. It reminds Amir how he had ridiculed Hassan for not being able to read, rather than teaching him how. They are interrupted by the general who returns to see his unmarried daughter conversing alone with a young man. He reminds Amir that he is among peers in the flea market and that *everyone* there is a storyteller. When he arrives back at his father's van, he tells him what happened. Baba just sighs.

Later that week, Baba takes ill with what seems to be a cold, but soon he is coughing up blood. Amir insists he see a doctor and they go to the county hospital, because they have no health insurance. The doctor there tells Baba and Amir that the X-rays show a spot on Baba's right lung and that he needs to see a pulmonary specialist. For the first time in a very long time, that night, Amir folds a blanket into a facsimile of a prayer rug and recites verses the mullah had taught him. Then he asks God for a kindness toward his father. Unfortunately, the pulmonary specialist tells Baba that he is of Russian descent and so Baba will have none of his medical help. The next pulmonary specialist turns out to be Iranian and so Baba approves. Despite his cultural background, this doctor offers little help. Baba has advanced oat cell carcinoma and it's inoperable. The only hope he can offer is through chemotherapy which will just prolong his inevitable death. When Baba refuses, Amir tries to make him reconsider in front of the doctor. Baba is incensed that

Amir would challenge him in public and warns him never to do it again.

Once they are home, Amir nearly cries when he tells Baba that he's not thinking of his son when he refuses medical help. Baba is still angry and tells Amir that he's twenty-two and needs to be a man. Furthermore, he tells his son that no one is ever to know about his condition, because he doesn't want anyone's sympathy.

The trips to the flea market continue in spite of Baba's cancer. Amir sees the general and his wife several times, but he seems more reluctant to spend time speaking to Amir. His wife tries to silently apologize when her husband isn't looking. It becomes a time of firsts: the first time Amir can hear his father moan aloud from the bathroom, the first time he finds blood on his pillow, the first time he calls in sick from work. His friends at the market notice his weight loss and his fatigue, but they are too respectful to comment that he might be seriously ill. One Sunday, Baba has a seizure right there on the ground of the market. Amir comforts him with soft words assuring him that his son is there with him.

At the hospital, they discover that the cancer has metastasized to Baba's brain and that's what caused the seizure. Amir stays with him at the hospital all night. The next morning the waiting room down the hall is filled with Afghans who file into his room and quietly offer their respects to this man for whom they care so much. Even the general, his wife and Soraya come to wish him well. Amir thinks about how his father had once told him that in spite of their hardheadedness and pride, there is no one you'd want by your side more than an Afghan. Amir is moved to tears and must leave the room when the general comes. Out in the hallway, Soraya comes to comfort him and he tells her that her gesture means the world to him.

Two days later, Baba is discharged from the hospital still refusing all radiation or chemotherapy. After Amir sees to his father's comfort, he asks him if he will do something for him: ask General Taheri for his daughter's hand in marriage. Baba smiles and immediately telephones the general and asks his permission to visit about an honorable matter. The general agrees and the two men - father and son - laugh together over this new turn of events. The next day, Amir helps his father dress for this important occasion, noting how large Baba's good suit now appears. The empty space between Baba's neck and his collar makes Amir think of all the empty spaces his father will leave behind when he is gone.

When Baba returns home, he tells Amir that the general accepted. However, Soraya wants to talk with Amir herself. In their conversation, Soraya tells Amir the truth about all the gossip - she had run away with a young man who was into drugs. She lived with him for a month, because she was rebellious and stupid. Her father eventually found her and made her come home. When she returned, she saw her mother had had a stroke which paralyzed one side of her face. Her guilt overwhelmed her and she saw the error of her ways. Amir tells her that the story bothers him a little, but he knows that he of all people cannot chastise someone else for what they did in the past. It doesn't bother him enough to make him change his mind. She breaks into tears of happiness and while Amir is happy, too, he can't help but envy her, because her secret is out and dealt with. She is a better person than him, he thinks, because she has courage.

## ***Notes***

This chapter presents two very poignant situations: Amir's courtship of Soraya and his father's courtship with death. At the same time he is losing his beloved Baba, he is gaining a woman that he suspects is so much better than he will ever be. The way life is once again pulling at him is ironic. He deals with life in death and death in life. It fulfills the way of things that when one generation passes on, another grows up to take its place.