

CHAPTER 2

Summary

This chapter opens with the narrator's childhood memory of him and Hassan climbing the poplar tree in the driveway of his father's home and using a mirror to reflect sunlight into the windows of the neighbors' houses. He describes their boyish misbehavior in a fond way and also describes Hassan as having a face of a Chinese doll chiseled from hardwood. The face is marred by the harelip as through "the Chinese doll maker's instrument may have slipped." It's also obvious that the narrator takes advantage of Hassan who he says would never deny him anything. Some of things he asks him to do are wrong, but Hassan never blames the narrator, always accepting responsibility himself.

The narrator tells us he lives with his father, his *baba*, in the most beautiful house in his district in the northern part of Kabul, Afghanistan. His father is wealthy and influential, but it is apparent that he doesn't provide the narrator with the time the boy would like with him. He describes many of the pictures in their home, including one of his father with King Nadir Shah in 1931 and one with his best friend and business partner, Rahim Khan. His father holds the narrator close as a baby in the picture, but his little hand is curled around the finger of Rahim Khan.

On the south end of the garden behind his father's house sits a modest mud hut, where Hassan lives with his father, Ali. Hassan had been born there just one year after the narrator's mother had died giving birth to him. In the eighteen years that the narrator lived in the house, he had only been inside that hut a handful of times. Hassan's mother, Sanaubar, left him and his father when she decided to run off with a clan of traveling singers and dancers. The narrator wonders if Hassan ever dreams of his mother or aches for her like the narrator aches for his mother.

Some of the narrator's earliest memories of Hassan are of the discrimination he faces because he is *Hazara*. Hazaras were in the minority, because they were *Shi'a* (*Shiite*) Muslims and not *Sunni* Muslims. They were identified by their "Chinese-like" faces, because they were of Mongol descent.

The narrator also tells us about Ali, Hassan's father, who has two congenital deformities: his lower facial muscles are paralyzed, leaving him unable to smile, and forced to show his feelings with his eyes; and he had suffered through polio and his right leg was atrophied, forcing him to swing the weak leg in an arc as he walked. The narrator used to follow Ali through the streets and mimic his walk, but Ali never said anything ever. The neighborhood children were afraid of him and called him *Babalu*, or Boogeyman.

The narrator never knew much about the Hazara, because his history books seldom said anything about these people. Then, he discovered in one of his mother's old books an entire chapter about how his people, the *Pashtun*, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazara. When he shows the chapter to his history teacher, the man just wrinkles his nose and comments that the *Shi'a* way is to pass themselves off as martyrs. When he said the word *Shi'a*, he pronounced it like it was a disease.

The narrator remembers that he heard that Hassan's mother had taunted Ali just like the neighborhood kids had done. What's more, at Hassan's birth, seeing the harelip, she had sneered that Ali now had his own idiot child to smile for him. She had refused to even hold her baby and five days later, she was gone. As a result, the narrator's father had hired the same woman who was nursing him to nurse Hassan, a blue-eyed Hazara woman from Bamiyan. Ali would always sing the song she had sung to the two babies and would then remind them both that there was a brotherhood between people who had fed from the same breast, a kinship that not even time could break.

The narrator and Hassan had done everything together from the beginning. His first word was *Baba*, but Hassan's was *Amir*, the narrator's name. The narrator believes that the foundation for what happened in 1975 and all that followed was already laid in their first words.

Notes

This chapter introduces us to what obviously impacted greatly on Amir's life: his father, Ali, and Hassan; the fact that his mother died at his birth and Hassan's mother ran away; the fact that they are from two different social classes, Pashtun and Hazara; and the fact that he and Hassan fed at the same breast and that they believe in his country that that makes them brothers forever.

By telling us these things, he is preparing us for significant events that will involve these people and the things that happened to them from the time they were born. He is also, in a subtle way, telling us that all these events had molded him into the man that he somehow is ashamed of having become and that he still has time, as Rahim Khan had said, to "find a way to be good again."