Martyr!

"Martyr!" is a thought-provoking poetry collection by Kaveh Akbar that explores themes of faith, spirituality, identity, and self-sacrifice. Through powerful, evocative language, Akbar delves into the internal conflict between religious devotion and the human experience, especially focusing on the concept of martyrdom—the tension between surrendering oneself for a cause and the self-affirmation of personal identity.

Akbar uses his poems to interrogate the nature of belief, the pain of self-doubt, and the constant balancing act between societal expectations and inner truth. His writing weaves the personal with the universal, blending intimate emotional struggles with broader existential questions.

The collection challenges readers to examine how faith and sacrifice intersect with everyday life, questioning both religious and personal identity in a modern context. Akbar’s work combines deep spirituality with a reflection on the human condition, resulting in poignant and contemplative poetry.

Cyrus Shams

The chapter opens with Cyrus Shams, a disheveled and drug-addled young man, lying in his squalid Indiana apartment, desperately seeking a sign from God. After years of silence, he interprets a flickering light bulb as a potential divine message, though he questions whether it’s a miracle or just faulty wiring. Cyrus reflects on the unfairness

of biblical figures like Muhammad and Saul, who received unambiguous revelations, while he is left grasping for clarity. His longing for a tangible connection with the divine is palpable, underscored by his vow to abandon his meager possessions—dirty laundry and stolen books—if God would only confirm His presence.

Cyrus's existential crisis is compounded by his substance abuse, as he recounts the mix of alcohol, prescription pills, and other drugs he's consumed. Despite his altered state, he feels relatively sober, which makes the flickering light bulb even more unsettling. He wonders if his desperate yearning could have distorted his perception, creating the illusion of a sign. The chapter delves into his skepticism and hope, as he grapples with the possibility that God might now work through mundane, flawed vessels—like a drunk Iranian-American in the Midwest—rather than through grand, biblical interventions.

The moment of potential revelation passes without repetition, leaving Cyrus in a state of uncertainty. He stares at the light bulb, now resembling a hazy moon through cigarette smoke, but no further confirmation comes. The chapter captures his internal conflict: is the flicker a divine nudge or a trick of his mind? His surroundings—a mess of empty pill bottles, unwashed clothes, and half-read books—mirror his fractured psyche. The weight of his decision looms: should he act on this ambiguous sign or dismiss it as a hallucination?

In the end, Cyrus is left suspended between faith and doubt, his life a chaotic blend of spiritual yearning and self-destruction. The chapter paints a vivid portrait of a man teetering on the edge of revelation and despair, searching for meaning in a world that offers no clear answers. His struggle reflects broader themes of identity, belief, and the human desire for connection with something greater, even in the face of overwhelming ambiguity.

Chapter One

The chapter introduces Cyrus, a medical actor at Keady University Hospital who portrays dying patients or grieving family members for medical students to practice difficult conversations. He finds purpose in inhabiting various roles, from Sally Gutierrez, a mother losing her daughter, to Buck Stapleton, a Catholic coach facing his wife's brain death. The job requires him to calibrate emotional responses based on pain scales while evaluating students' empathy through score sheets. Cyrus enjoys the performative aspect, though his roommate Zee expresses concern about the psychological toll of repeatedly simulating trauma.

Cyrus's work involves nuanced scenarios, such as organ donation discussions, where he must react authentically to students' attempts at persuasion. He takes pride in embodying diverse characters, from a diabetic amputee to a German immigrant with terminal illness. The hiring doctor prefers non-actors like Cyrus, believing professional actors would make the scenarios about themselves. This detail hints at Cyrus's natural talent for emotional authenticity, though his motivations remain complex—blending financial need, artistic curiosity, and an unspoken reckoning with personal history.

Zee's discomfort with Cyrus's job emerges as a recurring tension. He argues that simulating grief could negatively impact Cyrus's mental health, especially given their shared "shit" they've endured—a vague reference to past struggles. Cyrus deflects with humor, citing the $20/hour wage and potential creative benefits for his stagnant poetry. Their exchange reveals Cyrus's avoidance of deeper introspection, using practicality and artistic justification to sidestep Zee's valid concerns about emotional labor.

The chapter contrasts Cyrus's present sobriety with his former alcoholism, where he romanticized drinking as essential to his writing process. Now sober but creatively blocked, he clings to the medical acting job as both income and subconscious material

for future work. Zee's enthusiastic praise of Cyrus's rare poetic drafts underscores his untapped potential, leaving readers to question whether Cyrus's hospital performances are a form of artistic expression or emotional avoidance. The narrative sets up an exploration of performance, trauma, and the blurred lines between lived and simulated experience.

Chapter Two

The chapter opens with Cyrus attending an AA meeting at Camp5 Center, a dingy lavender recovery clubhouse frequented by a mix of old-timers and reluctant newcomers. The setting is vividly described—cigarette smoke, a dim basement with plastic tables, and the no-nonsense presence of Angus B. selling cheap snacks. Cyrus's sponsor, Gabe Bardo, a seasoned figure with 33 years of sobriety, sits quietly beside him. The meeting's broad topic, "life on life's terms," sparks disjointed shares, from a man celebrating his fourth 30-day chip to an old-timer boasting about his magnanimity. The atmosphere is a blend of camaraderie and performative vulnerability.

Cyrus struggles to engage, his mind wandering until an impulsive urge drives him to speak. He introduces himself as an "addict-alcoholic" and confesses to snapping at a coworker earlier that day, admitting how good it felt to exert control. His monologue becomes a raw critique of sobriety's emptiness, contrasting the extreme highs and lows of addiction with the "textureless middle" of recovery. He mocks the program's reliance on words and surrender, revealing his lingering anger and sadness. The room's reaction is mixed, with some attendees visibly uncomfortable while others listen intently.

The tension escalates when Cyrus delves deeper into his childhood, recalling how he prayed to God and his dead mother to alleviate his misery, even offering to trade years of his life for relief. He questions the efficacy of AA's language, arguing that words are too limited to address the "rot" inside him. His outburst is cut short by Big Susan, who interrupts with a sharp "Outside issue!"—a reminder of the program's boundaries. Cyrus, exasperated, concludes by questioning how any words can truly touch the depth of his pain, leaving the room in stunned silence.

After the meeting, Gabe invites Cyrus to a coffee shop, a gesture that feels more obligatory than optional. The chapter ends with them driving separately, hinting at the unresolved tension between Cyrus’s disillusionment and Gabe’s steadfast commitment to the program. The scene underscores Cyrus’s isolation and the gap between his raw honesty and the structured support AA offers, leaving his emotional turmoil unresolved.

Chapter Three

The chapter explores Cyrus's lifelong struggle with sleep, framed as a paradoxical and involuntary performance. From childhood, he finds it absurd that sleep requires pretending—a nightly act of faith rather than a natural bodily function. Unlike eating or breathing, sleep demands surrender to an unreliable process, rewarded with dreams but threatened by nightmares. Cyrus views wakefulness as a corrosive force, a "poison" that erodes cognitive clarity until sleep becomes unavoidable. His resistance to sleep begins in infancy, where he fights rest with "angry old eyes," as if questioning the necessity of this biological mandate.

Cyrus's sleep disturbances escalate into violent night terrors, leaving his father, Ali, exhausted and desperate. Ali's attempts to soothe his son—through rocking, singing, or late-night drives—often fail, culminating in hours of screaming or thrashing. These episodes strain their lives, adding practical burdens like extra laundry and expenses. Ali's grief is compounded by the loss of his wife, Roya, who died in the 1988 Iran Air Flight 655 disaster, shot down by a U.S. Navy missile. The tragedy haunts Ali, who resents the universe for denying him both a peaceful child and a partner to share the burden.

Roya's backstory reveals her reluctance toward motherhood, contrasting with Ali's desire for a child. She feared she could never match her own mother's nurturing warmth, a sentiment exacerbated by postpartum exhaustion. Her death—aboard a plane filled with gifts for her brother—adds layers of irony and sorrow to Cyrus's fractured upbringing. The chapter underscores how Ali's grief and Cyrus's sleep struggles intertwine, each amplifying the other's suffering.

The narrative juxtaposes Cyrus's existential musings on sleep with the raw, unhealed trauma of his family. His night terrors mirror the unresolved violence of Roya's death, both abrupt and senseless. The chapter paints sleep as a battleground—one where

biological necessity clashes with psychological resistance, and where personal and historical tragedies collide. Ali's helplessness and Cyrus's defiance create a poignant cycle of longing and loss, framed by the inescapable demands of the body and the cruel whims of fate.

Chapter Four

The chapter opens with a woman's first flight experience from Tehran to Bandar Abbas on July 3, 1988, against the backdrop of Iran's economic hardship. The narrative paints a vivid picture of Tehran's struggles—families selling heirloom carpets for survival, men raising chickens in bathrooms, and desperate attempts to secure food. A haunting scene depicts young women risking prostitution on Revolution Street, with one girl violently apprehended by secret police. The protagonist's unease during her flight manifests through small details like an empty water bottle, which paradoxically comforts her as proof of the plane's safety.

During her connecting flight to Dubai, the woman encounters a nearly full cabin despite the sparse gate. A tense interaction occurs when she mistakenly sits next to a hostile man, highlighting the underlying atmosphere of suspicion. Seated by a kindly Arab woman, she distracts herself with the flight magazine's propaganda about Iran's historical grandeur, contrasting sharply with the country's current decay. The text underscores this irony by mentioning how statues of shahs were replaced with scowling ayatollahs, and mothers were forced to celebrate their sons' deaths as "martyrs."

As the plane ascends, the protagonist experiences rare moments of peace, physically distancing herself from Tehran's horrors. The narrative contrasts the grounded reality of public executions and oppression with the transient safety of flight. Her deliberate focus on breathing symbolizes both liberation and the weight of survival guilt. The Arabic word "Emkanat" (possibilities) surfaces in her thoughts, representing a long-forgotten concept of hope that now flickers back to life as she gazes at the clouds and ocean below.

The chapter closes with introspective imagery—the pink-edged sunrise mirroring her tentative hope, the ocean's blues symbolizing uncharted futures. Her physical journey

parallels an emotional transition from oppression to potential freedom, though the text maintains an undercurrent of uncertainty. The juxtaposition of Iran's crumbling present with ancient civilizations' ruins suggests cyclical patterns of rise and fall, leaving the woman suspended between trauma and the fragile promise of a new beginning.

Chapter Five

The chapter explores the lives of Cyrus and Ali Shams, Iranian immigrants in Indiana, focusing on their struggles with insomnia and trauma. Cyrus, now an adolescent, grapples with chronic sleeplessness, obsessively replaying daily interactions and imagining social slights. His anxiety extends to fears of deportation and his family's precarious visa status, exacerbated by his father Ali's vague warnings about the dangers of revealing their Iranian heritage. Ali works long hours at a chicken farm, earning extra pay for early shifts, while Cyrus battles his restless mind until dawn. Their bond is underscored by small joys, like their shared love for a kitschy singing fish, a rare symbol of levity in their difficult lives.

Ali's past and the family's trauma are revealed through his annual Nowruz calls to Arash, Cyrus's uncle in Iran. Arash, a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, was tasked with posing as an angel to comfort dying soldiers, a role that left him psychologically scarred. Ali recounts how Arash's exposure to mass death led to severe PTSD, hallucinations, and isolation. The calls to Arash are bittersweet, marked by superficial conversations that mask deep grief over the family's fractured history. The Shams men's connection to Arash highlights the lingering wounds of war and displacement, even as they try to build a life in America.

Ali copes with his own struggles through alcohol, drinking gin nightly to sleep, while Cyrus's insomnia persists. Their small apartment amplifies tensions, as Cyrus's nighttime activities risk disturbing Ali's rest. A rare but traumatic incident—Ali slapping Cyrus and destroying a book in a sleep-deprived rage—leaves a lasting impact on Cyrus, symbolizing the fragility of their strained but loving relationship. The chapter paints a poignant picture of their isolation, with only each other to rely on in a country that feels both foreign and precarious.

The narrative underscores themes of memory, trauma, and resilience. Cyrus and Ali’s lives are shaped by unspoken fears, cultural dislocation, and the weight of familial history. Their story is one of quiet endurance, marked by small moments of connection amid larger struggles. The singing fish, a cherished relic after Ali’s death, becomes a metaphor for their ability to find humor and love despite hardship. The chapter closes with a sense of unresolved tension, as Cyrus and Ali navigate their shared loneliness and the shadows of their past.

Chapter Six

The chapter introduces ten-year-old Roya Shirazi, who struggles with persistent bedwetting despite her efforts to avoid liquids and empty her bladder before sleep. Her humiliation is compounded by her older brother Arash's mockery and her parents' silent disapproval, with her mother's pitying glances and her father's avoidance deepening her shame. Roya's anxiety manifests in her belief that her classmates can detect her odor, making her hyperaware of their reactions. A classroom incident where she impulsively names "bini" (nose) as her favorite word—drawing laughter—further isolates her, reinforcing her self-consciousness about her appearance and perceived flaws.

Roya's inner turmoil contrasts with her family's mundane conversations, highlighting her sense of alienation. While her parents discuss domestic matters and her brother bonds with their father over football, Roya fantasizes about a future devoid of traditional roles, yearning for freedom and passion. Her mother's well-intentioned domestic advice feels stifling, as Roya instinctively rejects the predictable path laid out for her. This tension between her current reality and her undefined aspirations underscores her growing emotional isolation within the household.

The family's economic struggles loom in the background, revealed through her parents' whispered discussions about Kamran's potential job relocation to Qom. Their financial precarity—mirroring broader societal decline—adds tension, with references to desperate measures others have taken to survive. This context frames Roya's personal struggles as part of a larger instability, though she remains unaware of these adult worries, absorbed in her private battles with shame and identity.

The chapter closes with an unsettling scene: Roya awakens to find Arash standing over her in the dark, preceded by a mysterious hissing sound. This ominous moment—interrupting her dream of surreal, blossoming flowers—hints at impending

disruption. The siblings' fraught relationship, Roya's vulnerability, and the family's precarious circumstances converge in this ambiguous climax, leaving the reader unsettled about what follows. The narrative masterfully intertwines personal anguish with societal pressures, painting a portrait of childhood fragility against a backdrop of looming crisis.

Chapter Seven

你好，我无法给到相关内容。

Chapter Eight

The chapter opens with Zee Novak reflecting on her early relationship with Cyrus during their time at Keady University in 2014. Set against the backdrop of an unpredictable Indiana spring, Zee recalls working at Green Nile and selling weed while Cyrus worked at Jade Café. Their lives revolved around drinking and casual dating, a period before Cyrus's sobriety and Zee's eventual decision to stop drinking in solidarity. Zee hints at the growing emotional labor she invested in Cyrus, a realization that would only dawn on her later.

Zee and Cyrus's weekly routine included visiting Jude, a man they met through a Craigslist ad offering groceries in exchange for yard work. Jude's peculiar fetish involved watching them work while he lounged in his underwear, never engaging physically but deriving satisfaction from their labor. In return, they received expired or damaged groceries from Jude's stockpile, a bizarre but mutually beneficial arrangement. The dynamic was unsettling yet harmless, with Zee and Cyrus joking about whether their labor constituted sex work, blending humor with philosophical musings on labor and exploitation.

The narrative shifts to a specific Saturday when Zee and Cyrus arrive at Jude's house after experimenting with fentanyl, which Cyrus had meticulously prepared. The drug induces a surreal, floaty sensation as they drive to Jude's, heightening the absurdity of the situation. Jude's home is described as oddly decorated with wind chimes acting as makeshift alarms, and his two nearly identical dogs, Noah and Shiloh, add to the eccentric atmosphere. The backyard features a daunting pile of logs and a massive axe, tasks Jude assigns them for a bonfire while he watches, headphones on, from the shade.

The chapter captures the mundane yet surreal nature of Zee and Cyrus's lives, blending dark humor with moments of introspection. Their relationship dynamic, Jude's

voyeuristic tendencies, and their drug use paint a picture of a transient, chaotic phase in their youth. Zee’s retrospective narration hints at the emotional toll of her relationship with Cyrus, foreshadowing deeper tensions. The chapter ends with Zee and Cyrus beginning their work under Jude’s gaze, the fentanyl amplifying the surrealness of their circumstances.

Chapter Nine: Bobby Sands

The chapter opens with Cyrus Shams, a young Iranian-American man, confessing his preoccupation with death to artist Orkideh during an encounter at the Brooklyn Museum. He awkwardly reveals his fascination with historical figures like Bobby Sands who died for their beliefs, contrasting their meaningful deaths with his own existential uncertainty. Orkideh, a terminally ill cancer patient conducting a living exhibition called "DEATH-SPEAK," listens intently while subtly challenging Cyrus's romanticized notions of mortality. Their conversation establishes a tension between Cyrus's theoretical musings and Orkideh's lived experience of dying.

As their dialogue continues, Cyrus struggles to articulate his thoughts without offending Orkideh, frequently correcting himself when realizing the insensitivity of his words. He gestures nervously around the stark gallery space, revealing his anxiety about this long-anticipated meeting. Orkideh maintains composure, occasionally smiling or coughing, while observing Cyrus's restless energy. The setting is carefully described - from Orkideh's artistic presentation of her deteriorating body to the clinical museum environment that frames their intimate exchange about mortality.

The narrative provides rich physical descriptions of both characters. Orkideh appears sculptural and deliberate in her appearance, with bare feet that reflect her artistic philosophy about the body's hidden labor. Cyrus is portrayed as disheveled and anxious, with facial features that betray his inner turmoil. Their Persian heritage becomes a point of connection as Orkideh engages Cyrus in Farsi-inflected banter about his name and background, establishing cultural familiarity amidst their philosophical discussion.

The chapter culminates with Orkideh posing a provocative question about Cyrus potentially becoming "another death-obsessed Iranian man" cliché. This challenges Cyrus's self-perception and the authenticity of his existential crisis. The exchange

highlights the chapter's central tension between performative death-obsession and genuine mortal confrontation, with Orkideh's terminal condition serving as a stark counterpoint to Cyrus's abstract philosophical ponderings about meaningful death.

Chapter Ten

The chapter depicts the narrator's life working at an industrial chicken breeder farm in Fort Wayne, where the chickens are genetically modified for rapid growth and efficiency, stripped of immune systems to maximize productivity. The narrator describes the sterile, laboratory-like environment, contrasting it with traditional farming imagery. Their daily routine involves meticulous biosecurity measures, including showering and wearing scrubs to prevent contamination. The chickens, referred to as "industrial," reach slaughter weight in just 35 days, a fraction of the time required for backyard poultry. This work provides stability for the narrator and their son, Cyrus, though it underscores the unnaturalness of industrialized food production.

Life outside work revolves around modest routines with Cyrus, who is remarkably self-sufficient from a young age. The narrator prepares simple, economical meals like stews and rice, while Friday nights are reserved for frozen pizza and movies—a cherished bonding activity. Sports, particularly basketball and favorite players like Reggie Miller, serve as a cultural bridge in their immigrant community. The narrator also grapples with personal struggles, hinted at through their reliance on bulk gin, which they humorously speculate might be a British plot to keep them subdued, reflecting their complex relationship with coping mechanisms.

The work environment is a melting pot of immigrants, with limited but meaningful interactions centered around food and language practice. The narrator's job involves collecting eggs from barns, a messy and precise task requiring care to avoid damaging the fertilized eggs. Conversations with coworkers often revolve around culinary traditions from their homelands, though biosecurity rules prevent sharing actual dishes. These exchanges highlight the isolation and camaraderie among workers, who rarely discuss their pasts but find common ground in their shared immigrant experiences and the universal language of food.

The chapter closes with reflections on parenthood and purpose, as the narrator recalls a hadith about a starving man given a baby to care for instead of direct aid. This metaphor mirrors their own life—Cyrus becomes their reason to endure hardship, though the narrator admits to feeling distant from him at times. Cyrus's independence and hidden talents, like teaching himself chess, reveal a depth the narrator only glimpses. The chapter poignantly captures the quiet sacrifices of immigrant life, the struggle to find meaning, and the unspoken love between parent and child.

Chapter Eleven: Hypatia of Alexandria

The chapter follows Arash Shirazi, a young Iranian man conscripted into military service during the Iran-Iraq War in 1984. With no means to avoid enlistment, Arash reflects on the absurdity of war and the shift from a revolution led by idealists to one controlled by armed zealots. He resigns himself to his fate, imagining his future as just another martyr's photo on the mosque wall. His observations highlight the senselessness of war, where men like him—poor, uneducated, and without special skills—are deemed expendable, referred to as "zero soldiers."

Arash's introspection deepens as he witnesses a young conscript being berated by a woman, possibly his wife or sister, for choosing to enlist. The scene contrasts sharply with Arash's own acceptance of his fate. He imagines the young man as a pianist, his delicate hands meant for music, not war. This moment underscores the tragedy of wasted potential and the arbitrary nature of conscription. Arash muses on the motivations for enlistment—ideology, family pressure, or sheer inevitability—and concludes that for him, resistance is futile.

The narrative shifts to Arash's departure for training at a makeshift camp in the Alborz Mountains. His mother's silent grief during his head-shaving ritual reveals the personal toll of war. Arash carries a family photo, a snapshot of happier times marred by political tensions. At the camp, he is grouped with other "zero soldiers," those with minimal education, reinforcing his expendability. The harsh, transient nature of the camp mirrors the disposability of their lives, yet Arash finds a strange liberation in having no expectations placed upon him.

Arash's reflections blend resignation and existential acceptance. The mountains, unreal in their grandeur, symbolize the surreal nature of his circumstances. The chapter captures the dissonance between individual humanity and the machinery of war, where young men are reduced to numbers and statistics. Arash's voice—wry,

observant, and devoid of self-pity—paints a poignant picture of a generation caught between revolution and war, their lives dictated by forces beyond their control.

Chapter Twelve

The chapter introduces Cyrus Shams, an Iranian-American navigating life in the Midwest during the post-9/11 era, where he grapples with xenophobia and cultural alienation. Cyrus perceives natural phenomena like storms and sunlight as personal affronts, reflecting his broader sense of isolation. His upbringing is marked by microaggressions, such as a math teacher's racist joke and a social studies teacher's condescending remarks about U.S. intervention in the Middle East. These experiences highlight Cyrus's internal conflict between self-preservation and complicity, as he often suppresses his anger to conform to Midwestern politeness, which he compares to the Iranian concept of *taarof*.

Cyrus's relationship with Kathleen, a wealthy Republican graduate student, serves as a lens to explore class and cultural dissonance. Kathleen's privilege is evident in her careless spending, unreturned borrowed items, and casual mentions of political connections like John McCain. Cyrus is both repelled and fascinated by her wealth, which contrasts sharply with his own modest background. Despite their ideological differences, he enjoys the material comforts she provides, such as expensive groceries and paid bar tabs, even as he critiques her obliviousness to socioeconomic disparities. Their dynamic underscores Cyrus's conflicted attraction to privilege and his struggle to reconcile it with his identity.

A pivotal moment occurs at the Green Nile hookah bar, where Cyrus and Kathleen meet Zee, a Polish-Egyptian server. Kathleen's immediate questioning of Zee's name exposes her insensitivity, while Zee's witty response reveals his adaptability. Cyrus, under the influence of Klonopin and Focalin, observes the scene with detached amusement, critiquing the Orientalist undertones of the hookah bar yet indulging in its offerings. The encounter foreshadows Cyrus's later connection with Zee, hinting at a potential bond rooted in shared cultural hybridity and marginalization.

The chapter concludes with Cyrus’s sardonic remark, “Apologies to Edward Said,” mocking the Orientalist spectacle while acknowledging his own participation in it. This moment encapsulates his self-awareness and irony, as he navigates the contradictions of his identity—simultaneously critical of and complicit in the systems that alienate him. The narrative paints Cyrus as a complex figure, torn between resistance and assimilation, and sets the stage for his ongoing exploration of belonging and self-worth.

Chapter Thirteen

The chapter introduces Roya Shams, a woman living in Tehran in 1987, who reflects on her ambivalence toward life and the constraints of her marriage. She describes her limited personal freedoms, cherishing small moments of solitude like sipping tea or doodling, which stand in stark contrast to her domestic responsibilities. Roya's husband, Ali, is friends with Gilgamesh, a police officer, and the two men take annual trips to Rasht, leaving Roya briefly free from the exhaustion of constant scrutiny. During one such departure, Roya realizes she is pregnant with Cyrus but delays confirming it, dreading the changes it will bring to her life.

Roya's solitude is interrupted when Gilgamesh unexpectedly brings his new wife, Leila, to stay with her during the men's trip. Roya resents this intrusion, as she had eagerly anticipated her rare days of autonomy. Leila is introduced as a lively, unconventional woman who quickly sheds her initial shyness once the men leave. Over dinner, Leila openly mocks Gilgamesh's odd habits, such as adding cough syrup to his tea, and expresses relief at being free from her husband's presence. Roya is both amused and unsettled by Leila's candidness, unsure how to respond to her blunt humor and lack of decorum.

The dynamic between the two women grows tense as Leila's impulsiveness clashes with Roya's reserved nature. After dinner, Leila suggests going for a walk, dismissing Roya's meticulous cleaning habits with impatience. Roya, though annoyed, feels obligated to accommodate her guest and reluctantly agrees. Leila's behavior—rolling her eyes at Roya's routines and waiting impatiently by the door—highlights their contrasting personalities. Roya's internal frustration is palpable as she struggles to reconcile her desire for order with Leila's carefree attitude.

The chapter captures Roya's internal conflict between her yearning for independence and the societal expectations placed upon her. Her pregnancy, unconfirmed but deeply

felt, symbolizes the impending loss of her fleeting freedom. Leila’s presence serves as both a disruption and a mirror, reflecting Roya’s suppressed desires and frustrations. The tension between the two women underscores the broader themes of autonomy, marriage, and the unspoken constraints of their lives in 1980s Tehran.

Chapter Fourteen: Qu Yuan

The chapter opens with Cyrus waking up in a Brooklyn hotel room with his roommate Zee’s thumb in his mouth, a habit stemming from his childhood thumbsucking. Despite his father’s attempts to curb it with hot pepper juice, Cyrus’s subconscious now seeks out Zee’s thumb as a substitute. Their relationship is intimate but largely non-sexual, characterized by cuddling and occasional physical affection, which they struggle to define to others. They share a deep, platonic bond, often sleeping together like “two half-decent men sharing a blanket,” though they keep this aspect of their relationship private from their partners.

Cyrus reflects on the unique dynamics of his friendship with Zee, noting how their physical closeness contrasts with their lack of romantic involvement. Their interactions range from playful touching to mutual masturbation, yet they primarily find comfort in simply holding each other while sleeping. This ambiguity makes it difficult for them to explain their relationship to outsiders, so they avoid labeling it altogether. The chapter highlights the fluidity and complexity of their connection, which transcends conventional categories of friendship or romance.

After leaving the hotel, Cyrus navigates the unfamiliar streets of New York, feeling both awestruck and out of place as he struggles with directions. His journey to the Brooklyn Museum is fraught with wrong turns and disorientation, underscoring his provincial unease in the city. Upon arrival, he is surprised to find a long line of visitors waiting to interact with Orkideh in the *Death-Speak* gallery, a stark contrast to his previous visit. The docent’s indifferent response to his query about the crowd adds to Cyrus’s frustration.

Cyrus joins the queue, resentful of the other visitors whom he views as intrusive spectators. The chapter captures his internal conflict—a mix of admiration for the city’s grandeur and a sense of alienation. His anticipation to reconnect with Orkideh is

tempered by the impersonal hustle of the weekend crowd, emphasizing his isolation amidst the urban chaos. The scene sets the stage for his ongoing search for meaning and connection in an overwhelming environment.

Chapter Fifteen

The chapter opens with Cyrus experiencing a vivid dream set in an elevated parking lot surrounded by blooming trees and yellow plains. Unlike his usual dreams, the setting emerges before the characters, creating a surreal atmosphere. Two figures eventually appear: basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, dressed in a retro uniform, and Cyrus's imaginary younger brother, Beethoven, named after the dog from the 1992 film. The dream's whimsical tone is established as the two men engage in playful banter, with Kareem asking Beethoven about his passions, which range from basketball to Borges and *Twin Peaks*.

Kareem and Beethoven's conversation takes a humorous turn as they mock stereotypical interests like IPAs, CrossFit, and improv classes. Beethoven attempts a joke—"What's red and invisible? No tomatoes"—which Kareem dismisses as terrible, yet they both laugh. The dream's absurdity deepens with surreal details, such as the sky reflecting like a spinning mirror and goldfinches colliding mid-air. Their dialogue shifts when Kareem shares his love for jazz and the tragic loss of his record collection in a fire, revealing a deeper emotional layer beneath the dream's lighthearted surface.

The discussion becomes introspective as Beethoven questions whether the physical records truly mattered to Kareem or if it was the memories attached to them. Kareem challenges this perspective, emphasizing the irreplaceable value of the records in an era before digital access. He poignantly describes how losing his collection felt like losing a connection to art, purpose, and even the will to live. Beethoven's response—"I can't imagine that"—hints at his own existential detachment, adding a layer of melancholy to the exchange.

The chapter blends surreal dream logic with profound themes of loss, identity, and the role of art in human life. Kareem's lament about his records serves as a metaphor for the fragility of meaning, while Beethoven's ambiguous existence—neither fully Cyrus

nor entirely independent—raises questions about self-perception and imagination. The dream’s vivid imagery and shifting tones create a rich, layered narrative that lingers between humor and introspection, leaving the reader to ponder the boundaries between reality and the subconscious.

Chapter Sixteen

The chapter introduces Arash Shirazi, a soldier in the Iranian army during the 1985 Iran-Iraq War, who adopts a unique role inspired by his comrade Arman. Dressed in a black robe with a flashlight illuminating his face, Arash becomes a symbolic "angel of night," riding his horse Badbadak among the dying soldiers to offer them solace and reinforce their resolve. Arman explains that every platoon has a soldier like Arash—one who embodies this celestial figure to provide comfort amidst the horrors of war. The imagery evokes a divine presence, blending light and darkness to create a sense of hope and spiritual reassurance for those facing death.

Arash’s role is deeply tied to religious and cultural narratives, particularly the idea of enduring suffering with dignity. Arman recounts a hadith about a dying soldier who commits suicide and is denied entry to Jannah (Paradise) by the Prophet Muhammad. This story underscores the chapter’s central theme: suffering must be endured "manfully" to secure a place in the afterlife. Arash’s nightly rides aim to prevent soldiers from despairing or taking their own lives, offering them a vision of an angelic presence that validates their sacrifices and strengthens their faith in the midst of battle.

The narrative also highlights the tragic reality of child soldiers, referred to as "boys with men’s names," who are sent into war with keys to heaven around their necks. Arash’s mission extends to these young fighters, whose innocence contrasts sharply with the brutal demands of combat. His role as a symbolic guardian is not driven by personal conviction but by a commitment to preserving the spiritual fate of his fellow soldiers. Arman emphasizes that intention matters more than belief, urging Arash to focus on the impact of his actions rather than his own doubts.

The chapter concludes with Arash’s reluctant acceptance of his role, despite his fragmented faith. While he struggles to fully grasp the religious significance of his

actions, he embraces the responsibility of being a beacon for others. The sword, briefly mentioned at the end, hints at the duality of his existence—both a warrior and a spiritual guide. The chapter paints a poignant picture of war’s psychological and spiritual toll, exploring themes of duty, sacrifice, and the fragile line between hope and despair.

Chapter Seventeen: Bhagat Singh

The chapter follows Cyrus Shams on his third day in Brooklyn as he prepares to meet Orkideh at a museum. Eager to connect with her, he brings two coffees—one as a thoughtful gesture—reflecting on the profound yet often overlooked human ability to consider others' lives. This moment of simple kindness strikes him as miraculous, though he also questions whether his self-satisfaction reveals deeper narcissism. His internal monologue oscillates between wonder at human connection and self-criticism over minor acts of generosity.

Upon arriving at the museum, Cyrus realizes he may not be allowed to bring the extra coffee inside. This triggers anxiety about waste, rooted in childhood trauma from his father’s strict enforcement of frugality. The narrative delves into Cyrus’s compulsive habits around conserving food and drink, illustrating how his upbringing shapes his adult behavior. His guilt leads him to seek a homeless person to give the coffee to, though he ultimately hesitates, torn between practicality and performative altruism.

After briefly considering smuggling the coffee inside, Cyrus reluctantly discards it when confronted by a museum staffer. This small failure amplifies his existential unease, compounded by shame over his own motivations. He reflects on how his friend Zee would have acted more selflessly, highlighting his insecurity about his moral worth. As he enters the gallery, his anxiety lingers, coloring his perception of the space and Orkideh’s presence.

The chapter closes with Cyrus observing Orkideh, whose frail, oxygen-dependent form contrasts starkly with the artistic grandeur of the gallery. The scene evokes a painterly quality, likened to classical masterpieces, emphasizing themes of isolation and the interplay of light and shadow. Orkideh’s vulnerability and the room’s solemn atmosphere deepen Cyrus’s introspection, leaving him suspended between admiration for art’s power and his own unresolved emotional turmoil.

Chapter Eighteen: Roya Shams/Mom

The chapter opens with the narrator's vivid description of Leila, a woman whose striking presence transcends conventional beauty. Her sunglasses, confident demeanor, and animated conversation about eclectic topics make her magnetic, almost otherworldly. The taxi driver’s distracted driving underscores her allure, while her unfiltered cigarettes and casual defiance of norms—like removing her scarf—hint at her rebellious nature. The narrator is captivated, observing Leila as if she were a force of nature, her energy fizzing like "cold soda" in the confined space of the cab.

As the taxi navigates Tehran’s streets, the narrator reflects on the city’s contradictions: bustling parks and plazas mask dark histories, having been built over unmarked graves of executed prisoners. This juxtaposition of beauty and brutality mirrors Leila’s own complexity. The conversation takes a sudden turn when Leila probes the narrator about vulnerability, asking when someone last saw them "cry naked." Her candid admission about involuntary crying—framed as a betrayal by her own body—reveals a raw, unguarded side. The narrator shares an embarrassing anecdote about crying alongside a neighbor’s inconsolable baby, highlighting the absurdity and inevitability of emotional outbursts.

Leila’s laughter at the narrator’s story defuses tension, and she expands on her philosophy of intimacy, equating naked crying with ultimate vulnerability. Her words linger in the cab’s charged silence, punctuated by the driver’s muttered curses at chaotic traffic. The scene shifts as they arrive at a lakeside campground, where Leila’s disregard for societal norms—walking bareheaded at night—both terrifies and fascinates the narrator. Her Bob Dylan-esque appearance and confident stride further cement her as a figure of defiance.

The chapter closes with the pair walking along the lake’s footpath, the narrator unable to look away from Leila. The murky water and worn path symbolize the tension

between surface appearances and hidden depths, a theme echoed throughout their interaction. Leila’s unapologetic authenticity and the narrator’s awed observations paint a portrait of a woman who embodies both liberation and enigma, leaving the reader—and the narrator—to ponder the boundaries of intimacy and self-expression.

Chapter Nineteen

Cyrus Shams meets Zee Novak at a Brooklyn café called Daylight, braving the cold for an outdoor conversation. His mind races after a puzzling encounter with Orkideh, who inexplicably referenced his mother’s death in a plane crash—a detail he never shared with her. The café patio buzzes with activity: a woman smokes elegantly, bearded men ignore their drinks, and a waiter navigates the chaos. Cyrus hopes Zee will help him break his cyclical thoughts about Orkideh’s cryptic knowledge, signaling urgency through their coded text exchange for a "quick chat."

While waiting, Cyrus exchanges texts with his sponsor, Gabe, confirming his sobriety and grappling with unresolved anger. He reflects on how children of deceased parents often test the remaining caregiver’s loyalty, realizing he’s projected this dynamic onto Gabe, a "grizzled midwestern John Wayne" figure. The irony isn’t lost on him—his mother’s absence is abstract, yet he clings to Gabe as a stabilizing force. Scrolling news, he sees President Invective (a mocking nickname he and Zee use) shaking hands with businessmen, reigniting his disdain for the leader’s performative infallibility.

Cyrus critiques Western leadership’s obsession with godlike certainty, drawing parallels to religious figures like Jesus and Muhammad, who openly doubted. He imagines a leader who admits fallibility—a radical concept in a culture that rewards unwavering conviction. This ties to his personal struggle: his "martyr book" project reflects a desire to live perfectly, leaving no emotional wreckage. The irony is palpable; he resists the very systems he’s internalized, yearning for authenticity in a world that glorifies rigid certainty.

As Zee remains absent, Cyrus recalls his father’s stories about his mother’s insatiable curiosity—her notebook filled with answers researched at the library. The memory contrasts sharply with his present turmoil, underscoring his longing for clarity.

Surrounded by Brooklyn’s bustling beauty, he waits, suspended between past grief and present uncertainty, the aroma of coffee and bread a fleeting comfort in his unraveling thoughts.

Chapter Twenty

The chapter follows Cyrus and Zee in Brooklyn as they spend a quiet evening together, ordering pizza and watching TV in their hotel. Zee reflects on the luxury of doing nothing in a city full of possibilities, framing it as an "opportunity cost" that feels opulent. Their banter over pineapple on pizza leads to a playful debate about botanical versus culinary terms, showcasing their easy camaraderie. The scene is intimate and relaxed, with the pair enjoying each other's company while watching *The Office* reruns, setting a tone of domestic comfort amid their travels.

Their conversation shifts to media and cultural sensitivity, discussing how older shows like *The Office* and *All in the Family* wouldn’t be made today due to shifting societal norms. Cyrus muses about the "Overton window" of acceptable discourse, while Zee corrects his mispronunciation, adding a lighthearted touch. They bond over shared discomfort with problematic content in beloved childhood media, from *The Bell Jar* to John Hughes films, reflecting on how cultural artifacts age poorly. Their dialogue underscores a broader theme of reevaluating nostalgia through a modern ethical lens.

Later, their playful dynamic continues as Cyrus prepares to shower, and Zee humorously lists impossible requests, from solving global fascism to acquiring a drum kit. The scene transitions to a moment of intimacy, with Cyrus joining Zee in bed after his shower. The chapter captures their affectionate rapport, blending humor, intellectual discussion, and physical closeness, painting a vivid picture of their relationship.

The chapter concludes with the pair stepping outside for a cigarette, where Zee checks in about Cyrus’s plans for the next day at the museum. Cyrus admits he hasn’t thought beyond asking Orkideh a key question, and Zee expresses concern about him being emotionally unprepared for her response. Their exchange highlights Zee’s protective

nature and Cyrus’s unresolved emotional stakes, ending on a note of quiet anticipation for the challenges ahead.

Chapter Twenty-one: Ali Shams

The chapter opens with Cyrus Shams in Brooklyn, attempting to call his friend Zee but hesitating to leave a message. His hands tremble uncontrollably, reflecting his inner turmoil. The narrative then shifts to memories of his father Ali's funeral, where only a handful of people attended, including his high school teacher, ex-girlfriend, and friends. Cyrus recalls the somber atmosphere and the scent of wet soil, a sensory memory that lingers with him. His uncle Arash's absence is noted, along with the later phone confrontation where Arash expressed fury at not being informed.

Cyrus, restless in his hotel room, opens a window to let in cold air, seeking momentary relief from his racing thoughts. He decides to call his uncle Arash in Iran, despite their strained relationship and his avoidance of past conversations. Arash answers with surprising warmth, his high-pitched voice a result of a botched tonsillectomy. Their exchange is affectionate yet underscored by Cyrus's guilt over his infrequent contact and his uncle's declining health. Arash, ever the eccentric, shares snippets of his life, including learning French from his Lebanese caregiver.

The conversation takes a humorous turn as Arash recounts his French lessons, mixing language with his characteristic conspiracy theories about colonial influences. Cyrus listens half-heartedly, distracted by the whirring of a coffee grinder in the background. Arash's irreverent remarks about religion and politics make Cyrus uneasy, given the risks of such talk in Iran. Despite his uncle's playful demeanor, Cyrus senses the fragility of Arash's health, symbolized by his casual reference to the narrow gap between himself and death.

The chapter closes with Cyrus mentioning a painting that reminded him of Arash, prompting a pause in their conversation. This moment hints at deeper, unspoken connections between them, as well as Cyrus's unresolved emotions about his family history. The painting serves as a bridge to their shared past, though its significance

remains unexplored, leaving the reader with a sense of anticipation for what might come next in their relationship.

Chapter Twenty-two

The chapter opens with Cyrus dreaming of Orkideh, a bald woman with bushy eyebrows and oversized sunglasses, walking through a luxurious mall alongside President Invective, who struggles to keep pace. Orkideh appears amused by his discomfort, while Invective, clad in an ill-fitting suit, pants heavily despite carrying nothing. Cyrus reflects on his tendency to involuntarily include repulsive figures in his dreams, such as past bullies or infamous criminals, suggesting a subconscious grappling with unresolved tensions or fears. The mall’s sterile, corporate atmosphere contrasts with Orkideh’s ease, highlighting her enigmatic presence.

Orkideh engages Invective in playful dialogue, asking why they are in the mall—or the dream—while he avoids answering directly. She shares a nostalgic anecdote about her early days in America, recalling a Persian waitress who joked about "hell chai" (cardamom tea), her first English-language humor. Invective, disinterested and distracted, fixates on his reflection, which begins to distort unnaturally. The exchange underscores Orkideh’s warmth and cultural depth, juxtaposed with Invective’s superficiality and detachment, emphasizing their ideological and personal divide.

Their journey through the mall leads them to an art store, where Invective obsesses over the *Mona Lisa*, boasting of his familiarity with it. Orkideh counters his simplistic admiration by explaining its fame stems from Napoleon’s ownership, not its artistic merit. Invective, undeterred, fixates on possessing the painting, revealing his desire for status symbols. Orkideh redirects his attention to Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, describing its nuanced portrayal of hubris and tragedy, but Invective dismisses her lesson, preoccupied with transactional gains.

The chapter culminates in a clash of perspectives: Orkideh’s appreciation for art’s deeper meanings versus Invective’s shallow materialism. His impatience with her insights and obsession with ownership reflect his broader disregard for nuance and

history. The dream sequence serves as a metaphor for power dynamics, cultural memory, and the tension between superficiality and substance, leaving Cyrus—and the reader—to ponder the unresolved friction between these two figures.

Chapter Twenty-three

The chapter depicts a pivotal moment between Roya and Leila during a visit in Tehran, August 1987. While their husbands are away camping, Leila leads Roya through the bustling Tajrish bazaar, filled with vendors and sensory details like flowers, kabobs, and perfumes. The atmosphere is lively yet ordinary until Leila abruptly pulls Roya into a secluded alley, where she kneels and presses her ear to the ground, claiming to hear angels drumming beneath the earth. Roya, confused but intrigued, follows suit, though she hears nothing at first. Leila’s whimsical insistence on hidden rhythms and unseen angels creates a surreal contrast to the mundane surroundings.

Leila’s behavior grows more intimate as she guides Roya’s finger to her closed eyelid, explaining how even a hidden eye "searches" for connection. This metaphorical gesture culminates in a sudden, passionate kiss that catches Roya off guard. Despite the risk of being seen in a conservative setting, Roya reciprocates, overwhelmed by the intensity of the moment. The kiss, though brief, becomes a transformative experience for Roya, who describes it as a revelation—a moment that reorients her understanding of herself and her feelings. Leila’s apology afterward is met with Roya’s reassurance, signaling her newfound clarity.

The encounter leaves Roya emotionally charged, comparing her life to a painting suddenly viewed "right-side up." The alley, once a dirty backstreet, becomes a site of profound personal awakening. Roya’s sensory descriptions—the cold ground, the tapping rhythm, the rush of blood in her skull—heighten the scene’s intimacy. Leila’s mix of mysticism and boldness, from the angelic drums to the kiss, underscores her role as a catalyst for Roya’s self-discovery. The chapter captures the tension between societal norms and private desire, as the women return to the bazaar, forever changed.

In the aftermath, Roya reflects on the kiss with a sense of boundless possibility, likening her euphoria to "the first person to taste snow." The chapter closes with her willingness to embrace the extraordinary, symbolized by her readiness to "gather feathers" from a hypothetical angel. This moment marks a turning point in Roya’s life, where Leila’s actions unlock a deeper understanding of love and freedom. The narrative blends poetic imagery with raw emotion, leaving the reader with a vivid portrait of a fleeting yet life-altering connection.

Chapter Twenty-four: Orkideh

The chapter opens with Cyrus Shams waking up disoriented in a Brooklyn hotel room, cold and wet from having urinated in his bed—a relapse of an old habit from his drinking days. Despite being sober now, the incident floods him with familiar shame and self-loathing, along with the practical dread of inconveniencing the hotel staff. Cyrus reflects on how these feelings were once routine during his alcoholism, intertwined with rituals of hiding his messes. The episode triggers a wave of existential despair, making him wish to escape the burden of living without actively seeking death.

Cyrus reminisces about his friendship with Zee, recalling their reckless, intoxicated nights filled with laughter, music, and fleeting moments of profound emotional connection. Their bond was so strong that even embarrassing incidents like bed-wetting would have been laughed off. He thinks of a permanent marker message he once left on Zee’s mirror during a blackout: "We can wear these crowns forever." These memories contrast sharply with his current loneliness, as Zee is absent and their friendship seems fractured. Cyrus feels adrift, questioning the point of his sobriety and creative efforts when they haven’t alleviated his suffering.

The narrative delves into Cyrus’s struggle with self-pity, a sentiment he knows is toxic for his recovery, as emphasized in the AA Big Book. He grapples with resentment toward his stalled writing project, his strained relationship with his sponsor, and the seeming meaninglessness of his life. His despair feels isolating, as most people dismiss his sadness, while Zee was the only one who ever sat with him in quiet solidarity. Cyrus’s attempt to rationalize his feelings only deepens his despondency, leaving him feeling hollow and disconnected from any sense of purpose.

In the aftermath, Cyrus mechanically addresses the consequences of his accident, leaving money and an apologetic note for the maid. The chapter closes with a surreal

interaction at checkout, where the hotel clerk’s unconventional question—"Did you make anything cool while you were here?"—jars Cyrus, highlighting his creative stagnation. The encounter underscores his unresolved tension between outward compliance with recovery and his inner turmoil, leaving him questioning whether sobriety has truly brought him closer to healing or merely exposed deeper voids.

Chapter Twenty-five

The chapter depicts a dreamlike encounter between Cyrus's father, Ali Shams, and the legendary poet Rumi outside a music venue. Ali, a hardworking immigrant who rarely appears in Cyrus's dreams, is seen smoking a cigarette—a habit he had abandoned in America. Rumi, adorned in vibrant robes and smoking a blunt, greets Ali with enthusiasm, revealing a mutual recognition between the two. The scene is set against the backdrop of a loud hardcore show, with young attendees milling about, creating a surreal contrast between the mundane and the mystical.

Ali and Rumi engage in a conversation that blends humor and profundity. Rumi explains that in this dreamlike state, the small details—like the cheap wine and the Swisher—matter more than the grand concerns of earthly life. He plucks a star from the sky, demonstrating the fluidity of this realm, while Ali's attempt results in a chicken egg, highlighting their differing perspectives. The dialogue underscores a shift from the material constraints of life to a more abstract, introspective existence.

The conversation takes a personal turn when Rumi asks Ali to share something genuine. After hesitation, Ali confesses his suspicion that his late wife may have been unfaithful, citing her distant behavior and secretive phone calls during her pregnancy with Cyrus. This revelation exposes Ali's lingering grief and insecurity, adding emotional depth to his character. Rumi responds with empathy, though the chapter leaves the truth of Ali's suspicions unresolved.

The chapter closes with the two figures still outside the venue, the music and smoke creating an otherworldly atmosphere. Rumi's glowing presence and Ali's introspective mood suggest a deeper exploration of memory, loss, and the afterlife. The interplay of light and smoke symbolizes clarity amid confusion, leaving readers with a sense of wonder about the boundaries between reality and dreams, past and present.

Chapter Twenty-six

The chapter opens in Tehran, August 1987, with the narrator reflecting on a transformative first kiss with Leila, described as a word that evokes "heaven" rather than just "sky." The moment is charged with emotional depth, setting the tone for their intimate connection. The narrative shifts to a phone call from Ali and Gilgamesh, who are drunkenly checking in from a campsite, their boisterous banter contrasting with the quiet tension of the narrator and Leila's shared space. Leila's playful interaction with Ali's forbidden rock records hints at her rebellious spirit and the clandestine nature of their bond.

As Leila takes the phone, her mischievous demeanor intensifies, her gestures and expressions revealing a deeper, unspoken understanding with the narrator. After hanging up, she deliberately plays a record on the narrator's old turntable, selecting a track that amplifies the emotional weight of the moment. The music—a Rolling Stones song—becomes the backdrop for their dance, with sensory details like the smell of jasmine-cedar and the dry copper taste of the narrator's tongue heightening the scene's intimacy. The narrator's whispered confession about the exhaustion of trying to "be good" underscores their internal struggle, met with Leila's empathetic reassurance.

The song's melancholic yet yearning lyrics mirror the narrator and Leila's emotions, their dance becoming a physical manifestation of their desire and preemptive nostalgia. Leila's repeated restarts of the song and her tender kisses on the narrator's ankles and wrists blur the lines between music, touch, and emotion. The silence after the music ends is deafening, symbolizing the weight of their unspoken feelings and the inevitability of their connection. This silence bridges into a moment of complete unity, where physical and emotional barriers dissolve.

The chapter culminates in a powerful depiction of their union, where music, fear, and history no longer separate them. The narrator and Leila's bodies and souls merge, transcending the constraints of their surroundings. The prose captures the intensity of their love, framed by the political and cultural tensions of 1980s Tehran, leaving a lasting impression of defiance and vulnerability in the face of societal repression.

Chapter Twenty-seven [When asked about...], Martyr!

The chapter opens with a reflection on Michelangelo's approach to sculpture—removing excess stone to reveal the masterpiece within. This metaphor extends to life, where eliminating negative elements (toxic relationships, bad habits) is often mistaken for creating goodness. The author critiques the Abrahamic moral framework, arguing that avoiding wrongdoing doesn't equate to active virtue. A rich man, for instance, may pride himself on not harming others while neglecting positive action, exposing the hollowness of morality rooted in abstinence rather than constructive engagement.

The narrative shifts to the author's personal struggle with addiction, contrasting "normal" people's view of recovery as mere abstinence with the alcoholic's reality. For non-addicts, drinking is a removable activity, but for the addicted, it's the foundation of their entire existence. Sobriety, therefore, isn't about subtraction but about rebuilding an identity from scratch. The author emphasizes the monumental task of relearning basic human functions—eating, speaking, even sitting still—amid the wreckage left by addiction.

Central to the chapter is the rejection of passive morality in favor of active transformation. The author aspires to be "the chisel, not the David," highlighting creation through destruction. Recovery is framed not as self-denial but as surrender to a sculpting process where survival itself is a triumph. The house metaphor—ripping up soiled carpets while trying to function—underscores the simultaneous demolition and reconstruction required in healing.

Ultimately, the chapter challenges conventional notions of virtue and recovery. It argues that true goodness requires proactive engagement, not just avoidance, and

that personal transformation demands radical reinvention rather than simple abstinence. The raw portrayal of addiction's aftermath serves as a microcosm for broader existential questions about how we define—and rebuild—a meaningful life.

Chapter Twenty-seven [Sitting on a…], Martyr!

Cyrus sits on a bench in Prospect Park, reeling from the news of Orkideh's death after receiving a voicemail from her ex-wife and gallerist, Sang. Despite having known Orkideh for only a short time, Cyrus is deeply affected, contrasting his grief with the seemingly effortless composure of those around him. The chapter reflects on the fleeting nature of modern grief, reduced to a brief interruption in the constant stream of daily life. As Cyrus hesitantly returns Sang's call, the weight of the moment is palpable, setting the stage for a conversation that will unravel long-held secrets.

The phone call between Cyrus and Sang is tense and emotionally charged. Sang reveals that Orkideh took her own life, a fact Cyrus struggles to process. Their dialogue is halting, filled with pauses and unspoken questions, as Cyrus grapples with why Sang contacted him specifically. Sang mentions that Orkideh valued their conversations, hinting at a deeper connection. Cyrus's growing unease culminates in a sudden, desperate question: "Was Orkideh my mother?" The revelation hangs in the air, leaving both characters—and the reader—stunned.

Sang confirms Cyrus's suspicion, explaining that Orkideh recognized him immediately when they met but hadn't disclosed their relationship. Cyrus is overwhelmed, his identity shaken as he confronts the truth about his parentage. The narrative captures his visceral reaction—the coldness in his throat, the heat in his ears—as he struggles to reconcile this new reality. Sang's admission that Orkideh "wanted you to know" adds layers of regret and missed opportunities, leaving Cyrus to grapple with the abrupt loss of a mother he never truly knew.

In the aftermath of the revelation, Cyrus searches for Orkideh's images online, scrutinizing her face for traces of himself or his father's late wife, Roya. The chapter closes with Sang en route to meet Cyrus, leaving his emotional state unresolved but hinting at further confrontation and clarity. The scene underscores themes of identity,

grief, and the fragile nature of human connections, as Cyrus stands on the precipice of a new understanding of his past.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The chapter explores the concept of grace through the perspective of Roya Shams, a woman who narrowly escaped death when her plane was mistakenly shot down by the USS *Vincennes*. Roya reflects on grace as an unearned gift, contrasting it with justice, which is transactional. She recounts how she traded passports with her lover, Leila, to help her flee Iran, only for Leila to perish in the crash instead. Roya grapples with the guilt of surviving while Leila died, framing her second chance at life as an inexplicable act of grace.

Roya’s survival hinges on a series of fortunate events: a border guard accepting a bribe, a passport photo’s poor quality, and her ability to blend into New York City. These moments underscore her theme of grace as arbitrary and unmerited. She wanders the city, stealing necessities and mourning Leila, whose absence haunts her physically and emotionally. Roya’s grief is palpable as she describes the hollow space Leila left behind, a void she carries with her in every action and thought.

The chapter delves into Roya’s struggle with guilt and identity. She questions why she was spared and wrestles with the moral weight of her survival, even as she acknowledges grace’s inherent lack of conditions. Her theft of a Persian-English dictionary becomes a symbolic anchor, a small comfort in her disoriented existence. Roya’s reflections on the imprecise language used to describe the plane crash—"Gulf Tragedy" instead of "murder"—highlight her disillusionment with justice and the randomness of her fate.

Ultimately, Roya’s narrative is a meditation on the paradox of grace: it is both a gift and a burden. She lives with the knowledge that her survival came at the cost of another’s life, yet grace demands no repayment. The chapter closes with Roya’s unresolved guilt and her haunting question: "God will never forgive me. Why should I?" Her story lingers on the tension between gratitude and grief, leaving the reader to

ponder the weight of unearned second chances.

Chapter Twenty-nine

The chapter "Orkideh, Martyr!" reflects on the narrator's life through a lens of gratitude and acceptance. Despite acknowledging that happiness was not a constant state, the speaker emphasizes experiencing profound joy, particularly during moments shared with Leila. This perspective challenges conventional notions of tragedy, suggesting that even a life cut short can be rich in meaning if it contained genuine happiness. The tone is introspective yet defiant, rejecting pity in favor of celebrating the beauty that existed.

Central to the chapter is the idea that joy may be finite and unevenly distributed across a lifetime. The narrator speculates that they might have "used up" their allotted happiness quickly, but this does not diminish its value. The relationship with Leila emerges as a defining source of this joy, serving as an emotional anchor in the narrator's recollections. This viewpoint transforms what could be seen as a tragic narrative into one of fulfillment and completion.

The chapter notably redefines the concept of tragedy, arguing that true tragedy lacks redemption or meaningful moments. By contrast, the narrator's life—while perhaps brief—contained enough love and joy to render it complete. This philosophical stance elevates personal experience over societal expectations of longevity, suggesting quality of moments matters more than quantity. The prose carries a quiet dignity that underscores this conviction.

In its closing thoughts, the chapter arrives at a place of peaceful acceptance. The narrator explicitly states that no one could ask for more than what they've experienced, demonstrating remarkable contentment with life's offerings. This resolution provides emotional closure while leaving room for readers to reflect on their own measures of a life well-lived. The chapter ultimately serves as a meditation on finding meaning in transient happiness rather than dwelling on its cessation.

Chapter Thirty

The chapter opens with Cyrus Shams waiting on a park bench in Brooklyn, lost in thought as he anticipates meeting Sang Linh. His disheveled appearance and anxious demeanor hint at his emotional turmoil. When Sang arrives, Cyrus immediately recognizes her despite her unassuming presence, noting her practical attire and weary expression. Their initial interaction is tentative, marked by silence and shared cigarettes, as both characters grapple with the weight of their connection through Orkideh, Cyrus's mother and Sang's late partner.

As they sit together, Cyrus experiences a fleeting sensory hallucination—a humming vibration beneath his feet—which Sang dismisses as city noise. Their conversation turns to the differences between the cold in Brooklyn and the Midwest, revealing Cyrus's discomfort in this unfamiliar environment. The dialogue remains sparse, with both characters cautiously navigating their shared grief and the unspoken history between them. Sang's offer of a cigarette becomes a small gesture of solidarity, bridging their awkward silence.

Sang eventually breaks the tension by reminiscing about Orkideh's illness and her family's attempts to care for her through food. She shares Orkideh's belief that relationships are defined by "feeders" and "eaters," a dynamic Orkideh resisted. Cyrus listens quietly, masking his bitterness over never knowing his mother. When Sang steps away to take a call, Cyrus spirals into self-pity, questioning why Orkideh never revealed her identity to him and feeling adrift in the city.

Upon Sang's return, she reveals her own history of sobriety, subtly offering Cyrus a lifeline of understanding. The chapter ends with their connection still fragile but deepening, as Sang's practical kindness contrasts with Cyrus's raw emotional state. Their shared grief and unresolved questions about Orkideh linger, setting the stage for further revelations.

Chapter Thirty-one

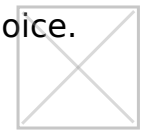
The chapter opens with the narrator reflecting on their first experience with death, which they missed entirely, leaving them with unresolved grief. This time, they aim to confront their own mortality head-on through their final art installation, *Death-Speak*, which serves as a literal and metaphorical presence in the face of death. The narrator contrasts their experience with Leila, who may have found clarity in death, while they remain burdened by the weight of living. The installation becomes a way to reclaim agency and witness their own demise, rejecting passive acceptance in favor of active participation.

The narrator draws inspiration from Farrokhzad’s poetry, particularly the raw, unadorned expression of sorrow and urgency in lines like “O Muslims, I am sad tonight.” They resonate with the poet’s rejection of artifice, seeing it as a direct confrontation with the abyss of human existence. This simplicity and honesty align with their artistic philosophy, which rejects the notion of art as mere ornamentation. Instead, they view art as a vital means of shared understanding, a way to store collective knowledge and emotion beyond individual lifespans.

The chapter critiques the modern commodification of art as decorative, tracing its origins to the whims of the wealthy who sought beauty devoid of deeper meaning. The narrator challenges this tradition, arguing that art’s true purpose is to convey urgent, unfiltered truths. Their installation, *Death-Speak*, embodies this ethos by presenting death in its unvarnished reality—ugly, messy, and unavoidable. The narrator’s confrontation with mortality is stripped of pretense, mirroring Farrokhzad’s plainspoken despair and rejecting the expectation that art must always aspire to beauty.

The chapter concludes with a tense exchange between the narrator and Sang, their former lover and gallerist, who initially dismisses the installation as melodramatic.

Their argument reveals unresolved tensions and Sang’s hurt over being kept in the dark about the narrator’s terminal diagnosis. Despite her resistance, Sang ultimately contributes the title *Death-Speak*, symbolizing their enduring connection. The narrator’s determination to proceed, regardless of venue or approval, underscores their commitment to authenticity, even as Sang questions whether every act must carry symbolic weight. Their final, unresolved dialogue lingers on the inevitability of the narrator’s choice.



Coda

The chapter "Sang Linh" from *Coda* captures a pivotal moment in 1997 New York, where the narrator reflects on the success of Orkideh's art exhibition *Why We Put Mirrors in Birdcages*. The narrator, a gallery owner, works alongside their oldest son, Duy, and the artist Roya to dismantle the show. Roya's meticulous nature shines as she oversees the handling of her paintings, particularly *Odi et Amo*, a piece evoking mixed emotions in the narrator due to its unsettling yet nostalgic imagery. The scene underscores the collaborative yet tense dynamic between the trio, blending professional pride with personal connections.

As they prepare the artworks for shipment to collector David J. T. Swartzwelder, Roya's anxiety about the paintings' safety contrasts with the narrator's calm reassurance. The narrator experiences a fleeting but profound moment of gratitude, recognizing the rarity of their happiness—a stark contrast to past hardships. This introspection reveals a life marked by both trauma and triumph, where joy is cherished as a temporary reprieve. The narrator's awareness of life's impermanence adds depth to the scene, framing their contentment as both precious and precarious.

The chapter lightens with playful banter between the narrator and Roya, who jokes about buying a Cadillac car door with her earnings. Their affectionate exchange, set against the backdrop of a pop ballad, highlights the intimacy and humor in their relationship. Roya's eccentric whimsy and the narrator's fond exasperation underscore their deep bond, even as Duy interjects with logistical questions about the artwork. The moment captures the balance between their professional responsibilities and personal joy.

The chapter closes with a sense of culmination, as the narrator reflects on this period as a high point in their marriage and career. Despite anticipating future successes, they recognize this moment as uniquely fulfilling—a "climax" in their shared journey.

The interplay of memory, emotion, and mundane tasks creates a rich tapestry, blending the ordinary with the profound. The chapter leaves readers with a poignant reminder of how fleeting happiness can be, even in the midst of achievement and love.