

The Lowland



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

Jhumpa Lahiri, the daughter of Indian immigrants from the state of West Bengal, was born in London but raised in the United States, where her father worked as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. After studying creative writing, comparative literature, and Renaissance Studies at Boston University, Lahiri began a distinguished record of publication with her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, which won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake*, was published in 2003 and later adapted into a film in 2007. Lahiri has frequently published stories in the prestigious *New Yorker* magazine throughout her career, and, in 2014, she was awarded the National Humanities Medal for her contribution to American letters. As of 2015, Jhumpa Lahiri writes fiction and nonfiction primarily in Italian—a language she taught herself after she began feeling “exiled” from the English language.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The turbulence of 1960s and 1970s India is at the forefront of *The Lowland*—even as the novel moves temporally past the early days of the Naxalite movement and the splintering of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) into the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). The extreme physical and ideological violence of the period resonates throughout the lives of Subhash, Gauri, and indeed their daughter, Bela, though she is raised in a foreign country, ostensibly removed from the painful truth of her family's very personal involvement with the violence and terrorism of the Naxalites. The movement, which grew out of the CPI(ML)'s support for the peasants of Naxalbari—sharecroppers who rose up against the unfair and predatory practices of the upper classes who drove them off their land yet forced them to continue working it without profit—threatened the city of Calcutta and the state of West Bengal more widely. Those who supported Maoist ideals of anti-imperialism and the overthrow of landowners and landlords attempted to spread radical Communist ideology throughout the territory. Though quelled in the early 1970s, the Naxalite movement has resurfaced throughout the decades, entering into violent conflict with the Indian government even in 2018.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Neel Mukherjee's 2014 novel *The Lives of Others* is also set in West Bengal in the 1960s and features a protagonist who

abandons his prosperous life in Calcutta to join the Naxalite movement after being radicalized by witnessing the extreme poverty—and destructive, lingering feudalism—of the countryside. Arundhati Roy's 2011 book *Walking with the Comrades* provides a nonfictional account of the enduring struggles between the Indian state and the Naxalite movement—a battle which she describes as one “for the soul of India.”

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Lowland*
- **When Written:** Early 2010s
- **When Published:** 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Literary fiction
- **Setting:** Calcutta, West Bengal, India; Rhode Island, USA
- **Climax:** Decades after abandoning her life in Rhode Island, Gauri Mitra returns to personally hand a set of signed divorce papers to Subhash, only to come face-to-face with their daughter, Bela.
- **Antagonist:** Gauri Mitra
- **Point of View:** Various

EXTRA CREDIT

Award-Worthy. *The Lowland* received the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2014 and was placed on short- and long-lists for the Man Booker Prize, the National Book Award, and the Bailey's Women's Prize.

Drawn From Life. The protagonist of *The Lowland*, Subhash Mitra, travels from West Bengal to Rhode Island to work at a university in Providence. Though unnamed throughout the book, the university is easily recognizable as the University of Rhode Island—the place where Lahiri's own father, himself an academic and an immigrant from West Bengal, worked as a librarian. The University of Rhode Island is also the setting of one of Lahiri's best-known pieces of short fiction, the short story “The Third and Final Continent.”



PLOT SUMMARY

Brothers Subhash and Udayan Mitra are growing up in Calcutta in the 1960s. Their neighborhood, Tollygunge, is full of refugees whose lives were displaced by the 1947 Partition of India, but the boys themselves live in a modest, middle-class home which sits on the edge of a stretch of land occupied by

two ponds. Between the two ponds there is a **lowland**, which floods in the rainy season.

The boys are one year apart in age, and inseparable. The older, more reserved Subhash often finds himself roped into trouble by his younger, more impulsive brother Udayan. As the boys enter their collegiate years and attend separate local universities, they begin to drift apart for the first time in their lives. Udayan falls in with a group of radicals associated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)—a splinter group of the Communist Party of India with ties to the burgeoning Naxalite movement, a violent uprising originally started by poor sharecroppers in the West Bengal village of Naxalbari. Amid the violence and unrest, Udayan devotes his days and nights to CPI(ML) activities, while Subhash decides to pursue a Ph.D. in America. Udayan begs Subhash not to leave India, but Subhash feels the distance between himself and his brother is already too wide to bridge.

In America, Subhash attends university in Rhode Island, at which he is one of the only Indian students. His feelings of isolation increase when a letter from Udayan arrives saying he has gone against their parents' wishes for an arranged marriage and chosen to marry a woman named Gauri for love. Subhash, who had been proud of himself for taking a bold new step in moving to America, feels "defeated by Udayan all over again." Throughout his second year of graduate school, Subhash fields frequent letters from Udayan asking when Subhash is going to come home and allow their parents to arrange a marriage for him. The letters almost never mention Naxalbari or any radical politics at all, and Subhash is relieved that his brother has settled down. Subhash becomes involved with a young, married white woman named Holly; though he knows the relationship is not tenable in the long-term, he is heartbroken when Holly ends their affair. At the end of summer, a letter arrives from Calcutta, telling Subhash that Udayan has been killed and urging him to come home as soon as he can.

Subhash returns to Calcutta to find it completely changed by the violence of the Naxalites. Subhash realizes that his brother had never given up his radical politics and was likely killed by police. Subhash's parents are so sidlined by their grief that they barely notice Subhash's presence, and will not answer any of his questions about Udayan's death. The only one who holds the answers Subhash seeks is Udayan's widow, Gauri—who is pregnant with her late husband's child. Gauri is being isolated by Subhash's parents in a combination of ritual mourning custom and their desire to edge her out of the house so that they can raise Udayan's child alone.

Gauri reveals what happened the night of Udayan's death: she and her mother-in-law came back from holiday shopping to find policemen swarming the house. The policemen held Gauri and her in-laws at gunpoint and directed them to the flooded lowland, where Udayan was hiding. After coaxing him out by threatening to kill members of his family, the police put Udayan

into a van and let the rest of the Mitras go. The family retreated into the house and, from their terrace, watched as the police executed Udayan, point-blank, in the middle of the field beyond the lowland. The police took Udayan's body and never returned it.

Subhash is so perturbed by both the details of his brother's death and his parents' cruel mistreatment of Gauri that he is unable to sleep for days. After a group of investigators come to the house to question Gauri about the activities of the local CPI(ML), Subhash realizes that in order to keep Gauri safe, he must marry her himself and take her back to America. Gauri reluctantly agrees, though she warns Subhash that Udayan would never have wanted such an arrangement.

Gauri arrives in Boston, five months pregnant. As she adjusts to life with Subhash, she struggles with feelings of isolation and a desire to pursue her education. She rips up her saris, cuts off her hair, and begins attending philosophy lectures at the college. After the birth of "their" daughter, Bela, Gauri's feelings of isolation and displacement do not abate. She and Subhash embark on a sexual relationship, but even this release of tension does not allow Gauri to feel any peace. Gauri takes a philosophy class and does so well in it that her teacher recommends she eventually pursue a doctorate. As Gauri becomes more dedicated to her studies, her relationship with the young Bela grows more and more contentious. When she is at last admitted to a doctoral program in Boston, when Bela is in first grade, Subhash becomes resentful of Gauri's desire to escape their home, their marriage, and now their child.

Subhash's father dies, and he takes Bela—now twelve—on a six-week trip to Calcutta. Subhash's mother Bijoli, her mind addled by old age, spends her days caring for a cement post in the lowland that marks the spot where Udayan died. After the trip, Bela and Subhash return to Providence to find that Gauri has left. She has written Subhash a note in Bengali, informing him that she has taken a teaching job in California and is leaving Bela to Subhash.

As Subhash and Bela begin adjusting to life without Gauri, Bela becomes withdrawn and loses weight. When a guidance counselor calls to report that Bela is distracted in school, Subhash begins taking her to see a therapist. As the months go by, and Bela enters eighth grade, she begins making friends and participating in school activities. The summer Bela graduates from high school, Subhash receives a letter telling him that his mother has had a stroke—he returns to India without Bela, and Bijoli dies.

After Subhash returns to Rhode Island, he brings Bela to college in the Midwest. As the years go by, she follows in Subhash's footsteps by studying environmental sciences. After graduation, however, Bela takes up an itinerant existence, travelling across the country and working on different farms. She returns home only a couple of times a year to visit. Every time Subhash sees Bela, he is surprised by how politically-

mindful and, in some ways, radical she has become, and worries that Udayan has reclaimed Bela from beyond the grave.

Meanwhile, on the West Coast, Gauri lives an isolated but successful life. She has published three books and has a tenured teaching job at a university in Southern California. She regrets having betrayed Bela but is too grateful for her freedom to dwell much on what she has done to her family. Subhash, now a man of sixty, lives a similarly isolated existence. At the funeral of a friend from graduate school, he meets a woman named Elise Silva—a widow and former high school teacher of Bela's who now runs the local historical society. She and Subhash begin seeing each other.

Bela is in her early thirties, and living in Brooklyn with a cooperative of artists, nomads, and radicals. She knows that her itinerant life is due to the influence of Gauri's abandonment, but shows no signs of wanting to live any other way. One June, Bela returns to Rhode Island for a visit, and reveals that she is pregnant. She has no relationship with the child's father, and instead wants to raise it on her own in Rhode Island, in the house she grew up in. Subhash is moved to tell Bela, at last, the truth of her parentage. Bela reacts poorly, at first, but after a trip to the coast to stay with a friend, she returns home and tells Subhash that knowing the truth does not change the fact that Subhash is her only father. If anything, she says, she loves him more, knowing now all he has done for her.

Back in California, Gauri reluctantly agrees to be interviewed by a former student for a book he is writing on the Naxalite movement. The interview brings up painful memories, and the lingering fear that she will be implicated for her tangential involvement, through Udayan, in the movement. One day, Gauri receives a letter from Subhash, asking her to sign some papers finalizing a divorce between them. Rattled, Gauri retreats into her memories of the early 1970s. Back then, she helped Udayan deliver letters on behalf of the CPI(ML) and was instrumental in the killing of a prominent policeman—Gauri tracked the man's schedule and reported back to Udayan the times when he was off-duty and unarmed so that Udayan's group could murder him. To this day, Gauri is haunted by the things she did.

A few weeks after receiving Subhash's letter, unable to compose a sufficient written response, she decides to stop in Providence on the way to a conference in London, to hand Subhash the papers in person and apologize for her actions. When Gauri rings the doorbell of her old house, however, it is Bela who answers. Subhash is not home, and so Gauri sits with Bela and her four-year-old daughter, Meghna, attempting to make small-talk and find out the details of their lives. Bela is enraged by her mother's presence and refuses to answer any of her questions. She berates Gauri for leaving, telling her that she is "nothing." Gauri leaves and flies to Calcutta instead of London, determined to confront her past. She visits the lowland, which has been filled in and built up—condominiums

now stand on the site of Udayan's execution. Gauri considers committing suicide by throwing herself off the balcony of her room in a local guesthouse, but ultimately loses her will to die, and returns to California.

Subhash and Elise, now married, go on a honeymoon to Ireland. Visiting a circle of stones in the countryside, and seeing the flooding all around them, Subhash is reminded of the lowland. The narrative flashes back to the evening of Udayan's death, revisiting his last moments from his own perspective. Udayan struggles to hide from the police underwater in the flooded lowland but cannot hold his breath long enough. He worries, in his final moments underwater, that his dedication to the revolution has helped no one, and instead had sown only violence and discord. As the police march Udayan across the field beyond the lowland, he knows he will die. He recalls meeting Gauri for a date one afternoon in front of a movie theater, and as the police's bullets rip through him, his last thoughts are of the sunlight on her hair.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Subhash Mitra – The protagonist of the novel. Subhash is a reserved, thoughtful, and studious young man whose coming-of-age in a post-Partition Calcutta forms the groundwork of his life—a life which will be ripped apart by both political and personal violence and unimaginable tragedy. Subhash and his brother Udayan are inseparable in childhood, though Subhash often feels suffocated or controlled by his younger brother. As the boys grow older, Udayan's fiery personality expands and he becomes involved with radical local politics while Subhash, uninterested in such pursuit, retreats into his studies. Subhash feels himself drifting further away from his brother and decides to continue his studies in Rhode Island, where he is isolated, but at last free of his brother's influence. At the start of his third year of graduate school, word arrives that Udayan has been killed, and when Subhash returns to Calcutta, he finds the city transformed by the violence of the Naxalite movement—a terrorist faction that supported the violent overthrow of landowners in the impoverished West Bengal city of Naxalbari, and which was taken up by local political radicals. Subhash, realizing that his brother's widow Gauri is not only pregnant with Udayan's unborn child but also seemingly mixed up in the CPI(ML), offers to marry her and take her to America so that she can escape the ire of his and Udayan's parents and the scrutiny of the Calcutta police. This selfless act will transform Subhash and Gauri's lives forever, as their struggle to make a home together in America, their resentments toward one another, their shared grief over Udayan's loss, and their guilt over raising "their" daughter, Bela, in ignorance of her true parentage overwhelm them. Gauri eventually leaves, and Subhash raises Bela alone in her absence. As his identity as

Bela's father becomes the center of his life, he must wrestle with his own feelings of inadequacy and the nagging sense that he is an imposter, doomed to forever follow in his brother's footsteps despite all his efforts to the contrary.

Gauri Mitra – Udayan's widow Gauri is the antagonist of the novel—a smart, aloof, and selfish woman whose unresolved grief over Udayan's death and feelings of inadequacy as a mother ultimately result in her detaching herself from the life she has built with Subhash and Bela and moving to California, severing all contact with her second husband and daughter. After Udayan's death, Subhash takes Gauri back to America with him and offers to raise Udayan's unborn child as his own. Gauri's adjustment to life in Rhode Island, though, is hampered by her traumatic experience of watching Udayan being executed right before her eyes, as well as her guilt over her own involvement in the covert CPI(ML) action that made Udayan a police target in the first place. As Gauri begins taking classes at Subhash's university and excelling in the philosophy department, she burrows deeper into her work in order to escape the crushing duties of being married to a man she does not love and mother to a child who reminds her of the man she lost and the world she left behind. Gauri's increasingly selfish actions, though condemnable, also allow her to finally obtain the intellectual freedom, financial independence, and physical solitude she has craved all her life.

Bela Mitra – Bela Mitra is the biological daughter of Udayan and Gauri, though she is raised in Rhode Island by Gauri and Subhash. Bela is, for all of her childhood and much of her adult life, ignorant of the truth of her parentage. Bela is politically-minded, socially conscious, and fiercely independent—all traits Subhash believes she has inherited from Udayan. She is also deeply scarred by her mother's abandonment and creates a nomadic life for herself that allows her to refuse attachments to other people and never put down roots. When Bela reveals to Subhash that she is going to become a mother herself and wants to raise the child alone, Subhash is so overwhelmed by the ways in which Bela is unknowingly repeating her own history that he reveals the truth of her parentage. Though shocked at the news, Bela reminds Subhash that it is he who is her true father, displaying the loyalty and gratitude she has felt toward him all along, in spite of her transient lifestyle and difficulties maintaining a familial structure.

Udayan Mitra – Subhash's younger brother Udayan is a rascal, a radical, and in many ways a secondary antagonist of the novel—despite the fact that he dies early on and exists only in the collective consciousness of those who knew him for much of the book. Despite being younger than Subhash, Udayan is the more dominant one in their relationship; his fiery personality and taste for adventure often land him and Subhash in trouble. As the boys grow older, Udayan becomes involved in radical politics through his affiliation with the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), a splinter group of the Communist

Party of India with ties to the violent peasant uprising in Naxalbari. Udayan's devotion to revolutionary politics and interest in controversial figures such as Mao, Fidel Castro, and Che Guevara alienate him from his quiet, studious brother, even as Subhash envies Udayan for his outspoken and intrepid nature. When Subhash announces his intention to continue his studies in the United States, Udayan begs his brother not to go, but Subhash's mind is already made up. When news comes years later that Udayan has died due to his involvement in the violent Naxalite terrorist movement, Udayan ceases to be a character in the book in the traditional sense—but Subhash, Udayan's widow Gauri, and Subhash and Udayan's mother Bijoli all spend the rest of the novel struggling with the ways Udayan's spirit haunts them and informs their actions even from beyond the grave.

Holly – A woman whom Subhash meets when he is still in graduate school. They begin a romantic and sexual relationship, and though Subhash knows that it is untenable in the long-term, he is devastated when Holly informs him that she must cut things off in order to pursue the rekindling of her relationship with her son Joshua's father, from whom she was never officially divorced.

Richard Grifalconi – Subhash's roommate during his first year of graduate school. Richard is a radical and opposed to the war in Vietnam but has never heard of the Naxalites or Naxalbari. Many decades after Richard moves to Chicago during Subhash's second year of graduate school, he moves back to Rhode Island, and the two old friends are reunited. Soon after their reunion, however, Richard dies suddenly, forcing Subhash to consider his own mortality.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bijoli Mitra – Subhash and Udayan's mother. In the years after her youngest son's death, Bijoli, her mind addled by age and grief, spends her days carefully tending the post at the edge of the **lowland** that marks the spot where Udayan died.

Dipankar Biswas – A former student of Gauri's who approaches her years after taking her class to ask if he can interview for a book he is writing on the Naxalite movement. At first, Gauri wants nothing to do with the book, but soon agrees to be interviewed anonymously.

Elise Silva – Subhash's second wife, whom he meets at Richard's funeral. The two are instantly attracted to one another. Subhash learns that Elise was one of Bela's high school teachers and now works at the local historical society. They begin a relationship soon after meeting and eventually marry.

Otto Weiss – A philosophy instructor at the university where Subhash works. Gauri enrolls in one of his classes, and at the end of the semester Otto is so impressed by her work that he offers to help her gain admission to a doctoral program.

Lorna – A graduate student at UCLA who approaches Gauri to

ask if she will help her with her philosophy dissertation. The two experience an attraction to one another, and soon embark on a sexual relationship.

Charu Majumdar – A real-life figure, Majumdar was a Bengali Communist instrumental in forming the CPI(ML). A college dropout from a well-to-do, landowning family, he was eventually arrested after the Naxalites become a veritable terrorist organization and died in police custody in Calcutta.

Kanu Sanyal – A real-life figure and a Bengali Communist from an upper-caste family who began as a disciple of Majumdar and eventually rose to power as the head of the radical CPI(ML). Sanyal eventually committed suicide in 2010.

Sinha – A radical medical student who attends school with Udayan. He runs meetings of the CPI(ML) and believes that revolutionary violence is justified. He is eventually arrested by the police; it is unknown whether he lives or dies in their custody.

Narasimhan – An Indian economics professor from the state of Madras. He is a friend to Subhash.

Manash – Gauri's brother, who first introduces her to Udayan.

Bismillah – A Muslim man still living in Tollygunge decades after Partition.

Joshua – Holly's young son.

Deepa – A young Bengali woman who works as Bijoli's housemaid and caretaker in her later years.

Meghna – Bela's daughter.

Drew – A farmer in Providence who pursues a relationship with Bela. Though she is wary of letting someone into her life, Drew proves himself a loyal and giving partner to her.

Abha – The proprietor of the guesthouse Gauri stays in when she returns, at last, to Calcutta.

Nirmal Dey – A policeman whom Udayan's party conspires to kill.

TERMS

Partition – This refers to the 1947 division of British India into two separate states: India and Pakistan. Partition was—and still is—seen as a hasty, ineffective, violent, and irresponsible dismantling headed by British administrators seeking to create a clean break from colonial control after India achieved independence. The upheaval in the wake of Partition, as Indian Muslims fled to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs fled Pakistan for India, claimed hundreds of thousands—some estimate millions—of lives in just a few short months. Despite the fact that India and Pakistan were intertwined economically and culturally, Partition engendered riots, uprisings, and refugee crises in both countries. The bitterness and pain of the separation is still felt in politics and relations between India and

Pakistan today, and survivors of the violence still struggle to understand why and how the two countries descended so quickly into such animosity.

Communist Party of India (Marxist)/CPI(M) – A political party that has endured to the present day. Within the pages of *The Lowland*, the party splintered from the original Communist Party of India when many members felt that the Party was neglecting the issues that plagued India—feudalism, class struggle, and extreme poverty—in favor of foreign interests.

Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)CPI(ML) /- Formed in 1969 by **Kanu Sanyal**, the party was a splinter group off of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or the CPI (M), itself already a splinter group, and later devolved further into hundreds of smaller Naxalite terrorist groups. The party's original formation was due to fears that the CPI(M) was turning away from revolutionary politics and ignoring the plight of the peasants in the West Bengal countryside, and its formation was thus inextricably intertwined with Naxalbari and the Naxalite Rebellion.

Caste – The Hindu caste system is determined by hereditary class divisions, in which social privileges are inherited from one generation to the next. It has historically been virtually impossible to move from a lower caste to a higher one.

United Front – A West Bengali political coalition formed in 1967. The party was threatened and eventually dissolved by the internal conflict within the CPI(M) and the associated Naxalite rebellion.

Naxalbari – A small village in West Bengal that was the center of an uprising by the CPI(M) led by **Charu Majumdar** and **Kanu Sanyal**. At the time of the uprising, the peasants of the village were being systematically forced off of their land, and sharecroppers were being killed with impunity by local police when they attempted to occupy or work on the land from which they'd been exiled. The Naxalite rebellion was the attempt to rise up against oppressive police and paramilitary forces and redistribute land to the impoverished. Though rooted in the desire for equality and justice, the Naxalite movement would soon resort to violent methods and become known as a radical terrorist faction.

Naxalites – The Naxalites are, today, commonly viewed as terrorists whose violent acts and demonstrations in support of far-left Communist ideologies trace back to the original 1967 splintering of the CPI(ML) off of the previously established CPI(M) and the associate Naxalite Rebellion in Naxalbari.

Durga Pujo – The largest festival in West Bengal, Durga Pujo (sometimes Durga Puja) is a major festival of Hinduism held for 10 days in the Hindu month of Ashvina, which overlaps with the Gregorian months of September and October. The festival celebrates the victory of the warrior goddess **Durga**—who is charged with protecting peace, prosperity, and goodness from evil forces—over the demon king Mahishasura.

Fidel Castro – A Cuban communist revolutionary. Castro converted Cuba into a one-party, socialist state under Communist Party rule—the first in the Western Hemisphere. Castro ruled Cuba first as Prime Minister and later as President—a thinly-veiled moniker disguising his status as dictator for life—from 1959 until his health declined in 2008.

Mao Zedong – Mao Zedong ruled the People’s Republic of China as the Chairman of the Communist Party from 1949 until his death in 1976. Mao’s Chinese nationalist, anti-imperialist outlook was inspired by Marxism-Leninism. He attempted to transform China’s economy from an agrarian to an industrial one. This movement, known as the Great Leap Forward, backfired with devastating consequences, leading to the deaths of an estimated 30 to 45 million people between 1958 and 1962. Mao attempted to strip Chinese society of cultural artifacts, elevate his own cult of personality, and keep China disconnected from the rest of the world. Though his supporters have, over the years, credited him with driving imperialism out of China and modernizing the nation, Mao’s regime was totalitarian, violent, and responsible not only for the deaths of perhaps 70 million Chinese but also for the widespread destruction of religious and cultural sites and artifacts in pursuit of a collective willful amnesia regarding Chinese history and culture.

Che Guevara – Che Guevara was an Argentine Marxist revolutionary and guerilla leader who has, since his death in 1967, become a recognized symbol of rebellion the world over. Like **Udayan**, Che was radicalized after his travels through the South American countryside made him aware of the extreme depths of poverty there. An anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist Marxist-Leninist, Guevara helped Fidel Castro to rise to power in Cuba, and his beliefs in the “immortality of the revolution,” which he spoke of until the very moment of his death, has made him a commonly-invoked figurehead of revolutionary politics.

Though nearly inseparable early in life, Subhash feels a rift deepening between himself and his brother as Udayan’s politics become increasingly radicalized in response to their homeland’s unrest. Broader strife in India continues to be mirrored by familial divisions and tragedies throughout the novel—moments that, in turn, often fuel further unrest. By exploring the ways in which political and personal violence feed each other, Lahiri suggests the ultimate inseparability of the two; the personal is always political, and vice versa.

The novel opens in Tollygunge, a neighborhood of the West Bengal city of Calcutta. As Subhash and Udayan play in the streets of their neighborhood and learn about its history in school, a portrait of a place already torn asunder by political violence begins to emerge. Less than twenty years earlier, Partition had created desperate refugee crises as Hindus living in Pakistan fled over the border to India, and Muslims living in India fled to Pakistan. An act of political violence—the careless splitting of one nation into two, and the creation of a political and religious line of demarcation—quickly transformed into countless acts of personal violence, as Muslims and Hindus murdered one another. Though the boys are, relatively speaking, sheltered and privileged, and do not witness any acts of such violence in their youth, the presence of a refugee crisis and the ubiquitous reminders of the violence of Partition establishes an atmosphere of volatility, instability, and resentment that will develop as the novel progresses.

Udayan and Subhash’s paths begin to diverge as they come of age, with their differing responses to the unrest around them fostering a sense of resentment between the pair. As Udayan becomes disillusioned by the plight of Indian peasants and subsequently swept up in the movement emerging around the illegal eviction of sharecroppers in the poor West Bengal village of Naxalbari, he finds himself in league with the radical, nationalistic Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), who see violence as a means of resistance and, they hope, of change. The CPI(ML) takes up the burgeoning peasant revolt against landowners in Naxalbari as their banner cause, and as Udayan joins his party members on a tour of the countryside, he witnesses the extreme poverty and injustice plaguing his fellow countrymen. As a result of his emotional connection to the peasants and sharecroppers he meets, his anarchic, anti-imperialist politics develop, and he becomes a member of the Naxalite movement—a notoriously vicious insurgency whose reverberations are still felt throughout India today. Thus, Udayan’s personal investment in the lives of others drives him toward political violence.

As Udayan’s political involvement becomes more and more radical, his personal life, too, becomes tinged with violence—not physical, but a kind of emotional violence that will sow its seeds in the whole of the Mitra family and have reverberations throughout generations. When Udayan is killed by paramilitary forces who were searching for him in the wake



THEMES

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POLITICAL AND PERSONAL VIOLENCE

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* is, at its heart, an exploration of violence. The 1960s India of the novel’s opening pages is not even two decades removed from the violence of Partition, the 1947 division of British India into India and Pakistan, and it is against this backdrop that brothers Subhash and Udayan Mitra grow up.

of his involvement with several acts of violence in Calcutta—the detonation of a pipe bomb and the murder of a policeman, most prominently—the political violence Udayan engaged in as part of his pursuit of a revolution is transfigured. Udayan’s death—itsself an act of political violence, as the paramilitary forces are going around the city arresting and executing young men suspected of involvement in the Naxalite movement—is reflective of the feverish but ultimately failed rebellion. Udayan’s death occurs when he is in his mid-twenties and cuts him off in his prime—just as the Naxalite movement was stomped out at the height of its proliferation throughout West Bengal.

After hearing news of his brother’s death, Subhash returns to Calcutta to find the city transformed by the violence of the Naxalites. Acts of terror have resulted in widespread loss of life and a general atmosphere of fear and unease. The political violence that has gripped the city is rooted in personal resentments—most notably, aggression and anger directed at wealthier, landowning classes. Subhash has, during his time studying in America, been largely ignorant of the extent of the unrest in Calcutta, and as he returns home and confronts it at last he is able to see the intersection of personal and political anger.

While mourning his brother, Subhash comes to realize that Udayan’s widow, Gauri, is pregnant. After Subhash witnesses Gauri being interrogated by police forces about her sympathies to Udayan’s cause and her involvement with the CPI(ML), Subhash realizes that the surest way of keeping Gauri—and her unborn child—safe is to marry her and take her to America, where hardly anyone has heard of the Naxalites at all. Back in the United States, Gauri and Subhash uneasily embark upon their marriage. Subhash does not understand the full extent of how traumatized Gauri is not just by her having witnessed Udayan’s death, but by her own involvement in the Party actions which resulted in it. As the narrative unfolds, Lahiri reveals that in the months before Udayan’s death, Gauri was helping him to covertly deliver notes and letters around Calcutta—effectively spying on behalf of the party. Udayan had procured Gauri a job that allowed her to observe the routine of a local policeman Udayan’s group wanted “out of the way.” After both the policeman and Udayan were killed, Gauri at last understood the extent of her role in the murder, and it is for this reason that she harbors so much guilt, unease, and unrest.

These emotions, born of Gauri’s involvement in political violence, morph into personal violence as Gauri tries—and fails—to adjust to “normal” family life in America. Gauri closes herself off from the small community in Subhash’s Rhode Island college town, and, even after the birth of her daughter Bela, behaves coldly and apathetically not just towards Subhash but towards “their” child, too. When Bela is twelve, Gauri abruptly departs for California, leaving behind only a coarse note. This deeply personal act of violence—a cleaving split which

symbolically mirrors the violent political splits of Partition and of the splintering Communist Party of India—stems from Gauri’s guilt over her own contribution to the political violence in Calcutta, and her inability to stop grieving for Udayan over a decade after his loss.

The personal and the political collide again and again throughout the pages of *The Lowland*. Violence begets violence, and when radical politics and ideologies are involved, the fallout of such intense conflicts almost always comes back around to the interpersonal relationships belonging to the humans behind them. In showing how an atmosphere of political violence can engender equal emotional violence between people, Lahiri uses *The Lowland* to demonstrate the circular nature of violence itself.



DUTY AND DESIRE

The Lowland follows the Mitra family through four decades and as many generations, with the fraught relationship between brothers Subhash and

Udayan forming the novel’s core. Subhash and Udayan repeatedly question what they owe one another, and, in turn, what they are owed. As they, along with Gauri and Bela, wrestle with their duties to one another, Lahiri explores the tension between competing notions of responsibility and desire, as well as the often selfish motives behind familial piety. Lahiri ultimately suggests that people may use the excuse of familial duty for their own ends, and thus creates a complex and nuanced set of characters whose dueling impulses often land them in difficult situations.

Subhash and Udayan are a year apart but look and behave like twins, and their codependence creates a sense of reluctant duty in their relationship. Their closeness is clear from a young age, as Subhash is held back from starting school and begins a year late because Udayan wants to be in class with his brother. As the two grow up, Udayan and Subhash explore their city and get into trouble together, with Udayan almost always taking the lead. For example, Subhash repeatedly follows Udayan on sneaky escapades into the Tolly Club, an exclusive country club.

Despite the imbalance in power between the brothers, they do look out for one another—most notably when Udayan flings himself in between Subhash and a police officer who beats him with a putting iron when the two young boys are discovered breaking into the Tolly Club one evening. Eventually, Subhash even helps Udayan go around Tollygunge slathering Communist slogans in red paint on the walls of the neighborhood. Subhash feels reluctance to do these things but fears “that he and Udayan would cease to be brothers, were Subhash to resist him.” So deeply dependent is Subhash on remaining close to his brother that he makes self-sacrificing decisions on Udayan’s behalf, establishing early on the shape their relationship will take and the patterns that will come to define it throughout their lives.

Subhash remains dedicated to his brother even after Udayan's death. Upon traveling home to Subhash witnesses the pain of Udayan's widow Gauri—who is pregnant with Udayan's child, and who is being treated poorly by the Mitras in the hopes that they will be able to drive her out and remove her from the unborn child's life. Subhash comes up with the idea to marry Gauri and to take her with him back to Rhode Island. His actions are primarily fueled by a sense of fraternal responsibility. Despite not cowing to Udayan's accusations of betrayal at the time, Subhash feels that in leaving India and going to the United States, he did effectively abandon his brother. He believes that he was “unable in the end to protect” Udayan when, as children, they had always looked out for one another. It is this guilt—itsself based in a sense of duty—that leads him to protect and care for Udayan's wife and child.

While this appears to be a remarkable sacrifice, Subhash has his own reasons for shouldering such a burden. His admission of his attraction to Gauri, as well as the fact that he is tired of being cut off from his family and Indian culture in Rhode Island, muddles the selfless nobility of his actions. Furthermore, what is implied but never outright expressed in the novel is Subhash's desire to become more like Udayan. Subhash always felt that Udayan was the family favorite, the adventurer, the trail-blazer. Subhash saw going to the United States as taking a step Udayan could never take, and now sees marrying Gauri—and, in turn, becoming a father—as yet another way in which he can, on some level, finally surpass his brother. Subhash thus integrates his own wishes as he weighs the possibility of marrying Gauri, demonstrating a distinct overlap of desire and duty.

Years later, Gauri's relationship to her daughter Bela—or the lack thereof—further calls into question the idea of familial duty undertaken competition against, or in tandem with, personal desire. In the early, unhappy days of Gauri's life in America, the only activity she will engage in is surreptitiously attending a philosophy class. Her work in philosophy eventually proves so impressive that her professor, Otto Weiss, offers to recommend her for a Ph.D. program when the time comes. Gauri's desire to be a student once again, and to carve out a space for herself in this strange new country, soon subsumes not only her sense of duty to Subhash, which was tenuous to begin with, but even that toward her own daughter.

Gauri immerses herself in work on her dissertation, neglecting her duties both as a wife and a mother. Lahiri never executes narrative judgement against Gauri—Gauri knows that she is failing as a mother, and though she carries a good deal of guilt about that failure, she ultimately feels she never asked for the life she has been given in the United States. Soon, Gauri abandons her shaky ties to that life entirely.

When Bela is twelve, Subhash takes her to Calcutta with him for several weeks, and they return to an empty house; Gauri has left for California, leaving behind only a letter in which she

half-heartedly apologizes to Subhash and tells him that she is leaving Bela to him. Gauri has followed her heart's desire—to forge a career in academia—and abandoned her duty to her child. The societal expectations internalized by Subhash, and indeed for some time by Gauri herself, seemed to dictate that Gauri would capitulate to the role of wife and mother, sacrificing her own desires in favor of duty to her family. Instead, Gauri chooses, in the end, to carve out her own agency. Though the pain of her choice to leave Bela haunts her, Gauri is too grateful for her freedom to ever fully apologize for her choice, making her character a radical in many ways.

Lahiri's exploration of the intersection between duty and desire reveals a nuanced view of humanity, and a subversive peek into the drives that motivate people to make certain choices and sacrifices. Throughout the novel, she calls into question the duty one has to oneself versus the duty one has to one's family, ultimately suggesting that duty is a force that both strengthens familial bonds and circumscribes the independent agency borne of desire.



HERITAGE AND HOMELAND

When Subhash, wary of becoming involved in the political unrest in Calcutta, comes to the United States to study on the remote Rhode Island coast, he finds that he has left one miserable situation for another. Through Subhash's struggle to adjust to life in the States—and, later on, through Gauri's—Lahiri explores the anxieties of adapting to a new homeland while remaining conscious of and loyal to one's heritage. As Subhash and Gauri both wrestle with feelings of dislocation and with the pressure—and desire—to assimilate, Lahiri uses their struggles to argue for the complexity of the concept of “home.” The novel ultimately argues that the relationship to one's heritage and homeland is fluid, ever-changing, and unpredictable.

Upon his arrival in Rhode Island, Subhash is disheartened by how few Indians there are on his new campus. He is more shocked to learn that no one in his new home knows anything about what is going on in India. Yet Subhash works his way through his feelings of isolation and even leans into them—for example, by taking up a research position on a boat that goes out to sea for several months. In the process, he finds himself feeling grateful for his solitude and even relieved to be removed from the insular, family-oriented structure of his life in Tollygunge.

Subhash also stumbles into an affair with a married American woman, Holly, though he knows that their cultural differences will render anything long-term between them impossible. His affair with Holly ends after she, too, realizes that the differences between them are too much to surmount, and expresses her desire to make things work with her estranged husband. Subhash soon finds himself overwhelmed by memories of Calcutta. The changing fall leaves remind him of

the colorful spices his mother ground each morning, and as the dates of the festival of **Durga** Pujo draw near, he grows homesick. Subhash's intense longing for home in the wake of the end of his first real relationship—with someone of a very different cultural background—suggests that Subhash is torn between two worlds, and is pitching wildly between the desire to remove himself from his heritage and to return to a life steeped in tradition and familiarity.

At first, Gauri's struggles to adapt to life in America echo Subhash's initial sense of isolation. She spends her days holed up in Subhash's apartment rather than exploring her new town or making friends. Gauri is so alone and sheltered that on a rare trip to the grocery store, she purchases a block of cream cheese—not knowing what it is—and eats it plain, in one sitting. This scene symbolically positions Gauri on a precipice—afraid of change and assimilation, but at the same time ravenous for something new and different. In time, Gauri begins to embrace life in the United States, evidenced by the fact that she cuts her hair into a blunt bob and begins wearing strictly Western clothing. She also starts taking a philosophy class, flirts with men, and starts sleeping with Subhash. When Gauri receives letters and newspapers from home sent by her brother Manash, she can only skim them, finding the references to Naxalite violence contained within their pages too much to bear.

As the years go by, Gauri thinks of Udayan less, pushing him from her mind to focus on her studies. Eventually she abandons Subhash and Bela to continue her studies on the West Coast. Her focus on philosophy symbolizes the sense of dislocation she continues to feel. When Udayan asked her, early on in their courtship, why she enjoyed studying, she answered simply that it helped her “understand things.” By the time she leaves for California, she has become completely enveloped by her chosen discipline, and eventually it is revealed that Gauri dove so deep into her studies “in deference to Udayan”—to be as devoted to something as he was to his own ideology. After years in academia, however, Gauri feels her ideology has become stale; she embarked on her studies to feel closer to Udayan, and thus to a part of her heritage, but has ultimately only become more disconnected from it.

When Gauri is approached by a student composing a book on the Naxalite rebellion, she at first denies having had any connection to the movement, and only agrees to anonymously contribute some information after a great deal of pressure. Gauri has tried to deny the part of her life tied to radical politics, because it stirs up memories of violence and loss. Gauri's disconnection from this part of her life is another example of her estrangement from her cultural heritage, however complicated that heritage is, and her homeland.

Gauri does return to Calcutta one day following a fight with Bela. There, she confronts her repressed memories of aiding Udayan in his political actions, and, standing on the balcony of a

guesthouse similar to the balcony in her grandparents' old flat, considers taking her own life. Even back in her homeland, Gauri feels disconnected from her roots and ashamed of her past. Whereas Subhash was able to adjust to life after leaving his homeland, the traumatic split Gauri experienced has rendered her relationship to her heritage perhaps irrevocably fractured. Gauri does not kill herself, and instead simply returns to California—symbolically abandoning for a second time her connection to Calcutta and its difficult history.

Through her characters' struggles to adjust to life in a new country, Lahiri shows how the concept of a faraway homeland is at once burdensome and liberating. For Subhash, the longing for his homeland is complicated by his desire to prove himself by striking out on his own; for Gauri, her attempts to sever herself from all she left behind have resulted in a denial, in many ways, of her heritage, her culture, and the woman she was back in Calcutta. As Lahiri tracks the fluid relationship of her protagonists to their pasts, she exposes the complicated nature of cultural identity, and examines the losses inherent to leaving one's homeland behind.



SECRETS AND CONSPIRACIES

The Lowland is concerned with the secrets people keep and the deception they engage in as they pursue ideological and personal goals; as they navigate not only politics, revolution, and terrorism, but also marriage, parenthood, and self-delusion. Udayan's role in a political conspiracy is thrown up against Subhash and Gauri's plot in the wake of Udayan's death: when Subhash brings Gauri back to America and promises to raise her and Udayan's unborn child as his own, without revealing to Bela the truth of her parentage, the two of them are becoming complicit in a secret that will forever shape all of their lives. As Lahiri explores the various conspiracies of the Mitra clan, she argues that the secrecy and subterfuge necessary to carry out and contain such schemes can destroy the lives of so-called conspirators—regardless of whether the conspiracy at hand is politically or personally motivated.

Udayan is a conspirator in the most literal sense. A hotheaded revolutionary, Udayan is swept up in a political movement he feels is vital to India's future. The aftershocks of Partition are still being felt, and the specter of colonialism looms over the country. Udayan joins the CPI(ML), and eventually the Naxalites, in hopes of bettering his country through the Communist ideology he feels has brought nationalistic pride and agency to countries such as China and Cuba.

Udayan's involvement is relatively successful at first—he helps organize a strike at a local university, paints Communist slogans on walls around town, and even gets to meet with the group's esoteric leader, Kanu Sanyal. However, when Udayan—who has a hyperthyroidism-related tremor—blows off the fingers of his **right hand** while trying to set off a pipe bomb, his involvement

in the Naxalite's conspiracies take a dark turn. Udayan's hand becomes a symbol throughout the second half of the novel of the self-destructive nature not only of violence, but of conspiracy, secrecy, and deceit.

Udayan's participation in one conspiracy—the pipe bomb—maims him physically, while his participation in another—the killing of a local policeman—causes him emotional pain, guilt, and remorse. Eventually it is revealed that Udayan was instrumental in the plot to kill the policeman, who was “in the way” of his group's goals. Udayan had Gauri observe the policeman and confirm his off day, and then, with the intel gathered, work as a somewhat-bewildered lookout while another of his comrades stabbed the officer to death. All of this occurred before Udayan set off the pipe bomb, revealing the emotional toll Udayan's involvement in such conspiracies has been taking on him for a long time. Udayan is ultimately traced to his home by paramilitary forces seeking to apprehend young Naxalite men. He attempts to hide in the **lowland** behind the house but is discovered and then shot in front of his family. Udayan's roles in Naxalite conspiracies and acts of terror are eventually his end—but his death is just the beginning of his family's suffering.

In response to Udayan's death as a result of his role in one kind of conspiracy, Subhash and Gauri concoct a “conspiracy” of their own. They will abscond to America, where the pregnant Gauri will be free from the disdain of Udayan's parents, from the officers who question her repeatedly about her ties to the Party, and from the isolation of being a single mother. Gauri and Subhash conspire to raise Udayan's unborn child as if she were Subhash's. At the start of their plan, they are each in their own way slightly desperate—Subhash for company and consolation, Gauri for passage from India—and so the conspiracy is one of necessity more than desire.

Any good conspiracy needs committed conspirators, though, and as Gauri's unhappiness grows over the years, her commitment to the plot weakens. Gauri ultimately leaves, telling Subhash that how he wants to handle raising “their” daughter Bela, and whether he wants to inform her of her true parentage, is up to him. Gauri does so knowing that she is bringing their careful plan tumbling down and possibly shattering Bela's world.

Ultimately, Subhash does tell Bela the truth about her parentage. When she comes home to reveal that she is pregnant, and intends to raise the child on her own, Subhash sees how his deliberate withholding of a major fact of Bela's origins has impacted her life. In adulthood, she is making a decision that mirrors the way she herself came into the world, though she is ignorant of the fact that her life has been so difficult largely because of the conspiracy intended to keep her safe and allow her to live a “normal” existence. In finally revealing the truth, Subhash shows how he is different from Udayan—Udayan's commitment to the conspiracies of his Party

brought his life to an end, but Subhash knows when the lies have become too much to bear. Though Bela initially reacts poorly, she eventually tells Subhash that knowing what he did for her before she was even born—knowing what he risked to give her a life away from the danger of Calcutta—has made her love him even more.

In showing the enduring ramifications of the conspiracies people choose to engage in, Lahiri calls into question the choices that make up a life, and the secrets that must be kept to sustain them. Udayan's involvement with the Naxalites ends his own life and sends his family into a veritable tailspin as they struggle to fill the void he has left behind. Subhash and Gauri's attempt to do just that becomes a veritable conspiracy of its own, and the upkeep of the façade they create eventually drains their marriage beyond repair, resulting in devastating consequences for Bela, the child they have altered their lives to protect. The secrets the Mitras keep from one another radically change the shapes of all their lives, and the destructive forces of those secrets result in pain, estrangement, and mistrust echoing through the generations of their family.



PRESENCE IN ABSENCE

Subhash learns that Udayan has been killed a quarter of the way into *The Lowland*. The novel, up to that point, has largely been about Subhash navigating his brother's emotional absence; once Udayan is killed, however, the book becomes about Udayan's physical absence not just from Subhash's life, but also from his wife Gauri's. Udayan becomes, in death, in many ways more present in the lives of those around him. Gauri, in turn, becomes a ghost in her own right after traveling to America, moving through the home she shares with Subhash coldly and glumly, taking up as little space in her new life as possible. Gauri is absent despite her presence; the mirror image of her dead husband. Through her exploration of what it means to be “present”—whether physically or psychologically—Lahiri suggests the immense weight and space that the absent take up in the lives of those left behind.

Subhash and Udayan are extremely close as young boys, and spend their childhoods following in one another's footsteps—often literally. **Udayan's footprints**, cemented forever in the concrete of their family home's courtyard, are a symbol throughout the novel for Udayan's constant presence in Subhash's thoughts, as the older brother seeks to follow the younger wherever he goes. As the two grow up, though, and Udayan's involvement in the CPI(ML) deepens, Subhash realizes that he cannot—and does not want to—follow his brother into this new realm. Subhash makes plans to study in America, hoping that some distance from his brother, and from the tumultuous political atmosphere, will allow him to carve his own path. Udayan warns Subhash that to leave India at such a fraught time is to abandon his country—what he is really saying,

though, is that Subhash is abandoning Udayan, creating an absence in Udayan's life with which he has never before had to reckon. After Subhash leaves for the States, he does feel his brother's absence profoundly, but it is not until his death that Udayan, in his removal from the world, becomes a nearly overwhelming emotional presence in Subhash's life.

After Udayan's death, Subhash brings a pregnant Gauri back to America with him, and though it is just the two of them living in Subhash's house, Udayan's presence is everywhere. Subhash looks like his brother, and Gauri is spooked by how similar the two men's voices are, again suggesting the notion of doubles and mirror images. Because of Udayan's "presence" in Subhash, Gauri finds herself unable to overcome the void her first husband's death has left in her life. Gauri and Subhash's marriage never flourishes. Eventually even its basic functionality is torn asunder by Udayan's presence, which has grown so powerful in his absence that it acts as a vacuum, pulling Gauri backwards in time even as the rest of her life marches on. Gauri's dissatisfaction in her marriage and in her role as a mother—combined with the crushing weight of Udayan's loss—pushes her to pursue a life in academia on the opposite coast, and she seeks to shed herself of all ties to Subhash, Bela, and, by proxy, Udayan and his memory. Despite her physical absence, however, as the years go by Gauri will herself become a stifling and oppressive presence in Subhash and Bela's emotional and psychological worlds.

Bela is one of the novel's most intriguing characters—a nomad who seeks to make herself as untethered and invisible as possible as a result of her tumultuous childhood. After Gauri leaves, Bela becomes a withdrawn and quiet child, where once she was expressive and gregarious. For years, she attempts to shrink herself both figuratively and literally—she becomes withdrawn from her father and her classmates, and she eats as little as possible. After many years under the care of a therapist, Bela begins to emerge from her cocoon, and becomes active and politically-minded, just like Udayan—so much so that Subhash himself is spooked by his brother's presence in his daughter and becomes worried that Udayan is somehow claiming Bela as his own from beyond the grave.

Rather than make her mark on the world by placing herself in the path of violence or conflict though, as Udayan did, Bela becomes a radical in a quieter sense, studying agriculture and taking up an itinerant existence that allows her to travel to farms across the country and educate people about sustainability—while leaving behind as the only trace of her presence the things she has grown. As the novel surges forward into the 2010s, Bela notably has no virtual footprint. Gauri cannot find her in any internet searches and believes that her daughter has done this purposefully. Bela's desire to be absent from Gauri's life, as Gauri was absent from hers, is so profound that she has carefully orchestrated her own life to be as untraceable as possible. When Gauri visits Subhash's house,

intending to hand him signed divorce papers, she finds not Subhash but Bela and her own daughter Meghna inside. Bela and Gauri have a terrible fight in which Bela tells Gauri that she is not her mother—Gauri is, in fact, "nothing." In this explosive scene, Bela wrestles with the duality of her mother's absence and presence in her life. Gauri wanted to be nothing to Bela, but to Bela, Gauri was everything. Over the course of her life, Bela has attempted to exorcise, in a way, Gauri's presence, and reduce Gauri to "nothing" in her own mind. This fight between the two women shows how absence, ironically, can result in an undeniable emotional or psychological presence.

The Lowland is about the things one leaves behind—the things which create presence in absence. As Lahiri's characters knowingly and unknowingly create situations in which their absence will be felt for years and years after their departures—physical or emotional or both—from one another's lives, they must also negotiate the taxing and almost uncanny nature of presence in absence, and the longstanding effects it has.



SYMBOLS

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



UDAYAN'S FOOTPRINTS

When Subhash and Udayan are children, the courtyard in front of their home is repaved. The boys are instructed to stay out of the courtyard while the cement dries, but the rebellious and intrepid Udayan runs barefoot through it anyway. His parents choose not to pave over the footprints he leaves behind, and their impressions remain in the courtyard throughout they boys' adolescence and adulthood. For Subhash they serve as a physical symbol of how even his brother's bad behavior is beloved and seen as inevitable; the more reserved and insecure brother, Subhash sees the footprints as a reminder of the ways in which he is inferior to—and often trailing in the wake of—his younger sibling.

As the boys grow older, they engage in an intense but unspoken struggle to best one another as they forge their own paths and grow more distant. As Udayan becomes a political radical, Subhash feels left behind. Subhash, then, pursues his own education to America, where he feels that he is at last taking a "step" his brother is unable or unwilling to. Years later, when word arrives in a letter that Udayan has gotten married, Subhash once again feels outpaced by his younger brother; when Subhash returns to Calcutta and decides to marry Gauri himself and take her back to America, he feels he is following in Udayan's footsteps in a "perverse" but "ordained" way. The footprints in the courtyard, physical reminders of Udayan's

intrepid, devil-may-care nature, have, at this point in the narrative, taken on a metaphysical quality, and linger in the back of Subhash's mind at all times. His brother's footprints, even in death, cleave a path for Subhash that he follows both excitedly and reluctantly, just as he did when they were children.



DURGA

Durga is a Hindu warrior goddess who, throughout Hindu mythology, combats evil and demonic forces that threaten peace and prosperity. She has many arms, each of which carries a different weapon. Durga has a significant following throughout India, but her influence is particularly felt in the country's eastern states—including West Bengal, where *The Lowland* is set. The autumnal festival in her name, Durga Pujo, is celebrated yearly throughout West Bengal, and, as the novel progresses, the citizens of Calcutta's reverence for the goddess comes to symbolize their desire for the return of peace, prosperity, and goodwill to their ideologically torn province.

As the Naxalite rebellion takes hold of West Bengal and violence, terrorism, and distrust clog the streets of Calcutta, the looming presence of Durga—and her yearly return—represents the hope that the discord will soon cease. Later in the novel—as the political violence in Calcutta infiltrates the Mitra family and a legacy of personal violence threatens to take over their lives—Durga Pujo offers Subhash and Gauri both a glimmer of hope that peace and prosperity will return to them, as well as a painful reminder of the emotional violence and discord they may never manage to escape.



UDAYAN'S HAND

Through Gauri's flashbacks to the weeks leading up to Udayan's death, Subhash learns that Udayan had been plotting large-scale explosions. When setting off a bomb, Udayan's hyperthyroidism-related tremors caused him to mishandle the device and blow off the fingers of his right—and dominant—hand. Udayan's mangled hand, then, becomes a symbol of the Naxalite movement's ultimate failure. The CPI(ML)'s involvement in the Naxalite movement, and the violent acts of terrorism they carried out on its behalf, ultimately made them an easily-spotted target, and their mission of bringing Maoist values and politics to West Bengal ultimately imploded. Udayan reflects on his own political futility shortly before his death, thinking in his final moments that his dedication to the revolution has helped no one and instead sown only discord. Udayan having blown off his own hand in pursuit of getting his party's message out is symbolic of the party itself becoming so myopic, violent, and narrow-minded that it caused its own downfall. Later in the novel, Gauri injures her own right wrist at a crucial moment, when distracted by

unpleasant memories of her involvement with the Naxalites after a visit from a former student, researching the movement, stirs them up. Gauri's injury, which echoes Udayan's, comes up again to remind her of Udayan's futile involvement with the Naxalites—and her own futile attempt to forget the days of the rebellion.



THE LOWLAND

The lowland, a flat plain between two ponds in the Calcutta neighborhood of Tollygunge, is a symbol of the distance, both emotional and physical, between Subhash and Udayan—themselves symbolized by the two ponds on either side. The brothers are closely linked to the lowland throughout their lives. As children, they traverse the lowland often on the way to the field beyond, where they play soccer with their friends. Overgrown with water hyacinth, the lowland eventually becomes the place where Udayan unsuccessfully attempts to hide from the police when they conduct a search for him. During the rainy season, the ponds overflow, flooding the lowland and rendering it invisible. As the novel progresses, the flooding and draining of the lowland becomes symbolic of the shifting emotional distance between the two brothers and the other tangential relationships in their lives.

When the brothers are young, the lowland is most often portrayed as dry—a flat plain they cross on their way to play soccer, explore their hometown, and get into mischief. As the brothers grow older, however, the lowland is more often depicted as a flooded, un-crossable marsh. Though it would seem that flooding would, symbolically, point to the joining of the two ponds and thus the closeness of the brothers, Lahiri actually uses the flooding of the lowland to denote an obfuscation of emotion, purpose, and direction. The lowland is flooded when Udayan dies, for example, and it's as he attempts to hide in the water that he questions his involvement with the Naxalites and the worthiness of the revolution he has given his life to. The lowland becomes filled with trash and refuge in the years after Udayan's death, further symbolizing the impossibility of connection between Udayan and Subhash now that death has severed their relationship. Still, Udayan and Subhash's mother Bijoli visits Udayan's grave marker in the lowland each day to try and clear the area out—to no avail. When Gauri returns to Calcutta towards the end of the novel, she finds that the land which once comprised the lowland has been built up into apartment buildings; the memory of any connection between Udayan and Subhash, or Gauri and either of the brothers, has been nearly complete obliterated.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Lowland* published in 2014.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ Should I stand guard on this side while you explore?
Subhash asked him.

What fun would that be?

What do you see?

Come see for yourself.

Subhash nudged the kerosene tin closer to the wall. He stepped onto it, feeling the hollow structure wobble beneath him.

Let's go, Subhash.

Udayan readjusted himself, dropping down so that only his fingertips were visible. Then he released his hands and fell.

Subhash could hear him breathing hard from the effort.


You're all right?

Of course. Now you.

Subhash gripped the wall with his hands, hugging it to his chest, scraping his knees. As usual he was uncertain whether he was more frustrated by Udayan's daring, or with himself for his lack of it. Subhash was thirteen, older by fifteen months. But he had no sense of himself without Udayan. From his earliest memories, at every point, his brother was there.

Related Characters: Udayan Mitra, Subhash Mitra (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis


In this passage, Subhash and Udayan are sneaking into the Tolly Club—their neighborhood's exclusive golf and country club—after hours. The headstrong, willful Udayan has, as usual, led the mission so far, and urges Subhash to join him inside the club rather than simply stand watch. As Subhash relents to his brother's requests, he experiences a deep frustration. Though Subhash is the older brother, he is the more reserved one and almost always following Udayan's lead. Subhash feels he is not upholding his duty as an older brother nor filling the role of a conventional older sibling. This brings him shame, and he constantly feels steamrolled by Udayan's more dominant personality. Subhash keeps thinking he should grow up and take the lead, but it is just not his way; as a result, he winds up following in Udayan's footsteps and taking cues from his younger brother, a pattern which will come to plague the brothers' relationship as they continue to grow older—and apart.


Part 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

☞ In the courtyard of their family's house was the most enduring legacy of Udayan's transgressions. A trail of his footprints, created the day the dirt surface was paved. A day they'd been instructed to remain indoors until it had set. [...] Subhash had listened. He had watched through the window he had not gone out. But when their mother's back was turned, Udayan ran down the long wooden plank temporarily set up to get from the door to the street. Halfway across the plank he lost his balance, the evidence of his path forming impressions of the soles of his feet, tapering like an hourglass at the center, the pads of the toes disconnected.

The following day the mason was called back. By then the surface had dried, and the impressions left by Udayan's feet were permanent. The only way to repair the flaw was to apply another layer. Subhash wondered whether this time his brother had gone too far. But to the mason their father said, Leave it be. Not for the expense or effort involved, but because he believed it was wrong to erase steps that his son had taken. And so the imperfection became a mark of distinction about their home. Something visitors noticed, the first family anecdote that was told.

Related Characters: Subhash Mitra (speaker), Udayan Mitra

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 13-14



Explanation and Analysis

The early sections of the novel are largely concerned with establishing and dissecting the relationship between Subhash and Udayan. In this passage, the narrator describes one of the novel's most profound symbols: a set of footprints which Udayan left in the courtyard as a child while the surface was being paved. Udayan disobeyed orders, broke the rules, and marred the work happening in the courtyard—in spite of all this, their parents chose to leave the footprints forever impressed upon the concrete. The footprints have, throughout Subhash's childhood, served as a constant reminder of how his brother constantly—often literally—paves the way for the two of them, and can get up to almost any kind of trouble with impunity. Subhash is insecure about his gentle disposition and submissive personality, and the footprints function as a physical reminder of his lack of initiative and his timid, unadventurous nature.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

☛☛ Now if they happened to pass the Tolly Club together on their way to or from the tram depot, Udayan called it an affront. People still filled slums all over the city, children were born and raised on the streets. Why were a hundred acres walled off for the enjoyment of a few? Subhash remembered the imported trees, the jackals, the bird cries. The golf balls heavy in their pockets, the undulating green of the course. He remembered Udayan going over the wall first, challenging him to follow. Crouching on the ground the last evening they were there, trying to shield him. But Udayan said that golf was the pastime of the comprador bourgeoisie. He said the Tolly Club was proof that India was still a semicolonial country behaving as if the British had never left. He pointed out that Che, who had worked as a caddy on a golf course in Argentina, had come to the same conclusion. That after the Cuban revolution getting rid of the golf courses was one of the first things Castro had done.

Related Characters: Subhash Mitra (speaker), Udayan Mitra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 29-30

Explanation and Analysis

By the middle of the novel's first part, the brothers are young men. As the novel's early chapters suggested, the two have taken very different paths; the fiery Udayan is opinionated, loud, and idealistic, while Subhash is often still at his brother's heels, impressionable and uncertain as ever. Witnessing the violence and revolutionary politics that have taken hold of the state of West Bengal has radicalized Udayan—he devours every bit of communist literature he can get his hands on and idolizes controversial figures such as Mao, Che Guevara, and Fidel Castro. Udayan's political views have obscured his fond memories and pleasant disposition, and that change is exemplified in this passage. Udayan and Subhash once gleefully snuck into the Tolly Club, desperate for the chance to see the sights and play some golf. Udayan now looks down on the club as a bastion of the upper classes, and a thing to be sneered at and reviled.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Quotes

☛☛ Subhash remembered climbing over the wall of the Tolly Club. This time, Subhash wasn't afraid of being caught. Perhaps it was foolish of him, but something told him that such a thing could happen only once. And he was right, no one noticed what they did, no one punished them for it, and a few minutes later they were crossing the bridge again, quickly, smoking cigarettes to calm themselves down.

This time it was only Udayan who was giddy. Only Udayan who was proud of what they'd done. Subhash was angry with himself for going along with it. For still needing to prove he could. He was sick of the fear that always rose up in him: that he would cease to exist, and that he and Udayan would cease to be brothers, were Subhash to resist him.

Related Characters: Subhash Mitra (speaker), Udayan Mitra

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Subhash, forever suggestible and easily bent to his brother's will, has agreed to accompany Udayan on a clandestine, late-night trip through Calcutta to plaster communist slogans on some walls. As the boys sneak out together on another secret mission, Udayan is reminded of their adventures sneaking into the Tolly Club—but the memory is quickly subverted, and even perverted. This time, the boys are not on equal footing; the mission is Udayan's alone. Whereas Subhash was a reluctant but ultimately enthusiastic accomplice in their childhood escapades, he is now being dragged along against his will outright—but still, he does not have the strength to stand up for himself. He is so afraid of alienating himself from Udayan and ending their relationship that he will not resist his brother even a little bit. The feelings of frustration, anger, and resentment this engenders will fuel Subhash's choices throughout the next section of the novel, as he makes the counterintuitive but definitive choice to abandon Udayan—and their family—and pursue his studies in America.

Part 2, Chapter 3 Quotes


☝ In her cramped bedroom, setting aside his guilt, he cultivated an ongoing defiance of his parents' expectations. He was aware that he could get away with it, that it was merely the shoals of physical distance that allowed his defiance to persist. He thought of Narasimhan as an ally now; Narasimhan and his American wife. Sometimes he imagined what it would be like to lead a similar life with Holly. To live the rest of his life in America, to disregard his parents, to make his own family with her.

At the same time he knew that it was impossible. That she was an American was the least of it. Her situation, her child, her age, the fact that she was technically another man's wife, all of it would be unthinkable to his parents, unacceptable. They would judge her for those things.

He didn't want to put Holly through that. And yet he continued to see her on Fridays, forging this new clandestine path.

Related Characters: Subhash Mitra (speaker), Gauri Mitra, Narasimhan, Holly

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

In his second year of graduate school, the lonely Subhash begins a clandestine affair with a woman named Holly—a married white woman who is the mother of a young boy. Having seen one of the only other Indians on campus, Narasimhan, with a white wife, Subhash attempts to believe that he, like Narasimhan, could make a relationship with someone from such a different cultural background work. As Subhash pursues his dalliance with Holly, he continues to tell himself both that the relationship could work out and that it never could.

As he runs through the reasons why things with Holly would never work, he is foreshadowing a choice he will make later in the novel. When he marries his brother's widow, Gauri, Subhash will invest his life in a woman who is with child, and who is another man's wife—things “unthinkable to his parents.” Subhash's fears of “putting Holly through” such judgement will nearly evaporate later on with Gauri, demonstrating Subhash's ultimate desperation not to carve out his own path, but to follow in his brother's footsteps once again—despite the fact that he spent so much of his youth resenting that very impulse.


Part 3, Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ Like the solution to an equation emerging bit by bit, Subhash began to perceive a turn things might take. He was already eager to leave Calcutta. There was nothing he could do for his parents. He was unable to console them. Though he'd returned to stand before them, in the end it had not mattered that he had come. But Gauri was different. Around her, he felt a shared awareness of the person they'd both loved. He thought of her remaining with his parents, living by their rules. His mother's coldness toward Gauri was insulting, but his father's passivity was just as cruel. And it wasn't simply cruelty. Their treatment of Gauri was deliberate, intended to drive her out. He thought of her becoming a mother, only to lose control of the child. He thought of the child being raised in a joyless house.

The only way to prevent it was to take Gauri away. It was all he could do to help her, the only alternative he could provide. And the only way to take her away was to marry her. To take his brother's place, to raise his child, to come to love Gauri as Udayan had. To follow him in a way that felt perverse, that felt ordained. That felt both right and wrong.

Related Characters: Subhash Mitra (speaker), Bijoli Mitra, Gauri Mitra, Udayan Mitra

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

After Udayan's death at the hands of the Calcutta police, Subhash returns home to Tollygunge to mourn his brother. While there, Subhash learns that Udayan's widow, Gauri, is pregnant—and that his parents are purposefully treating her with indifference and cruelty in the hopes that once the child is born, she will return to her studies and leave the child to them. Subhash sees the situation as unjust and regrettable, and, one night, is seized by the idea that he himself could marry Gauri in order to save her from his parents' treatment and judgement. Though Subhash has spent his entire childhood and indeed much of his adulthood struggling to differentiate himself from his younger brother, he now feels he must follow in Udayan's footsteps after all—as “perverse” as that decision may feel.



Part 4, Chapter 2 Quotes

☛ On the dressing table was a pair of scissors that he normally kept in the kitchen drawer, along with clumps of her hair. In one corner of the floor, all of her saris, and her petticoats and blouses, were lying in ribbons and scraps of various shapes and sizes, as if an animal had shredded the fabric with its teeth and claws. He opened her drawers and saw they were empty. She had destroyed everything.

A few minutes later he heard her key in the lock. Her hair hung bluntly along her jawbone, dramatically altering her face. She was wearing slacks and a gray sweater. [...] Why did you cut off your hair? I was tired of it. And your clothes? I was tired of those, too.

He watched as she went into the bedroom, not apologizing for the spectacular mess she'd made, just putting away the new clothes she'd bought, then throwing the old things into garbage bags. For the first time, he was angry at her. But he didn't dare tell her that what she'd done was wasteful, or that he found it disturbing.

Related Characters: Subhash Mitra (speaker), Gauri Mitra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 168-169

Explanation and Analysis

Months after Gauri's arrival in America, she has had trouble adjusting to life in Rhode Island and has kept herself cooped up in the apartment, isolated from the college town and the few friends Subhash has attempted to introduce her to. One afternoon, he comes home to find that Gauri has ruined all her old saris. He is confused and angry, and when he sees her come home with a totally new, Westernized look, he is disturbed by the fact that Gauri has apparently tried to completely reinvent herself. Gauri, struggling with the trauma of having witnessed Udayan's death and the pain and isolation of being alone and pregnant in a new country, is making an attempt to sever herself from her old life. She has not been able to do so emotionally, and so she tries to physically differentiate the woman she is now from the woman she once was—her drastic change both will and will not work, as the next several sections novel will come to show.

Part 4, Chapter 5 Quotes

☛ Every night, at Bela's insistence, he lay with her until she fell asleep. It was a reminder of their connection to each other, a connection at once false and true. And so night after night, after helping her brush her teeth and changing her into her pajamas, he switched off the light and lay beside her. [...] Some nights he, too, fell asleep briefly beside Bela. Carefully he removed her hands from the collar of his shirt, and adjusted the blanket on top of her. Her head was thrust back on the pillow, in a combined posture of pride and surrender. He'd experienced such closeness with only one other person. With Udayan. Each night, extracting himself from her, for a moment his heart stopped, wondering what she would say, the day she learned the truth about him.

Related Characters: Subhash Mitra (speaker), Udayan Mitra, Bela Mitra

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 186-187

Explanation and Analysis

After Subhash and Gauri's daughter Bela is born, Subhash struggles constantly with the knowledge that he is not the child's "true" father. Though Udayan is dead, Subhash is haunted by his brother's presence—he is reminded of their close relationship as children by his own present relationship with Bela, and afraid that one day, his love for Bela will be shunned once she learns the truth about her parentage. Subhash is a good father to Bela, but his fear and dread of the moment she learns that her "real" father is dead keeps him from ever being entirely present with his daughter. As their relationship grows and changes over the years, the ways in which this anxious distance manifests will be shown through their waxing and waning attachments to one another.

Part 4, Chapter 6 Quotes

☹☹ [Gauri] was failing at something every other woman on earth did without trying. That should not have proved a struggle. Even her own mother, who had not fully raised her, had loved her; of that there had been no doubt. But Gauri feared she had already descended to a place where it was no longer possible to swim up to Bela, to hold on to her.

Nor was her love for Udayan recognizable or intact. Anger was always mounted to it, zigzagging through her like some helplessly mating pair of insects. Anger at him for dying when he might have lived. For bringing her happiness, and then taking it away. For trusting her, only to betray her. For believing in sacrifice, only to be so selfish in the end.

She no longer searched for signs of him. The fleeting awareness that he might be in a room, looking over her shoulder as she worked at her desk, was no longer a comfort. Certain days it was possible not to think of him, to remember him. No aspect of him had traveled to America. Apart from Bela, he'd refused to join her here.

Related Characters: Gauri Mitra (speaker), Udayan Mitra, Bela Mitra

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

As Bela grows older, Gauri still cannot manage to find it within herself to give her daughter the love and attention she sees other mothers around her giving to their own children. Gauri feels ashamed and deficient, but does not know how to properly mother her child. She feels that it is too late to try and mend things—she does not think there is anything she can do to catch up on the time she has lost or mend the mistakes she has made.

Gauri's panic and sadness are compounded by the fact that Bela had, for so long, been her one chance of keeping her love for and connection to Udayan intact. Now, Gauri feels only betrayal when she thinks of Udayan. Bela was supposed to serve as a proxy for Udayan's enduring legacy—his presence despite his absence—yet Gauri feels that Udayan has completely vanished from her heart and her mind, and the part of him that exists through Bela is not enough to help Gauri sustain either relationship.

Part 5, Chapter 1 Quotes


☹☹ She carries a large shallow basket meant to store extra coal. She walks over to the lowland, hoisting up her sari so that her calves are revealed, speckled like some egg-shells with a fine brown spray. She wades into a puddle and bends over, stirring things around with a stick. Then, using her hands, she starts picking items out of the murky green water. A little bit, a few minutes each day; this is her plan, to keep the area by Udayan's stone uncluttered.

She piles refuse into the basket, empties the basket a little ways off, and then begins to fill it again. With bare hands she sorts through the empty bottles of Dettol, Sunsilk shampoo. Things rats don't eat, that crows don't bother to carry away. Cigarette packets tossed in by passing strangers. A bloodied sanitary pad.

She knows she will never remove it all. But each day she goes out and fills up her basket, once, then a few times more. She does not care when some people tell her, when they stop to notice what she's doing, that it is pointless. That it is disgusting and beneath her dignity. That it could cause her to contract some sort of disease. She's used to neighbors not knowing what to make of her. She's used to ignoring them.

Related Characters: Bijoli Mitra (speaker), Udayan Mitra

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 228

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's fifth part, the perspective shifts, briefly, to inhabit the mind of Bijoli Mitra—Subhash and Udayan's mother. Bijoli's mind is addled by her old age and her unending grief over her youngest son's death. She spends her days collecting trash out of the lowland—the place where Udayan was killed by paramilitary forces—in order to try to preserve the sanctity of his memory and stave off the erasure of a place that has become emotionally significant for Bijoli herself.

The Lowland symbolizes connection throughout the novel, and as nearby real estate companies deliberately attempt to clog it with trash, the lowland comes to symbolize muddled and complicated relationships. At this point in the story, Bijoli is far from Subhash; Subhash and Gauri are struggling to make their marriage work; Gauri feels her connection to both her daughter Bela and her memories of Udayan slipping away. As Bijoli tries to clear the trash from the lowland—a Sisyphean and ultimately futile task—Lahiri is calling into question whether or not human relationships, past a certain point of breakage and damage, can ever be

salvaged.



Part 5, Chapter 2 Quotes

☝☝ For breakfast [Bela] was given bread toasted over an open flame, sweetened yogurt, a small banana with green skin. Her grandmother reminded Deepa, before she set out for the market, not to buy a certain type of fish, saying that the bones would be too troublesome.

Watching Bela try to pick up rice and lentils with her fingers, her grandmother told Deepa to fetch a spoon. When Deepa poured Bela some water from the urn that stood on a little stool, in the corner of the room, her grandmother reproached her.

Not that water. Give her the boiled water. She's not made to survive here.

Related Characters: Bijoli Mitra (speaker), Deepa, Bela Mitra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

When Bela and Subhash travel to Calcutta in the wake of Subhash's father's death, Bela finds herself experiencing the feelings of dislocation and inadequacy that plagued Subhash when he first arrived in America. Bela is ignorant to many Indian customs, and her stomach is too sensitive to eat certain foods and drink water that hasn't been boiled. Bela's disconnection from her heritage and her ancestral homeland is a result of her parents' shame over the scheme they have concocted to keep the truth of Bela's true parentage from her; Subhash has never returned to Calcutta for fear that someone would expose the truth to Bela. Now, as she visits the town her father grew up in and stays in the house in which he was a child, she is seen as an outsider in her family's own home, and a stranger in their own land.

Part 5, Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ In the house in Rhode Island, in her room, another remnant of her mother began to reveal itself: a shadow that briefly occupied a section of her wall, in one corner, reminding Bela of her mother's profile. It was an association she noticed only after her mother was gone, and was unable thereafter to dispel.

In this shadow she saw the impression of her mother's forehead, the slope of her nose. Her mouth and chin. Its source was unknown. Some section of branch, some overhang of the roof that refracted the light, she could not be sure.

Each day the image disappeared as the sun traveled around the house; each morning it returned to the place her mother had fled. She never saw it form or fade.

In this apparition, every morning, Bela recognized her mother, and felt visited by her. It was the sort of spontaneous association one might make while looking up at a passing cloud. But in this case never breaking apart, never changing into anything else.

Related Characters: Bela Mitra (speaker), Gauri Mitra

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 259



Explanation and Analysis

After Gauri leaves suddenly for California, leaving behind only a note composed in Bengali, Bela becomes haunted, in a way, by her mother. Gauri has made the conscious decision to excuse herself from her family, and has showed no signs that she will return or even extend contact to them. Bela, shocked and shaken by this sudden abandonment, starts seeing her mother's profile in a shadow on her bedroom wall. In this way, Lahiri is demonstrating how in spite of her absence, Gauri is—and will remain—an unsettling yet inescapable presence in Bela's life as the years go by. The shadow on the wall "never chang[es]," symbolizing how Bela's concept of her mother will remain frozen in time. This distant visitor will appear on Bela's wall each day—and yet Gauri's true presence, it seems, may never appear to Bela again.

Part 5, Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ She was establishing her existence apart from him. This was the real shock. He thought he would be the one to protect her, to reassure her. But he felt cast aside, indicted along with Gauri. He was afraid to exert his authority, his confidence as a father shaken now that he was alone.

Related Characters: Subhash Mitra (speaker), Gauri Mitra, Bela Mitra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

As Bela slowly recovers from the pain of Gauri's abandonment, she first retreats into herself—then, as she comes back out of her cocoon, she becomes more emotionally present but still a bit aloof. As Subhash watches these changes in his daughter, he is “shocked” by the distance between them, when they'd always been so close. He knows that though he hasn't done anything to Bela, she must see Gauri's abandonment as at least partly his fault. Despite all of this, Subhash is afraid to confront Bela about these things, due to his own feelings of insecurity about the fact that he is not her “real” father. With Gauri, maintaining the lie seemed tenable—the two of them were in cahoots together. Now, alone, Subhash is assaulted by the fear that the truth could be revealed any minute, and his claim to Bela—and his role as her father—could be stripped away.

☝ [Subhas] learned to accept [Bela] for who she was, to embrace the turn she'd taken. At times Bela's second birth felt more miraculous than the first. It was a miracle to him that she had discovered meaning in her life. That she could be resilient, in the face of what Gauri had done. That in time she had renewed, if not fully restored, her affection for him.

And yet sometimes he felt threatened, convinced that it was Udayan's inspiration; that Udayan's influence was greater. Gauri had left them, and by now Subhash trusted her to stay away. But there were times Subhash believed that Udayan would come back, claiming his place, claiming Bela from the grave as his own.

Related Characters: Subhash Mitra (speaker), Gauri Mitra, Bela Mitra

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 274

Explanation and Analysis

As Udayan has watched his daughter Bela grow older, he has come to admire her resilience in the face of the pain of Gauri's abandonment. Bela suffered for a long time, but ultimately bounced back, and made her life into one focused on helping things grow, getting in touch with the world

around her, and considering how she could make the lives of others better, richer, and simpler. Bela's radical politics, however, and opinionated nature, cause Subhash to worry that Bela is somehow being influenced by Udayan from “beyond the grave.” Subhash has long struggled with feelings of inadequacy, and with the idea that he is an imposter. Subhash is obsessed with the fact that despite having raised Bela, she is not his child by blood—this causes him grief, doubt, and resentment even as he marvels at the woman his child has become.

Part 6, Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ [Gauri] knew that the errors she'd made during the first years of Bela's life were not things she could go back and fix. Her attempts kept collapsing, because the foundation was not there. Over time this feeling ate away at her, exposing only her self-interest, her ineptitude. Her inability to abide herself.

She'd convinced herself that Subhash was her rival, and that she was in competition with him for Bela, a competition that felt insulting, unjust. But of course it had not been a competition, it had been her own squandering. Her own withdrawal, covert, ineluctable. With her own hand she'd painted herself into a corner, and then out of the picture altogether.

Related Characters: Gauri Mitra (speaker), Subhash Mitra, Bela Mitra

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis


As Gauri reflects on her life, and her choice to abandon Subhash and Bela while they were visiting Calcutta, she vacillates between sticking to the beliefs she held at the time she left and the wisdom she has, however indignantly, garnered over the years. At the time she left, Gauri felt that she had already ruined things not just with Subhash but with Bela, too. She was so consumed by her trauma, pain, and longing for Udayan that she could not focus on the real, vital relationships in front of her, and instead decided to give up on trying to make things work in the face of her grief. Now, though, Gauri can see that of course it wasn't too late—the relationships could have been saved, and even made wonderful, if only she hadn't erased herself from her family's lives so cruelly, callously, and permanently.

Part 6, Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ Were her mother ever to stand before her, even if Bela could choose any language on earth in which to speak, she would have nothing to say.

But no, that's not true. She remains in constant communication with her. Everything in Bela's life has been a reaction. I am who I am, she would say, I live as I do because of you.

Related Characters: Bela Mitra (speaker), Gauri Mitra

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

As Bela, living in Brooklyn, reflects on her life's trajectory and the choices which have brought her to her present moment, she has the self-awareness to admit that all of her life has been a "reaction" to Gauri's abandonment. Though she is furious with her mother, and wants to deny the influence Gauri's abandonment has had on her, in the end Bela must admit that her nomadic tendencies and lack of social and romantic attachments all stem from the fact that her mother left her when she was twelve years old, and never made any attempt to communicate with her after that. Though Bela would like to think that she would have "nothing to say" to Gauri if the two came face-to-face, she is able to reach down inside herself and admit that despite Gauri's absence from her life, the force of Gauri's abandonment has been a constant presence—and in this way, Gauri has, however unwittingly, shaped the whole of Bela's existence.

Part 6, Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ The coincidence coursed through [Subhash,] numbing, bewildering. A pregnant woman, a fatherless child. Arriving in Rhode Island, needing him. It was a reenactment of Bela's origins. A version of what had brought Gauri to him, years ago.

Related Characters: Subhash Mitra (speaker), Gauri Mitra, Bela Mitra

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 322

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Bela has just returned home to Rhode Island for a visit—and has revealed to Subhash that she is pregnant, and intends to raise her child alone without the

presence of its father. As Bela delivers this news, Subhash reels at the uncanny coincidence. Many years ago, Gauri arrived in Rhode Island, pregnant and desperate, without a father for her childhood—now, history is repeating itself. Subhash's amazement is compounded by the fact that Bela, having lived in ignorance of her true parentage, does not know that she is bringing a child into the world in the same manner she herself was brought into it. This strange repetition of events, and Bela's total obliviousness, spur Subhash to tell Bela the truth, at last, after decades of denying to her.

Part 7, Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ [Gauri's] impressions were flickering, from a lifetime ago. But they were vivid inside Dipankar. All the names, the events of those years, were at his fingertips. [...] Dipankar had studied the movement's self-defeating tactics, its lack of coordination, its unrealistic ideology. He'd understood, without ever having been a part of things, far better than Gauri, why, it had surged and failed.

Related Characters: Gauri Mitra (speaker), Dipankar Biswas

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 341

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gauri has agreed to meet up with a former student, Dipankar Biswas, who wants to interview her for a book he is writing on the Naxalites. Gauri—who has guarded her shame over her involvement with the Naxalites, and her role in the death of a Calcutta policeman, for decades now—is initially hesitant to talk about the movement, but after Dipankar assures her that any information she provides can remain anonymous, she opens up. As she recounts her memories, however, she is shocked by how much more comprehensive her student's knowledge of the movement is than her own. Though she was physically involved in it, and Dipankar was likely not even born—though she was present and he was absent—he has enormous knowledge of the events which took place in the 1960s and 70s, and can see the movement's trajectory and the reasons behind it as a whole, whereas Gauri's memories are only "flickering" and incomplete.

Part 7, Chapter 5 Quotes

☝☝ I've known for years about Udayan, she went on. I know who I am.

Now it was Gauri unable to move, unable to speak. Unable to reconcile hearing Udayan's name, coming from Bela.

And it doesn't matter. Nothing excuses what you did, Bela said.

Bela's words were like bullets. Putting an end to Udayan, silencing Gauri now.

Nothing will ever excuse it. You're not my mother. You're nothing. Can you hear me? I want you to nod if you can hear me.


There was nothing inside her. Was this what Udayan felt, in the lowland when he stood to face them, as the whole neighborhood watched? There was no one to witness what was happening now. Somehow, she nodded her head.

You're as dead to me as he is. The only difference is that you left me by choice.

She was right; there was nothing to clarify, nothing more to convey.

Related Characters: Bela Mitra (speaker), Udayan Mitra, Gauri Mitra

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 383

Explanation and Analysis

In this final, cataclysmic, and very overdue confrontation, Bela excoriates Gauri for the choices she made—choices that forever impacted Bela's memories, sense of self-worth, and choices in life. Decades have passed since Gauri's abandonment, but Bela has wounds that have not healed—she has not made peace with her mother's absence, and in this moment, she is able to at last tell her that “nothing” excuses her behavior. Throughout the novel, Lahiri has used the relationship between Bela and Gauri to play with themes of presence and absence. Gauri's absence has become a presence of its own in Bela's life, whereas for Gauri, her choice to leave Bela seemed to be the best thing to do, as she had never felt “present” in her life with Subhash in Rhode Island in the first place. Now, Bela, in a twist of rhetoric, tells her mother that she means “nothing” to her. Gauri has, for so long, been both nothing and everything to Bela—in using this language against her mother now, she is attempting to negate the catastrophic effects her abandonment had, and reclaim power in a situation which left her feeling powerless all those years

ago.

Part 7, Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ The courtyard no longer existed. [...] She walked past the house, across the lane, and over toward the two ponds. She had forgotten no detail. The color and shape of the ponds clear in her mind. But the details were no longer there. Both ponds were gone. New homes filled up an area that had once been watery open.



Walking a bit farther, she saw that the lowland was also gone. That sparsely populated tract was now indistinguishable from the rest of the neighborhood, and on it more homes had been built. Scooters parked in front of doorways, laundry hung out to dry.

She wondered if any of the people she passed remembered things as she did. [...] Somewhere close to where she stood, Udayan had hidden in the water. He'd been taken to an empty field. Somewhere there was a tablet with his name on it, commemorating the brief life he'd led. Or perhaps this, too, had been removed. She was unprepared for the landscape to be so altered. For there to be no trace of that evening, forty autumns ago. [...] Again she remembered what Bela had said to her. That her reappearance meant nothing. That she was as dead as Udayan.

Standing there, unable to find him, she felt a new solidarity with him. The bond of not existing.

Related Characters: Gauri Mitra (speaker), Udayan Mitra

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 391

Explanation and Analysis

Towards the end of the novel, Gauri, having been rejected by Bela, returns to Calcutta in a desperate attempt to once and for all reconcile her painful, traumatic past with the choices she has made as she has tried to escape from it. As Gauri confronts the place where her husband Udayan died—where everything changed forever—she is shocked to find that the house Udayan grew up in has changed and, most significantly, the lowland, the site of such horror and trauma, has been completely paved over. The lowland has, throughout the novel, served as a symbol of connections made and lost—now that the lowland does not exist, Lahiri is symbolically demonstrating how the connections between many of her characters have been severed or flattened

completely. Gauri, who made the choice to leave Subhash and Bela behind, has recently discovered that there is no chance of them forgiving her. Having been told that she is

“nothing” by Bela, Gauri—her connections to her family, and to Udayan completely stamped out—at last feels like Udayan’s equal.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

East of the Tolly Club in Tollygunge, a neighborhood in the West Bengal city of Calcutta, there is a small mosque, and past that a quiet enclave of modest, middle-class homes. Once, within the enclave, there had been two ponds, and between the ponds a **lowland** which took up a few acres. After the monsoons each year, the ponds would rise and rainwater would cover the lowland for months. The sun would eventually burn the water off, and once again the damp, marshy ground would become exposed. Two brothers, Subhash and Udayan, have walked across the lowland uncountable times, using it as a shortcut to the field where they play football, or soccer, with friends. As they tiptoe through the dank, wet lowland, they encounter many kinds of plant and animal life. Some creatures lay eggs that are able to last through the dry season, while others bury themselves in the mud, “simulating death” and waiting for the rains to return.

The novel's first chapter introduces the central symbolic image of the lowland. Though the narrator is telling readers that the lowland—and the ponds serving as its water sources—have been since dried up and paved over, the marshy ground was once deeply tied to the lives of the novel's two central figures, Subhash and Udayan. The chapter's final image, of animal life struggling to survive in the lowland throughout the dry season, foreshadows the struggles Subhash and Udayan will face themselves as they mature. The lowland is both a calm and a violent ecosystem—the brothers' relationship, too, will have periods of peace and of volatility as they grow older.



PART 1, CHAPTER 2

Subhash and Udayan have never set foot in the Tolly Club, a local golf and country club, though they have passed by its high brick walls “hundreds of times.” Their father used to watch horse races within from the street as a young man, but after the Second World War—around the time when Subhash and Udayan were born—the walls of the Tolly Club were raised to keep the public from being able to see inside.

The Tolly Club, and its walls built to ensure that the luxuries within it are reserved only for a privileged few, is in many ways the center of the Tollygunge of the boys' youth. By starting the novel off with this framework, Lahiri demonstrates the inequities and simmering discord in the background of Subhash and Udayan's childhood.



Bismillah, one of the boy's neighbors, works as a caddy at the club. Bismillah is a Muslim who stayed in Tollygunge following Partition—the violent and devastating 1947 division of British India into two independent nations, India and Pakistan. Bismillah sells local boys golf balls and broken putting irons which have been lost or damaged on the golf course for a cheap price, allowing Subhash, Udayan, and other boys like them who are barred from the Club to play golf on their own—despite the fact that they're not very good at it. Bismillah knows the boys long to learn more about the club, and he draws them maps of the interior and gives them a tip about “sections of [unfinished] wire fencing where one might enter.”

Lahiri illustrates the diverse makeup of Tollygunge and hints at the memories of unrest between its Muslim and Hindu residents. Subhash and Udayan are not distracted by religious or cultural difference—their relationship with Bismillah is happy, because he allows them to glimpse what life is like for the privileged members of the Tolly Club. Bismillah and the boys are united by their desire to not just work in or look at the Tolly Club, but to be a part of the luxury, safety, and status it symbolizes.



One evening, Subhash and Udayan decide to try to infiltrate the club. Around dusk, they approach the wall with their putting iron and two empty kerosene tins. They cut through dried-up paddy fields, passing refugee encampments filled with Hindus who have fled from the territories which are now a part of Pakistan. These families have been “stripped of their ancestral land,” and now are forced to live without sanitation or electricity, “in shanties next to garbage heaps, in any available space.” These people, Subhash and Udayan know, are “the reason for the club’s additional walls.”

Subhash and Udayan arrive at the walls of the Club and find a place where the fence is low enough to scale. Their pockets are full of golf balls, and Bismillah has told them that they will find plenty more inside. Subhash helps his brother—who is a few inches shorter—to climb over. Subhash offers to stand guard on the outside of the wall while Udayan explores, but Udayan urges his brother to join him on the other side. Subhash reluctantly heaves himself over the wall, as “frustrated by Udayan’s daring [as he is by] himself for his lack of it.” He is thirteen, and older than Udayan by over a year, but has “no sense of himself” without his younger brother.

The boys are suddenly “no longer in Tollygunge.” The Club is full of lush tree, manicured grass, and beautiful tall egrets. The boys are afraid they will be caught, but when no one comes to chase them away, they begin to relax and explore the golf course. As the boys practice their swings, they encounter a water buffalo and a group of jackals, who begin howling—signaling that it is late, and time for the boys to go home. The boys return many times, and on each visit Subhash collects feathers, almonds, and bird eggs while Udayan practices his swing.

One evening, climbing over the wall to leave the club, the boys notice that the kerosene tin they’ve left on the outside of the wall is missing. Just then, a policeman appears, and makes them empty their pockets, which are full of golf balls. He also takes their putting iron. The policeman tells the boys that they should know better. Udayan insists the break-in was his idea, and the policeman tells Subhash he has a “loyal brother.” The policeman tells the boys that he’ll do them a favor and forgo mentioning their trespassing to the Club as long as they promise not to try it again. Subhash agrees. The policeman orders Subhash to turn around and face the wall, and then strikes the backs of his legs with the putting iron. Udayan cries for the policeman to stop, throwing himself in front of Subhash. The policeman throws the iron into the grass and retreats.

Lahiri uses Subhash and Udayan’s point of view as children to deliver a simple and affecting portrait of a complicated political situation in a town divided by religious and cultural tension. Even Subhash and Udayan, young as they are, know that the more privileged members of their society would rather ignore the pressing humanitarian problems facing it, and the Tolly Club’s raised walls symbolize the willful ignorance of the privileged and the elite—an ignorance which will, later in the boys’ life, motivate one of them to drastic action.



This scene serves to transition the focus of the narrative from the wider issues and tensions facing Tollygunge to the particular tensions between Subhash and Udayan. Subhash is the older brother, but clearly the less daring one. His frustration with his brother’s impulsive nature is mirrored by his frustration with his own inability to be so carefree and headstrong—as the older brother, he harbors insecurities about being overshadowed or left behind by the younger.



The wild animals within the Tolly Club’s bounds underscores the cruelty of its walls’ even more greatly. Wild animals are more permissible a presence than poor people, refugees, or simply middle-class individuals. Nevertheless, the boys are enchanted by the club, and play happily there again and again, testing fate with each visit.



This scene demonstrates the sense of loyalty and duty between Subhash and Udayan, but also the imbalances in their relationship. Udayan tries to rightfully take the blame for his impulsive behavior, but it is nevertheless Subhash, the eldest, who bears the brunt of the punishment. This foreshadows the power dynamics that will plague the boys’ relationship as they grow older, signaling that Subhash will be forced to accept shame and punishment that should belong to his younger brother.



PART 1, CHAPTER 3

Since childhood, Subhash has been a cautious, quiet boy. He enjoys planting dahlias, observing insects, and helping his mother, Bijoli, cook. His relatives believe “he lives in his own world,” and yet he is always in plain sight; Udayan, on the other hand, is always disappearing, playing games in which he hides and then jumps out to surprise his family members. As the boys have grown older, Udayan has shown himself to be brave and “blind to self-constraints,” approaching Bengali cinema stars on visits to Technicians’ Studio, the local film lot, while Subhash is always trying to “minimize his existence.” Despite their differences, the boys look and sound so alike that they are perpetually confused for one another; they even answer to each other’s names.

Subhash is insecure about his quiet, passive disposition; his brother, despite his unruly nature, is always able to “surprise [and] impress” their parents, family members, and even strangers. For example, when the family’s courtyard had been paved and the boys had been told to stay off the fresh cement for twenty-four hours, Udayan had broken the rules and run through the wet pavement, leaving his **footprints** behind. Rather than grow angry with him, their parents chose to leave the prints there. Udayan’s “imperfection became a mark of distinction about their home,” and the first thing that all visitors notice.

In their classes, Subhash and Udayan learn that Tollygunge was built on reclaimed land. It was once a dense swamp, which the English—led by Major William Tolly—cleared and began to inhabit in the 1770s. A “displaced dynasty” of Muslim rule has soaked into the bones of the town, and though Partition has made Muslims a minority in Calcutta, the streets of Tollygunge retain Islamic names.

Udayan becomes obsessed with circuitry and electronics, and installs a buzzer at the front door of the house. He and Subhash learn Morse code, and take turns sending each other messages through the buzzer. They pretend to be “soldiers or spies” and play games centering around covert communication.

This new chapter deepens the examination of the relationship between Subhash and Udayan as it focuses not only on how they treat one another but on how they are perceived by the outside world. They seem so similar in appearance that they themselves have internalized their interchangeability in the eyes of others, yet a few very important differences mark them. Subhash is always present, but emotionally absent; Udayan is always absent, running away and getting into trouble, but is such a forceful, commanding presence that even when he’s gone it’s not really noted.



This scene introduces the symbol of Udayan’s footprints in the courtyard of the Mitra home. The footprints will come to symbolize Udayan’s intrepid nature, and the marks he leaves behind on the places he visits. Subhash, though older, feels he is always following in his brother’s footsteps—not just emotionally, but literally as well, as the footprints Udayan left behind in the courtyard exist as a testament to his singularity and leadership.



Lahiri wants her readers to understand that Subhash and Udayan are coming of age in a place forever altered by politically and personally motivated violence—a West Bengal state profoundly changed by the effects of the violent Partition of India.



Udayan and Subhash play games centering around secrets and conspiracies, and toy with concepts of presence and absence, hiding and finding one another.



The boys grow older and are admitted to two of the city's best colleges: Udayan to Presidency to study physics, and Subhash to Jadavpur to study chemical engineering. They are the only students from their high school to have achieved such honors, and the first members of their family to pursue degrees. Their proud parents allow them to choose a gift to celebrate. Subhash wants a marble chess set, but Udayan wants a shortwave radio—and Udayan gets his way. The boys use the radio to listen to news from around the world. It is 1964, and the reports they hear tell of the war in Vietnam and conflicts in Brazil. Distressing, too, are the reports from Calcutta itself: riots between Muslims and Hindus claim hundreds of lives, and Indian communists form a breakaway political group sympathetic to China: the Communist Party of India, Marxist, or the CPI(M).

As the boys grow older, they begin to move in separate directions for the first time in their lives. In spite of the fact that they have both achieved something special, it is again Udayan who takes the lead in deciding what their gift should be. The shortwave radio opens the boys up to what is happening in their hometown a little more—the violence they hear about on the radio foreshadows the intense and volatile political climate slowly beginning to take over Calcutta.



PART 1, CHAPTER 4

In 1967, the boys begin hearing about Naxalbari on the radio and in the newspaper. One of a string of villages in the Darjeeling District, nearly four hundred miles from Calcutta, it is a place inhabited mostly by tribal peasants who have for generations been living under a feudal system: being manipulated by wealthy landowners, preyed upon by moneylenders, evicted from their land, and denied profits from crops they've grown.

The conflict in Naxalbari is a struggle between the oppressed and their oppressors. As Subhash and Udayan take in the news about this small town, they begin to understand that things are changing—their countrymen are not going to take terrible conditions lying down any longer.



In March of 1967, a sharecropper in Naxalbari ploughs land from which he has been illegally evicted, and his landlord sends “thugs” to beat him. The police hear of the incident, but refuse to intervene, and as a result sharecroppers across the region begin retaliating, burning deeds and records and forcibly occupying land. Though this is not the first instance of peasant revolts in the district, the peasants have now adopted militant tactics. They are armed with primitive weapons, carry red flags, and can be heard shouting “Long live Mao Tse-tung.”

As the conflict in Naxalbari gains momentum, the revolting peasants begin using Communist language, imagery, and ideology in support of their struggle. The influence of such ideology—rooted in anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, and the dismantling of the landowning classes—will take hold of much more than just Naxalbari in the coming years.



Two Bengali communists, Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal, are the movement's primary organizers. These men, younger than most of the communist leadership in India, are dissidents of the CPI(M) and see the older generations as out of touch. Sanyal is a true radical—raised wealthy in an upper-echelon caste, Sanyal now refuses to own property and devotes his life to the rural poor. The Calcutta government has attempted to enlist Sanyal's help in getting the peasants to surrender, but he backed out of negotiations at the last minute. As tensions have escalated, many peasants have been killed.

The CPI(M) is so effective in large part because it rejects outdated ideology and its leaders are wholly devoted to the ideals they espouse. Though there has been large-scale violence throughout the countryside, the movement is still gathering momentum and support from those frustrated with old-guard politics and oppressive class issues.



Subhash and Udayan often stay up late, listening to the radio and discussing what is happening in Naxalbari. Udayan supports the peasant rebellion, but Subhash has reservations, feeling that the peasants' primitive weapons will do no good against the might of the state. Udayan, though, admires the peasants for fighting back through any means possible. Udayan blames the United Front, the left-wing government coalition in charge of West Bengal, for not backing the rebellion despite its promises of rights for workers and peasants and its communist sympathies.

Over the summer, the conflict worsens, and there are demonstrations in support of the Naxalbari peasants at both Subhash and Udayan's colleges. The West Bengal government authorizes a raid of Naxalbari peasants' houses, and many insurgents are captured as a result. The rebellion is quashed, and when news of its defeat reaches Udayan and Subhash via their radio, Udayan is visibly upset. He quotes a Chinese newspaper which recently predicted that the "spark in Darjeeling will start a prairie fire and will certainly set the vast expanses of India ablaze."

By the fall, Sanyal and Majumdar have gone into hiding. Indian journalists are reprinting articles from Chinese Communist magazines. Udayan shows the articles to his father, who dismisses their rhetoric. He has already lived through change in India, he says; he foretells that the peasants will not rebel again, and the United Front will remain in power. Udayan criticizes his father for not taking a stand, but Subhash knows that their father is a government employee—there are rules about what he can say and do, and he cannot join any party or union. Subhash knows that all their lives, their father has been responsible for their sake, but Udayan does not see things this way.

Subhash begins finding communist texts, including Mao's Little Red Book, among Udayan's things. One afternoon, on a study break, Subhash picks up a book of essays by Majumdar, and later asks Udayan whether he really believes Majumdar's calls for India's communists to follow China's example—and use civil war as a tactic of seizing power—can really work. Udayan tells Subhash these methods have already worked in China. Subhash and Udayan are on their way to play soccer, and as they pass the Tolly Club, Udayan calls it an "affront." Subhash remembers breaking in as a boy, and attempts to remind Udayan of these memories, but Udayan replies only that "golf [is] the pastime of the comprador bourgeoisie" and points out that after the Cuban revolution, "getting rid of the golf courses was one of the first things Castro had done."

As the brothers process the news coming out of Naxalbari, they react to it in accordance with their personalities. Subhash is skeptical both of the violence he's hearing about and the efficacy of revolutionary politics—Udayan, though, believes the peasants should keep trying, blazing a trail despite lack of governmental support.



In this scene Udayan demonstrates, for the first time, his deep emotional connection to what the peasants there are going through. The newspaper quotation Udayan relays to Subhash is a violent one, but this seems to make Udayan feel hopeful rather than wary or frightened—he thinks that India needs to be "set on fire" in order to change.



Once again, Subhash's perspective is the more tempered one. He is able to see that his and Udayan's father has made sacrifices to keep them safe, but Udayan is so wrapped up in revolutionary rhetoric that he cannot see things the way Subhash can. Udayan wants radical politics now, and cannot see how, from his father's perspective, in the wake of turmoil such as the fallout of Partition, upholding even an imperfect status quo is preferable to more violence.



In this passage, Subhash is coming to realize just how radical his brother has become. Once, Udayan wanted the chance to get into the Tolly Club so badly that he led Subhash on a mission to sneak in—now, he is only to see it only as a bastion of class warfare, inequality, and corruption. Udayan has become so swept up in the rhetoric of his Communist idols that he no longer has any appreciation for anything that goes even remotely against their ideology.



PART 1, CHAPTER 5

By early 1968, the United Front government has collapsed and direct rule by the Central Government has been imposed. Students all over West Bengal are protesting their insufficient educations—which teach the young “to ignore the needs of the common people”—by boycotting exams, tearing up diplomas, and delivering incendiary speeches during convocations and graduations.

Despite this climate, Udayan and Subhash both begin their postgraduate studies. Subhash continues on at Jadavpur, while Udayan transfers to Calcutta University. Udayan’s schedule becomes erratic, and he frequently misses dinner. Subhash knows that the Naxalbari movement is spreading throughout India, and suspects that his brother is involved, but does not discuss these matters with their parents.

One evening, Udayan invites Subhash to a meeting in North Calcutta. In the small room, students are gathered together to engage in a study-session-like meeting at which the group must prove their familiarity with Mao’s tenets and Chinese history. Communist newspapers are distributed, and from reading them Subhash learns that the peasant rebels are still active in Naxalbari. They are even having some success, and landowners are fleeing after a spate of landowning families have been burned and decapitated. Sinha, the leader of the meeting, tells the room that the CPI(M) is nothing but “lackeys of the United States,” and urges the creation of a new party to reflect their group’s radical views. Though Subhash is skeptical, Udayan hangs on every word.

Later that week, beneath the brothers’ bed, Subhash finds a can of red paint along with a folded piece of paper on which is written a list of slogans glorifying Mao and the uprising in Naxalbari. One night, when Udayan comes home late, Subhash asks if he has been out painting slogans. Udayan replies that the “ruling class” puts their propaganda everywhere, and so he and his group should be able to influence people, too. Udayan then invites Subhash to come help him paint the following evening.

The next night, Subhash again finds himself in the position of lookout as Udayan paints the slogan “Long live Naxalbari” in English on a wall. Subhash is not afraid of being caught, and remembers, in contrast, how terrified he was back when they scaled the wall of the Tolly Club. After the vandalism is finished, Udayan is elated and excited, but Subhash is angry with himself for going along with it. He knows he only followed Udayan because he is afraid that if he resists Udayan, the two will “cease to be brothers.”

Revolution has come to West Bengal in earnest, as forward-thinking citizens have exposed the ways in which the infrastructures around them are not meeting their needs. These protests reveal the anger simmering below the surface of West Bengal and establish a volatile atmosphere.



In the midst of the unrest in West Bengal, Subhash doubles down on his studies—but cannot account for what his brother is up to. Subhash, true to his nature, does not want to raise suspicion or rock the boat where Udayan is concerned, and so keeps his fears to himself.



Subhash’s first foray into radical politics is of course only at Udayan’s behest. Subhash is skeptical throughout the meeting, but when he sees how invested Udayan is in everything Sinha is saying, he understands that the gulf between himself and his brother has widened significantly. Subhash is neutral and uninterested in the violent, radical overthrow of the status quo—he is a natural introvert and is disinclined to participate in any activities that could get him into trouble.



Subhash is realizing, bit by bit, the true extent of his brother’s involvement in the burgeoning revolutionary movement which has swept Calcutta. Understanding that Udayan is not just ideologically aligned with this movement, but is putting his own safety at risk in order to carry out acts on their behalf, shakes Subhash more than a little.



Subhash goes along on this mission only half-willingly and is flooded with memories of similar escapades they undertook as boys. Subhash has always felt steamrolled by Udayan’s influence, afraid of denying his brother and damaging their close bond. Subhash is angry with his own spinelessness, and with Udayan for taking advantage of it for all these years.



After finishing school, Udayan finds a job teaching science at a high school near Tollygunge, while Subhash applies to Ph.D. programs in the United States, where he can continue his research on the environment. Udayan insists he cannot walk away from what is happening in India and warns Subhash that leaving is selfish. Subhash tells Udayan that in engaging with radicals, he is endangering their family. Udayan then begs Subhash not to leave. Subhash, however, does not hear the request as one made out of love, but rather as a command—“another exhortation to do as Udayan did.”

It is Udayan, however, who goes away before Subhash, claiming he is traveling with friends. A month later, Udayan returns thin and bearded, with a noticeable tremor. He is diagnosed with an overactive thyroid gland and placed on medication. After Udayan recovers, things mostly go back to normal—but Subhash can tell that “some part of Udayan [is] elsewhere.” Something, Subhash realizes, has subdued and preoccupied his brother.

On April 22, 1969—Lenin’s birthday—a third communist party launches in Calcutta. They call themselves Naxalites. Majumdar and Sanyal are at its head—Sanyal is the “party chairman.” Sanyal gives a speech, christening the party the Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist—the CPI(ML.) He proclaims that the party’s chief task will be to organize the peasantry against the Indian state, using guerrilla warfare as its main tactic. Sanyal predicts that by the year 2000, “the people of the whole world will be liberated from all kinds of exploitation,” and communism will be celebrating a great victory.

The next day, the newspapers feature articles about the gathering, and photos of Sanyal and his followers. Subhash looks through them, seeing portraits of a city he no longer feels a part of. Already, he is preparing to leave Tollygunge behind. He knows that his brother was at the rally and feels slightly sad that Udayan did not invite him to come along. Subhash feels as if the two of them have already parted.

For so much of his life, Subhash has gone along with what his brother has wanted—now that Subhash is ready to carve his own path, his brother is trying once again to steer him in a certain direction. Subhash is sick of this treatment, and it is perhaps because of his frustration that he doubles down on his resolve to travel to America and leave Udayan—and the unrest of Calcutta—behind.



Udayan returns to Calcutta noticeably changed. This is the beginning of the novel’s toying with the concept of presence in absence, and of absence despite presence. Udayan has returned—but just how much of him has come back is something Subhash and his family must try to figure out.



The creation of this splinter party is a celebrated occasion for many—but Lahiri strategically employs her reader’s position in time to show how this cause, however valiant, is already doomed. Of course, by the year 2000—already well in the past by the time of the book’s publication—the world’s people were not liberated from all of their suffering, and communism is not the world’s dominant political model.



Subhash is so disconnected from what is happening in Calcutta—partly through his own aloofness, but partly because he has chosen, upon seeing Udayan’s intense involvement, to keep himself removed. Though physically still present in Tollygunge, Subhash already emotionally absent from his hometown.



PART 1, CHAPTER 6

Subhash travels to Rhode Island to attend a university there. He takes a room off-campus, which he shares with a Ph.D. student named Richard Grifalconi. Richard tells Subhash that he was active in the civil rights movement. One day, on campus, Subhash sees Richard standing at the center of a group of students and faculty, speaking into a megaphone, decrying the war in Vietnam. This demonstration is nothing like the explosive ones in Calcutta; even so, he thinks of how his brother Udayan would ridicule him for not taking part in it. Subhash reminds himself that he is in America as “Nixon’s guest,” and cannot make waves.

There are few other Indians at the university, and Subhash is the only one from Calcutta. He meets a professor named Narasimhan and his American wife, who give Subhash their number and tell him they’ll invite him round for dinner one day, but an invitation never comes.

One day, Subhash sees a wedding taking place at a nearby church. After the couple leaves, he enters the church and thinks of his own future marriage. He wonders what woman his parents will choose for him, and knows that getting married will mean returning to Calcutta. He does not feel in any big hurry to do either. He is proud to be on his own in America—it is a step he has taken which Udayan will never take. He is alone in this strange, coastal landscape.

With Richard’s help, Subhash learns how to drive, and the two travel up the coast one afternoon. Richard asks Subhash about India—he is ignorant of the politics there and does not know what Naxalbari is or what it stands for.

One afternoon in November, Subhash receives a letter from Udayan. Udayan excitedly describes meeting Kanu Sanyal. He also reveals that their parents are adding onto the house in anticipation of both the boys’ marriages, and lastly tells Subhash that the days are dull without him, asking him to come home soon. Subhash reads the letter several times, missing his brother intensely. He knows that the references to meeting Sanyal render the letter somewhat dangerous, and as such burns the letter. He then writes Udayan a letter back, telling him about his studies. He describes the marsh grass in Rhode Island, and how its propagation pattern is similar to that of the mangroves in Tollygunge.

Subhash has left one country with a complicated political situation and found himself in another. Though he does not seem particularly allured by politics in America, either, he has the excuse this time of being a “guest” in America—in Tollygunge, the only excuse he had was his own skepticism and hesitancy.



Subhash is not just politically but culturally isolated in America, and even the support of other Indian students never quite materializes for Subhash.



Though Subhash struggles with loneliness and feelings of dislocation in his early days in America, he at least has the point of pride of having taken one decisive step of his own. He has at last gone where his brother cannot follow—it is he now, not Udayan, who is leaving the trail of footsteps.



Richard’s ignorance of Naxalbari symbolizes how faraway India is from the minds of average Americans, confirming Subhash’s isolation.



Through letters, Subhash and Udayan are attempting to repair the gap between them. They are, however, still very different men: Udayan’s letters are about his continuing political involvement, while Subhash’s response is uneventful, focused on the quiet observations Subhash has made about his new home. Udayan longs openly for Subhash to return; the most Subhash says about missing India is making the comparison about the marsh grass and the mangrove trees.



New Year's Eve comes and goes, and a new letter from Udayan arrives—along with a black-and-white photograph of a young woman. Udayan's letter informs Subhash that he is married to the woman in the picture, whose name is Gauri. The two of them have kept things quiet; Gauri is a studious orphan with similar beliefs to Udayan's. Udayan describes how he has rejected the idea of arranged marriage, which goes against Mao's tenets, and has married Gauri without his parents' blessing. The two are going to wait to have children until the country is "fixed," Udayan writes. Udayan asks Subhash when he is going to return to India, and to bring along certain politically-sensitive books for Gauri to read.

Subhash reads this letter only once. He is concerned for his brother, who, at only 24, cannot possibly support a family. He feels Udayan has made an impulsive decision, disrespectful of their parents, and is surprised that for as deeply as Udayan eschews convention, he has so suddenly gotten married. He is also upset that in rejecting arranged marriage, Udayan has forged ahead of Subhash, denying his own place as the younger brother.

Subhash destroys the letter but keeps the photo of Gauri tucked into the back of one of his textbooks. From time to time he looks at it. He wonders when he will meet Gauri, and what he will think of her. He feels "defeated by Udayan all over again, for having found a girl like that."

PART 2, CHAPTER 1

Whenever Udayan is at Gauri's house, studying and discussing communism with her brother Manash, Gauri stays on the balcony or in another room. One day, however, the houseboy is out on an errand, and Manash asks Gauri to make the two of them tea. Gauri brings the men their cups, and when she locks eyes with Udayan, the attraction between them is instantaneous—they both feel it.

Gauri and Udayan's universities are next to one another, and Gauri often finds herself looking for him. Even at home, on the wide balcony that wraps around the two sides of her grandparents' apartment, Gauri scans the people on the streets below for Udayan's face. One day, Udayan joins Gauri on the balcony; Manash is out running errands. Gauri and Udayan begin talking, and Gauri tells Udayan that she has "observed the world" from this balcony for most of her life. She reads on the balcony, and even sleeps out there some nights.

Subhash has just begun to settle into his life in Rhode Island when this letter from Udayan arrives, causing him to question his choices and falter. Though Subhash has a lonely, isolated life in this new country, he has taken pride in his own intrepidity in even coming to the States in the first place. This letter from Udayan, though, erases all of Subhash's feelings of progress—with his marriage, his younger brother has again outpaced him in a major way.



Subhash is jealous of Udayan, to be sure, but also worried for him. He is afraid that his brother is making impulsive, irresponsible choices—but at the same time, there is a part of him which cannot suppress his feelings of being left behind.



Subhash continues to be perturbed by his brother's having found a wife first. Subhash has spent his whole life feeling outpaced by Udayan and being "defeated" in romance is one of the largest blows of all.



The narrative returns to India, to the early days of Udayan and Gauri's courtship. Lahiri portrays Gauri at the outset as an aloof girl—Udayan's presence, however, ignites something in her.



Lahiri uses Gauri's frequenting of balconies to establish her as a character who prefers to observe the world but remain aloof and detached from participating in it. Gauri has seen many things, but always from the safety of her high perch. As she grows closer to Udayan, she does not yet know that she is becoming close to someone who has disdain for such aloofness.



Udayan notices that Gauri is reading Descartes and asks her about her studies in philosophy. Gauri enjoys says they help her understand the world, but Udayan believes that degrees have become meaningless in India. When Gauri points out that Udayan himself is enrolled in a degree program, he quickly changes the subject, and asks about Gauri's family. She lives with Manash, their maternal grandparents, two uncles and their wives. Gauri explains that she moved around a lot as a child—her father was a district judge—but she came to live with her grandparents after her parents died in a car accident.

As Gauri tells Udayan her story, she realizes he is fascinated by the amount of autonomy she has had in her life, both as a result of how her parents raised her and as a consequence of their deaths. Udayan asks Gauri if she will miss her balcony when she marries and goes to live with her husband, but Gauri replies that she is never going to marry. Instead, she wants to teach philosophy. Udayan agrees, flirtatiously, that Gauri should never stop doing what she loves “for the sake of a man.” Udayan points to a home across the street and asks Gauri whether it would be “all right” to get married if the man lived just on the opposite corner. Gauri smiles coyly and laughs.

Gauri and Udayan run into each other all the time, and frequently meet at one another's campuses. Udayan gives Gauri books, and she feels her mind “sharpening [and] focusing.” She enjoys thinking deeply about the things that matter to Udayan: individualism, freedom, and what Indian society might become.

As Gauri and Udayan grow closer, Udayan is often pulled away because he suddenly has to be at a meeting, a study session, or a rally. He often talks about his desire to travel out to the villages, and asks Gauri if she would understand if one day he had to leave Tollygunge and go live among peasants. Gauri, aware that she is being tested, replies that she would understand. As Gauri spends more and more time with Udayan, she feels herself being swept up in his orbit, and questions the person she once was. She feels she is seeing herself more clearly with Udayan in her life.

One day, Gauri discovers a note in one of the books Udayan has lent her, asking her to meet him at a matinee at a cinema. The day of the matinee, Gauri hesitates, but eventually decides to go. She does not arrive until intermission; Udayan is outside, though, smoking a cigarette. As she approaches him, she expects him to be irritated with her, but instead sees only pleasure in his expression. She asks him what has happened so far in the film, and what she has missed; he replies that he does not know, because he has been outside the whole time, waiting for her.

Gauri and Udayan have had very different pasts. They see things differently and are ideologically at odds with one another. Gauri's choice to study philosophy, of all things, is significant—it positions her as someone curious in the human condition and the choices people make, but mostly theoretically. Udayan, meanwhile, is interested in taking direct action and witnessing human suffering up close.



Gauri is steadfast and sure in what she wants out of her life—she wants to study, learn, and teach. She does not seem to have romance on her mind at all. As Udayan flirts with her, though, she finds herself charmed by him—and impressed by his being in agreement that she should not give up what she wants for the sake of tradition.



Though Gauri told Udayan she would not let herself be changed by a man, she begins absorbing Udayan's ideologies as her own—mostly as a way of growing closer to him. She feels Udayan's presence in the books she is reading.



Gauri knows that her relationship with Udayan is not perfect and is demanding of her things she doesn't want to agree to or give away. At the same time, being in Udayan's presence feels so good that she is willing to compromise her own ideology to accommodate Udayan's. She feels he is making her into a sharper version of herself rather than whittling away at the girl she was before she met him.



This scene is highly symbolic and seems to portend that Gauri and Udayan will proceed through their relationship as equals, taking care of one another's needs and never diving into something without the other's consent. Udayan waits for Gauri and greets her joyfully, gratefully, even, though he has sacrificed his own enjoyment for her comfort.



PART 2, CHAPTER 2

In the second year of his Ph.D., Subhash lives on his own; Richard has moved to Chicago. In the spring semester he boards a research vessel with a group of students and professors, and heads on a three-week trip along the coast to study the effects of pollution on ocean life. Subhash is mesmerized by the wildlife, big and small, which struggle against all odds to survive, but cannot escape intense feelings of isolation and longing for his family. He has not heard their voices in a year—they do not have a phone back in India, and so Subhash has had to settle for receiving news only in writing.

Udayan's letters no longer mention Naxalbari or any kind of politics. He asks repeatedly, though, when Subhash is going to return to Calcutta and marry. Subhash is puzzled by the blandness of these letters in contrast with Udayan's earlier, fiery missives. Letters from Subhash's parents express their disappointment with Udayan's rash elopement, and urge Subhash to trust them, when the time comes, to choose his wife for him. Subhash replies encouragingly, assuring them that his future is in their hands. Subhash knows that though Udayan has provoked their parents, he still lives under their protection with his wife Gauri—Subhash wonders if the girl has already replaced him.

One summer day, Subhash, back from his research trip, goes down to a beach near campus. He spots a woman, Holly, walking with a her son, Joshua. Joshua is looking for starfish and Subhash, knowing where the starfish hide, procures one for him. Holly strikes up a conversation with Subhash, asking whether he likes it in Rhode Island. Subhash replies he has "discovered the most beautiful place on earth." Though he does not belong here, it doesn't matter; here, alone in this "majestic corner of the world," he can breathe.

Subhash learns that Holly and Joshua live nearby. Though Holly does not mention her husband, Joshua talks about his father a lot. Subhash sees Holly and Joshua at the beach often, and the three of them—along with the dog, Chester—frequently take walks together. One afternoon, while they share a picnic on the beach. Holly confesses that she and Joshua's father have been living apart for nearly a year—he is with another woman. As the weeks go by, Subhash finds himself nursing an attraction to Holly. He knows that there are "great chasms" separating them: cultural differences, an age gap of nearly ten years, and the fact that Holly has experienced love and heartbreak—things Subhash has never known.

Subhash's emotional isolation is given shape as he embarks on a physically isolating journey. Though he is excelling in his studies, he misses home, and his family's absence from his life makes his thoughts of them a ubiquitous presence, even when deep in the trenches of his own research. Subhash is struggling with the fact that his duties now are not to his family, but to his own advancement.



Subhash's feelings of isolation, disorientation, and not just physical but emotional absence from his family is palpable here. He is surprised that Udayan seems to have forsaken his radical politics, and though he should be relieved that his brother has removed himself from danger and controversy, instead he is fearful that Udayan's return to normalcy means that Subhash will be further edged out of his family.



Subhash has been feeling isolated due to his removal from the familiarity of Calcutta. When asked how he feels about Rhode Island, however, he has nothing but wonderful things to say. This scene reveals that despite his waffling, Subhash does truly feel empowered by his choice to come to America and sees his isolation more as a freedom or an opportunity than a burden or detriment.



Subhash finds himself once again shirking tradition, going against what is expected of him, and taking a bold step into new territory by acknowledging his attraction to Holly. Subhash has been feeling pulled, lately, back toward his homeland and his family, but at the height of that depression Lahiri introduces a complication to his narrative: the attraction to a woman who represents a clear choice to separate himself from his duties to his family and his desire to return to the familiar, traditional world of Calcutta.



One afternoon at the beach, Subhash arrives to find Holly there alone—it is a Friday, and Joshua spends Friday evenings with his father. When it begins to rain, Holly invites Subhash back to her house for dinner. There, Subhash sees that she lives an isolated life; she has few neighbors, and her home is small and cramped. Subhash can tell that the sparsely-decorated cottage is a place she moved after separating from her husband. He sees that Holly is just as alone as he is—maybe even moreso.

As Subhash and Holly eat dinner, Holly confesses she is afraid the separation is negatively affecting Joshua. After dinner, when it is time for Subhash to leave, Holly offers to walk him to his car with her umbrella, but at the door, Subhash pauses. Holly invites Subhash to stay the night, and he agrees to. The two make love—it is Subhash's first time, and he is both "embarrassed [and] exhilarated." In the morning, Holly asks Subhash if he would like her to tell him the next time Joshua is spending the night at his father's, so they can rendezvous again. Subhash agrees. He leaves Holly's house, and when he walks outside there is no sign of last night's rainstorm.

PART 2, CHAPTER 3

Subhash wishes he could tell Udayan about the "profound step [he has] taken" in embarking upon an affair with Holly, but knows that to accurately describe Holly—and the arrangement between them—in a letter or a telegram would be impossible.

Subhash goes to Holly's every Friday, and sometimes stays through the weekend. They are deeply at ease with one another. A few times, Subhash and Holly do things that married people would do, like going to the supermarket—Subhash knows that in Calcutta, he would never do these things with a woman during their courtship. On the other hand, there are things that dating couples normally do that Holly and Subhash do not, like going to the movies.

When he is with Holly, Subhash knows that he is "cultivat[ing] an ongoing defiance of his parents' expectations." Subhash often thinks of Narasimhan, the Indian professor at the university, and his American wife, and wonders if such a life could be possible for himself—though he always winds up reminding himself that it would not. He is torn between wanting to cut things off with Holly because he knows they have no future for them and wanting to push things forward towards an unreachable horizon.

Though they are an unlikely match, and their circumstances are vastly different, Subhash and Holly are brought together by a great equalizer: loneliness. As Holly at last allows Subhash a peek into what her life is really like, he recognizes his own loneliness in her, too, and sees that they are perhaps more alike than he'd previously considered.



As Subhash and Holly give into their lust, they both find that desire is enough—for the time being—to bridge whatever differences there are between them. As they decide to embark upon an affair, Subhash feels as if his world has been changed. The world outside, though, shows no sign of the "storm" within him, symbolizing the world's indifference to the choice he is making in spite of the fact that it feels like a serious step to him.



As Subhash invests more in his life in Rhode Island and grows closer to Holly, he feels his connection to India, and to Udayan, becoming more and more tenuous.



The cultural gap between Holly and Subhash is highlighted by the difference in romantic custom. Subhash is surprised by how different this relationship is from what he'd expected—of course, the odd way they do things is deeply related to the fact that Holly is still married, and they are having a physical affair rather than a tenable relationship.



Subhash eventually realizes that he and Holly are carrying on in a way which is unsustainable. Though he fantasizes about making things work in the long-term, he cannot manage to fully deceive himself into believing that such a feat would actually be possible.



PART 2, CHAPTER 4

One weekend in September, Joshua is visiting his father, and Holly suggests she and Subhash take a ferry to Block Island for the weekend. There, Holly gifts Subhash a pair of binoculars. The two go bicycling, and Subhash is reminded of learning to ride a bike with Udayan in Calcutta. He thinks of a letter he recently received from his brother, which tells of how mundane Udayan's life has become—but still makes oblique reference to a fascination with Castro. The letter caused Subhash to wonder whether his brother has “traded one passion for another,” and committed fully to a quiet life with Gauri.

Subhash and Holly see a turtle in the road, and Subhash moves it back into the grass, away from harm. The rest of the evening, Holly is withdrawn and pensive, and that night the two go to sleep without making love for the first time since their affair began.

On the ferry back to the mainland in the morning, Holly tells Subhash that their affair must end—she is going to try to make things work with Joshua's father. When Subhash protests, Holly points out that in a few years Subhash has said himself that he will return to India. Subhash feels as if their relationship is the turtle in the road—Holly has picked them up and pulled them off “the precarious path they were on [...] putting their connection to one another out of harm's way.” In his hurt and anger, Subhash takes Udayan's most recent letter from his pocket, rips it up, and drops the pieces into the ocean.

It is Autumn of 1971, Subhash's third fall in Rhode Island. The changing leaves' fiery colors remind him of the vibrant spices his mother Bijoli pounded each morning in preparation for the day's meals. Subhash is struck by how these colors have followed him to such a vastly different part of the world. He is flooded with memories of Calcutta as he realizes the holiday celebrating the many-armed warrior goddess **Durga** is taking place there right now. For the past two years, his parents have sent gifts to mark the holiday—this year, only a telegram arrives. It consists of only two sentences: “Udayan killed. Come back if you can.”

As Subhash's connection with Holly continues to intensify, his connection to home, and to Udayan, becomes muddier. He has not seen his brother in a long time and cannot gather what is truly going on with Udayan from the tone of his letters. Subhash is conscious of this disconnect, but uncertain of how to mend it—he is too wrapped up with Holly, and too far removed from Udayan.



Subhash has been lamenting how far removed he has become from his brother—in this moment, it becomes evident that he is further removed from Holly, too, than he realized.



Subhash and Holly have both known that they were on borrowed time. This fact, though, was unspoken between them. In this way, Holly and Subhash were conspirators in a lie they told one another—that their relationship was fine. As a result of Subhash's pain, he rips Udayan's letter up—symbolizing his desire to estrange himself not just from Holly, but from everyone close to him.



At the height of Subhash's homesickness and feelings of disconnection from the traditions of his youth, a thread reconnecting him to Calcutta appears—in the most painful form imaginable. The curt letter puts an end to his romanticizing of the Calcutta of his youth and brings him back to an awareness of the fact that things there are darker, and more dangerous, than they seem.



PART 3, CHAPTER 1

Subhash makes the arduous journey back to India. On a train from Delhi to Calcutta, his fellow passengers fill him in on what has happened in the country in his absence. By 1970, the Naxalites had “plastered” Calcutta with images of Mao, disrupted elections, and set off bombs. After a period of general intimidation, they began focusing specifically on businessmen, educators, and members of the CPI(M), their rival party. Eventually the Naxalites took control of Tollygunge. An old law authorizing the police and paramilitary forces to arrest people without charging them was renewed in order to attempt to stop the Naxalites. Subhash begins to realize that Udayan was, more than likely, killed by the police.

As Subhash, in a taxi, approaches his childhood home, he is assaulted by the pungent stench of algae and open drains, and the crowds of people in the streets. As he enters his home’s courtyard, he looks down at **Udayan’s footprints** in the cement. Subhash’s parents toss down a key rather than coming to greet him, and Subhash uses it to open a heavy padlock on the door.

Subhash joins his parents for lunch. When he asks where Gauri is, his parents tell him that she prefers to take meals in the kitchen. Subhash knows, though, that they are indulging a custom of segregating the widow from the rest of the family. Subhash asks to meet Gauri, but his parents tell him she’s not feeling well. When he asks if they’ve called a doctor, they reveal the truth: Gauri is pregnant.

After lunch, Subhash takes a walk over to the **lowland**. He sees a small stone marker bearing Udayan’s name, and the years of his birth and death. Subhash remembers twisting his ankle at a football game when he was young, and how Udayan helped him limp home, all the way across the lowland.

Subhash returns home and takes a nap. When he wakes up and goes to the kitchen for a snack, he sees Gauri sitting there. She is dressed in a white sari—widow’s garb. Gauri tells Subhash that he slept through dinner, and offers to fix him a plate, but Subhash refuses. Upon hearing Subhash speak, Gauri remarks that Subhash has the same voice as Udayan.

Subhash has been totally disconnected from what has been going on in Calcutta, as the Naxalite movement has not been deemed important enough to make the news in America. As he returns home, he realizes the extent of the political violence that has come to roost in his hometown, and understands that his brother more than likely never gave up on his political radicalism. Subhash’s trip to mourn his brother starts with this seed of suspicion, setting the stage for Subhash’s need to uncover the secrets Udayan left behind.



Subhash must become reoriented with the sights and smells of his childhood, which, after years in America, have become foreign and distasteful. He is also reminded of the parts of his childhood that left him feeling insignificant—Udayan’s footprints, for one, and his parents’ ability to overlook his presence, intensified now in the wake of his brother’s death.



Subhash’s parents willful neglect of Gauri’s presence concerns Subhash. The idea of presence in absence, and emotional absence despite physical presence, will become a major facet of Gauri’s character arc, and Lahiri sets the stage for it in this passage.



The sight of the lowland brings up memories of Subhash and Udayan’s childhood. The lowland, which was a place of connection for them, is now the site of a tragedy.



Upon their first meeting, Gauri is haunted by the strange and uncanny similarity between Subhash and Udayan’s voices. Though Udayan is gone, he seems “present” when Subhash speaks.



As the days go by, Subhash adjusts to the new layout of his home and the strange ways his parents maneuver around Gauri. His parents barely even acknowledge her presence when she enters a room. Subhash himself struggles to interact with his parents, who are quiet and withdrawn. Each evening, Bijoli gathers flowers from the courtyard and goes to the **lowland**, rinsing Udayan's marker clean and laying flowers at its base. Subhash realizes that Udayan must have been killed around dusk.

Subhash's parents refuse to tell him how Udayan was killed. Subhash later approaches Gauri, giving her a book Udayan had asked him to procure for her. He asks Gauri if Udayan knew that he was going to be a father, and Gauri admits that he did not. She tells Subhash that the baby is due in the summertime. Sensing how bad things are for Gauri in his parents' house, he offers to take her somewhere else—to visit her family, perhaps—but she tells him that her family is still angry with her for eloping. Subhash then asks Gauri to tell him what happened to Udayan.

PART 3, CHAPTER 2

The narrative flashes back to the night of Udayan's death. It is the week before **Durga** Pujo in Calcutta, and Bijoli and Gauri have hired a rickshaw to take them home from the tram depot after a day of shopping for the holiday. The rickshaw driver drops the women where the main road turns into the small enclave leading to their house, refusing to take them any further. Turning down their street, Gauri and her mother-in-law are surprised to see no families walking about despite the festival atmosphere in the town—and then to see a police van parked outside their house, and soldiers gathered around it.

Approaching the house, Gauri and Bijoli find it full of policemen. One of them points a gun at Gauri's father-in-law, and the women are not allowed to go into the house. Policemen bring Gauri, Bijoli, and Udayan's father out of the courtyard and towards the flooded **lowland** at gunpoint. At the lowland, an officer uses a megaphone to announce to the neighborhood that he and his men are searching for Udayan Mitra. The police ask Gauri where he is—they know he somewhere in the enclave, and they have cordoned it off. Gauri says she does not know, but the officers accuse her of lying and hold a gun to her throat. Gauri knows that Udayan is hiding in the lowland—he has rehearsed his escape from the house many times before.

Subhash is struck by the new rituals and behaviors that have come to define how his family negotiates one another's presences. His parents are inconsolable and have retreated into themselves in their grief. Udayan is gone, but his presence is everywhere, and Subhash's mother especially is doing everything she can to keep it that way.



Gauri and Subhash bond over their feelings of isolation. Gauri has been by her own family and by the family of her dead husband. Subhash cannot connect with his parent nor reach them through the haze of their grief. Subhash's delivering books to Gauri is an act of good faith, and he asks her to extend the same courtesy to him and explain the truth of his brother's death.



The quiet on the street despite the approach of Durga Pujo lets Gauri and her mother-in-law—and Lahiri's readers—know that something is wrong. Durga, the goddess of peace and prosperity, is absent from the street where they live despite the fact that it is her festival week, symbolizing that discord has come to Tollygunge and to the Mitra home more specifically.



As Gauri returns to the house and realizes that Udayan has been cornered by the police, she seems on edge but not entirely surprised. Through her reflections on past rehearsals of an escape route, it becomes clear that whatever Udayan has been up to, he has been in the police's crosshairs for some time now and has involved his family—or at least Gauri—in the knowledge that he must be prepared to make his escape from the house at any time.



The soldier with the megaphone announces that he will begin shooting members of the Mitra family if Udayan does not reveal himself. Moments later, Gauri can hear something emerging from the flooded **lowland**—it is Udayan. He lifts his hands above his head, following the officers' orders, and is marched over to his family. The soldiers instruct him to bend down and touch his parents' feet, asking for their forgiveness. **Udayan's right hand** is bandaged from a previous injury, and so he does this all with his left hand. Udayan's father asks the policemen what he is supposed to be forgiving. The policemen tell him that Udayan has "betrayed his country."

After Udayan begs his parents' forgiveness, he meets Gauri's eyes for just a second, and then is pulled away into the van. Gauri, Bijoli, and Udayan's father are escorted back into the house, and as they go, they hear the van starting up, and then see it driving over the grass at the edge of the **lowland** toward the empty field on the other side. Gauri and her in-laws climb to the third-floor terrace and watch as the soldiers release Udayan from the van. They see him walking away from the paramilitary officers and back toward the house. Gauri thinks for a moment that they are letting him go, but then there is the sound of gunshots—Udayan has been executed. The officers drag his body back towards the van, lift him into the back, start the engine, and drive away.

The police, Gauri learns, had discovered a diary under her and Udayan's mattress when they entered the house to search for him. It contained instructions for how to create homemade bombs and Molotov cocktails, and featured a map Udayan had sketched of the Tolly Club's layout. Over a month earlier, when Udayan was questioned by the police—a routine occurrence, lately, for the young men of Calcutta—he denied having any ties to the CPI(ML). Then, about a month before he was killed, Udayan did not come home one night. When he returned the next morning, his right **hand** was bandaged—he and his group had been assembling a pipe bomb, and Udayan, due to his tremor, accidentally set it off in his own hands, blowing off his fingers. Udayan told his parents that it had happened during an experiment at school, revealing the truth only to Gauri.

Udayan's body is not returned to the Mitras, and they are not told where it has been burned. As Gauri endures the ritual mourning period, she feels isolated and numb, unable to cry or grieve Udayan. Outside, the city is celebrating; inside the Mitra house, the family is mournful and secluded. As the festival ends, the people of Calcutta bid farewell to the goddess **Durga**, chanting prayers for her return the next year.

It is clear, from the police's disregard for the rest of the Mitras' lives, that Udayan is an important person for them to capture, and they will stop at nothing to apprehend him. Udayan's surrender is tinged with shame and failure, as he is forced to beg his family for forgiveness for crimes which the reader—and even his family—are not privy to.



Udayan's family is forced to watch his cruel execution, which the police seem to have designed to inflict maximum emotional pain both on Udayan himself and the rest of the Mitras. The fact that Udayan's body is taken by the police is a further injustice—the Mitras are denied the chance to properly mourn their son, and the absence of his body becomes the presence of injustice itself.



As the truth of Udayan's involvement in violence on behalf of the Communist Party is revealed, a portrait of an idealistic sense of duty gone wrong emerges. Udayan was so wrapped up in the party that he physically harmed himself, and yet did not let even this major setback slow him down. The loss of his fingers symbolizes the larger losses awaiting Udayan. His diary showed clear plans of a desire to infiltrate and attack the Tolly Club and its members—a fact that Gauri must now, in the wake of having witnessed her husband's violent execution, come to terms with.



The fact that such a miserable period in the Mitras' life coincides with the festival celebrating Durga, the warrior goddess charged with protecting peace and prosperity, is a cruel irony.



About a month after Udayan's death, Gauri begins feeling faint and ill. Bijoli, realizing what is going on, informs Gauri that she is going to be a mother. Gauri reflects on how Udayan had wanted to wait until after the revolution had successfully played out to have children and considers how burdensome and difficult her future as a single mother will be. As time slowly passes, Gauri feels as if she is holding her breath, like Udayan did in the **lowland**.

Gauri feels trapped—in a family that does not want her, with a pregnancy she herself may not even want, and within her own feelings of guilt, sadness, and anger that prevent her from fully mourning her husband's death. The lowland has moved from a symbol of connection to one of oppression—it is the place where Udayan died, and the metaphysical space where Gauri now feels herself struggling for air.



PART 3, CHAPTER 3

The day after hearing Gauri's story of Udayan's death, Subhash goes out into the city to the tailor to have new clothes made, though he knows he will have no use for them in Rhode Island. After visiting the shop, Subhash stops in front of a store that sells embroidered shawls to light a cigarette. The shop-owner invites him in, and Subhash selects a navy-blue shawl for Bijoli. Though it is against tradition, as Gauri is a widow and must wear drab colors, Subhash picks out a bright turquoise shawl for her as well.

As Subhash begins to process the true story of his brother's death, he attempts to isolate himself from his family. He cannot stop thinking of Gauri, though—when he purchases the bright shawl for her, he is symbolically demonstrating how unfair he feels it is that she is being made to behave as a widow at such a young age, after such a short marriage.



When Subhash returns home, he confronts his parents about their treatment of Gauri, shaming them for forcing her to dress in dull colors, abstain from eating fish and meat, and dine separately from them. Bijoli insists these are their family's customs, but Subhash tells them that they are demeaning Gauri, who is carrying their grandchild. Subhash's mother, though, believes that Gauri is "too aloof to be a mother," and suggests that once the child is born, Gauri should leave the child to them and go off to continue her studies. Subhash begs his parents to accept Gauri and treat her with respect, for Udayan's sake, but his mother angrily warns him not to tell her how to mourn her own child.

Since his arrival, Subhash has been able to sense that something is off with regards to his parents' treatment of Gauri. Now, after this conversation with his mother, he understands that his parents do not think Gauri is fit for motherhood and are purposefully excluding her in hopes of edging her out of mothering her own child. Subhash is shocked by this seemingly cruel act but cannot yet see that his parents' suspicions are perhaps more well-founded than they seem.



That night, Subhash cannot sleep. He thinks about how Udayan's death was in vain—dedicated to a movement that has caused only destruction, and which has already effectively been dismantled. He also laments that Udayan inserted Gauri into the family, only to "strand her there." As Subhash considers Gauri's predicament, he realizes that the answer is right in front of them: he cannot console Bijoli and his father, and he wants to leave Calcutta. He is afraid to leave Gauri behind, when he knows his parents' cruel treatment of her is intended to drive her out. He realizes that he must take Gauri away—and to do so, he must marry her. To follow Udayan in this way, Subhash thinks, feels both "perverse [and] ordained."

Subhash wrestles with how the atmosphere of political violence Udayan became involved with has brought personal violence into their family. Subhash wants to smooth out the pain his brother's death, and all its "violence," has brought into his parents' home, and sees that the only way to do this is to do the opposite of what he has been trying to do for years now: he must follow in Udayan's footsteps once more, in a new and "perverse" way.



Subhash is sick of being alone in Rhode Island—and, he admits, is attracted to Gauri. The next morning, rather than going to his parents, Subhash goes to Gauri directly. He gives her the shawl and helps her to wrap it around her shoulders. He tells her that he hates how Bijoli and his father treat her but cannot say any more—he loses his nerve, realizing the absurdity of his plan. Subhash knows that Gauri is mourning his brother—he himself means nothing to her.

The next afternoon, two policemen and an investigator arrive at the house and ask to speak to Gauri. They ask her if she is sympathetic to Udayan’s beliefs, and whether she is a current member of any political organization. She says she is not. They show her some photographs and ask if she recognizes anyone in them; she tells them she doesn’t. They mention a few names to her and ask if she recognizes any of them: among them are Nirmal Dey and Gopal Sinha. Gauri denies knowing the names, but Subhash realizes she is lying—even he remembers Sinha from the meeting he attended long ago.

After the investigators leave, Subhash joins Gauri on the terrace. He asks her when the policemen will come back; Gauri says they won’t, as she has nothing to tell them, but Subhash does not believe her. He tells Gauri that she is not safe in Calcutta—even if the policemen leave her alone, Bijoli and his father will not. He tells her what he knows of his parents’ wishes that Gauri will leave the child to them. Subhash then tells Gauri that no one in America knows about the Naxalite movement; no one there will bother her. Subhash tells her that he knows she still loves Udayan and does not expect love from her. He urges her to understand, though, that if she joins him in America, they will be far from both political and personal harm.

That evening, Gauri privately reflects on the investigators’ questions. She knew most people in the photographs, and though she did not know the name Nirmal Dey, she cannot shake the feeling that she is “not in ignorance of this man.”

The next morning, Gauri tells Subhash that he does not have to shoulder the burden of marrying her—Udayan would not have wanted “this.” Subhash says he understands, but Gauri reveals that Udayan did not want a family. In fact, she says, Udayan often said that because he had married before Subhash, he wanted for Subhash to be the first to have a child.

Subhash has selfish reasons, too, for wanting to marry Gauri and take her away from Calcutta. When the moment of truth arrives, though, he feels sheepish and ashamed for thinking that he could convince Gauri to come away with him and decides not to ask her to marry him yet.



As it becomes clear to Subhash that Gauri was more involved in whatever Udayan and the party were up to than she initially let on, another reason why leaving Calcutta seems necessary for her emerges. Subhash sees that Gauri is lying about her knowledge of higher-ups in the party, and wonders what else she knows that she has not shared with him.



A complicated ballet of rhetorical manipulation is happening in this scene. Subhash has already established, privately, that he wants to marry Gauri for selfish reasons as well as noble ones. He finds her attractive, and on some level feels that marrying his brother’s bride—however “perverse” it may be—would be the ultimate victory against Udayan. At the same time, Subhash doesn’t want Gauri or her child to face the political persecution that claimed Udayan’s life. His true intentions are a mix of various desires and feelings of obligation.



Lahiri allows her readers to see things from Gauri’s point of view, for a moment, to confirm that Gauri’s involvement in the party runs deeper than anyone knows, and possibly puts her and her unborn child in danger.



As Gauri reveals that Udayan always hoped his brother would have a child first, yet another “perversion” of desire occurs. What Udayan wanted in life is coming to pass—but only because of his death.



PART 4, CHAPTER 1

Gauri, now five months pregnant, arrives at the airport in Boston to find Subhash waiting for her. She is struck by how similar he looks to Udayan, but thinks he is a “milder version” of her husband with “weakness” in his eyes. Subhash brings Gauri to his car, and the two begin the drive towards Rhode Island. Gauri is disoriented and nauseated by the continuous movement of the car, different from the stop-and-start travel she is used to in Calcutta.

Throughout the car ride, the baby kicks, and Gauri cannot shake the feeling that she “contain[s] a ghost.” As the couple arrives in Providence, Gauri considers the meaning of the word “foresight,” or the ability to hold the future before it has been experienced.

Gauri and Subhash arrive at Subhash’s apartment building. Gauri is shocked by the loose security—the flimsy locks on the apartment doors, and the fact that the main doors are held wide open by rocks. Inside, Subhash shows Gauri to the bedroom, which he tells her will be hers alone—he will sleep on the sofa bed in the living room. During their first few days living together, Gauri is surprised by but grateful for the independent nature of their days. Subhash prepares breakfast each morning, then goes off to work, leaving Gauri with a few dollars, keys to the door and the mailbox, and the phone number of his department.

Gauri reflects on the days leading up to her marriage to Subhash. Her in-laws had accused her of “disgracing their family.” Gauri herself knew that the marriage was a bad choice—she was marrying Subhash as a means of staying connected to Udayan, but knew even as she was going through with it that it was as useless an act as saving one earring when the other half of the pair is lost.

One weekend, Subhash takes Gauri shopping for cold-weather clothes, but she hardly uses them; she does not leave the house. Subhash suggests Gauri take in a film on campus, attend a lecture, or make friends with some of the wives of other Indian graduate students, but Gauri declines. Gauri settles into a quiet, easy routine with Subhash, whose comings and goings, unlike Udayan’s, are predictable and regular. When the two of them watch the news in the evening, Gauri is surprised to find that there is nothing about Calcutta or Naxalbari on the broadcast—the things that tore her city apart and “shattered” her life are not reported here.

Gauri, still adjusting to life without Udayan, senses his presence despite his absence every time she sees Subhash. The arduous journey to America, made more difficult by her pregnancy, is not one she could have completed without that link—however tenuous—to Udayan’s memory.



Lahiri chooses Providence for the setting of the novel both because of personal biographical reasons and the connection to the mystical its name bears. Ironically, none of the characters—Gauri or Subhash especially—seem to have much useful foresight when it comes to the choices they make and the predicaments they insert themselves into.



Subhash gives Gauri space, knowing that the adjustment to America will be difficult for her. He himself, after all, had many moments of discomfort and uncertainty during his first several years in America, and he came without the baggage of a recent emotional and psychological trauma—and without the burden of a pregnancy.



The choice Subhash and Gauri have made to marry one another is one which will come to define the structure of their lives—and indeed the novel. They both know the marriage is an unhappy solution to a deep emotional problem.



Gauri is surprised but relieved to find that Subhash was telling the truth—in America, the violent goings-on in India are insignificant. The cultural amnesia this has the potential to engender in both Gauri and Subhash evokes the novel’s theme of presence in absence. If the strife in India is absent from their current cultural climate, will its presence in their minds remain sharp over time? Lahiri is posing questions about the relationship between heritage, cultural memory, and trauma that will unfold as the novel progresses.



One afternoon, Gauri decides to go out and explore. She goes to a little grocery store near campus and browses the shelves. She finds cream cheese and, not knowing what it is, purchases it, opens it in the parking lot, and eats every last bite, savoring it and licking the paper clean.

Gauri at last begins exploring campus a little more. One day, she enters a lecture hall in the philosophy department and sits down. She peers at another student's syllabus and sees that the course is an undergraduate one in ancient Western philosophy. Gauri goes back twice a week, every week, to take the class, intending to sit in the back and remain anonymous—but after a while, she cannot help herself, and begins vocally participating in the class. Gauri begins spending more and more time on campus, enjoying the feeling of being surrounded by people. She longs to blend in—she is still wearing saris every day but wants to begin looking like the other women on campus.

Subhash and Gauri attend an appointment with a local obstetrician, who tells Gauri that the baby is healthy and developing well. After the appointment, Subhash stops at the supermarket, and Gauri waits in the car. Exploring his glove box, she finds a woman's hair elastic, and feels relieved that she is not the only woman in Subhash's life—that she, too, is a replacement.

Gauri and Subhash take a walk on the beach one day and discuss baby names. Subhash asks if being in America is helpful to Gauri, and she admits that it is indeed helpful to be away from Calcutta. She is overwhelmed, though, by the burden she has placed on Subhash. Subhash reminds Gauri that he promised to raise the child with her. Gauri wishes she could express the magnitude of her gratitude to Subhash, or tell him that he is a better man than Udayan, but she cannot. She looks at their footprints in the sand and sees that, unlike **Udayan's footprints** in the courtyard, they are already washing away.

PART 4, CHAPTER 2

As Subhash adjusts to life with Gauri, he notes the careful ways their routines are aligned but not intertwined. Gauri walks through the living room, often, as if Subhash is not even there. Subhash believes that once the baby comes, things will change, and he and Gauri will come together not only as parents but as husband and wife.

This scene is symbolic of Gauri's burgeoning desire to "devour" life in America despite not knowing anything about it—it externalizes the relief she feels at being away from the political violence of India, with a clean slate in front of her.



As Gauri explores her surroundings and begins to adjust a little more, she longs to fully assimilate into her new environment. Gauri's motivations seem to stem both from her relief at being away from the violence of Calcutta, and her desire to forget the person she was there—to remove all ties to the version of herself who fell in love with, married, and lost Udayan.



When Gauri finds the hair tie, Lahiri is injecting yet another moment of presence in absence. Subhash, too, has had lovers who remain "present" in his consciousness, and in the story of his life, despite their physical absence. Gauri is relieved to know they are equal in this way.



This scene symbolizes the fact that Gauri and Subhash—for better or worse—have struck out on their own path, independent of Udayan. As both of them had spent time following in his footsteps and attempting to please him, this is a major moment for them. They have both found themselves in a strange new country, with only each other to cling to—and without Udayan's example to guide them.



Subhash and Gauri are both present in the house they share, but emotionally absent from one another. They move around like ghosts, and Gauri's aloofness becomes a force all its own, confusing and worrying Subhash.



Subhash runs into Narasimhan, who invites Subhash and Gauri over for dinner. The night of the dinner party, Subhash and Gauri arrive at the house to find a number of Indian couples already there. Subhash is relieved to see that as the party goes on, Gauri is mingling with the other wives—after the party, however, on the way home, Gauri seems tired and annoyed. Subhash suggests Gauri pursue friendships with other women, noting that their presence will be helpful after the baby arrives, but Gauri insists she does not need or want friendship with those women—she has “nothing in common with them,” she says.

A few days later, Subhash arrives home to an empty apartment. On Gauri’s bureau are the shredded remnants of all her saris, which she has cut into scraps with kitchen scissors. A few minutes later, Subhash hears Gauri coming in the front door. He goes to greet her and sees that she has cut her hair into a short bob and is dressed in slacks and a sweater. Subhash asks Gauri why she ruined her clothes and cut her hair—she replies only that she was “tired” of her old things and her old appearance.

That night, Subhash has an erotic dream about Gauri. He wakes up confused and aroused. Though they are legally married, he feels guilty for having such feelings for her—he knows it is too soon. He cannot deny, though, that just as he has inherited Udayan’s wife and child, he has inherited a need for Gauri physically.

PART 4, CHAPTER 3

As summer arrives, Gauri continues spending time on campus, enjoying the empty library now that classes have ended. Each day she sits alone in the philosophy section and reads. One day, Gauri’s contractions begin in the library. She returns home to pack a bag, and then waits for Subhash to come home. They drive to the hospital together in the midst of a torrential summer rain. Gauri gives birth to a girl, and as they bring her home from the hospital, Gauri adjusts to new motherhood and the “all-consuming” awareness of her daughter, Bela. Gauri is afraid of harming her daughter by falling asleep while she’s nursing or somehow accidentally breaking Bela’s neck. To stop these fears from taking over, Gauri begins letting Subhash hold Bela more often. She tells herself, though, that Subhash is simply “playing a part”; the child, Gauri feels, does not really belong to him.

Despite the fact that in the previous chapter Gauri had a demonstrable desire to explore her social surroundings and perhaps even begin assimilating into her new environment, she is aloof and disengaged at the dinner party—much to Subhash’s dismay. Subhash perhaps thinks that if he can get Gauri excited about friendships, she will one day come around to the idea of the two of them embarking on a relationship themselves.



Gauri has been waffling between her desire to retreat further into herself and her desire to sever herself from the person she once was. In this scene, she takes decisive—even manic—action in an attempt to make herself new and different, even unrecognizable.



Subhash struggles with his desire for Gauri in this scene as he considers his duty to Udayan’s memory, and to making Gauri feel as comfortable as possible.



As big changes arrive in Gauri and Subhash’s lives, they must adjust all over again to their relationship with one another and their fears, insecurities, and deep-rooted traumas about the arrangement they have entered into. Gauri herself is insecure about her abilities to mother her child well, but at the same time cannot erase from her mind the fact that Subhash is not Bela’s true father. This tension will continue to plague Subhash, Gauri, and indeed even Bela, as the novel unfolds.



Subhash is surprised and relieved that Bela recognizes his voice and sleeps contentedly in his arms—she has no idea that he is an “imposter.” One night, while attending to Bela, Subhash sits down with her on Gauri’s bed and falls asleep. When he wakes up, it is morning and Gauri is nursing Bela. Subhash apologizes for having fallen asleep in Gauri’s bed, but Gauri asks him to stay; she is ready, she says, to begin sharing a bed with him. As Subhash and Gauri begin making love with one another over the next several weeks, Subhash is at first afraid that Gauri will never emotionally accept him. After the first few times they have sex, though, Gauri is engaged and even enthusiastic, and through their lovemaking they give each other a sense of support.

Subhash is revealed to have his own insecurities—he, too, cannot fully accept the fact that he will be the only father this child will ever know. As a result, perhaps, of their twinned insecurity and self-doubt, Subhash and Gauri begin a romantic relationship—or at least a sexual one—in earnest. They seem to be growing close to one another, and even if they are only supporting each other physically, it is a step in the direction of creating a cohesive home and family unit.



PART 4, CHAPTER 4

At four years old, Bela is developing a memory. When she uses the word “yesterday,” though, she is referring to the whole of her life that has become before the present moment. Bela is a precocious child, and Gauri often finds herself losing her patience with her daughter. One day, when Gauri is zipping Bela’s jacket, Bela protests that Subhash lets her do it herself—“Your father’s not here,” Gauri replies, and is chilled by the double meaning of the sentence.

The trials of Bela’s infancy have passed, and yet new struggles present themselves as she grows older. Bela’s fluid concept of time and her inability to understand why certain rules are in place frustrate Gauri, who is struggling with the constant reminders of her child’s dead father, and the bargain she herself has made to ensure a “normal” life for Bela.



After dropping Bela at school, Gauri goes to the library each day to read. She is becoming more and more engaged with philosophy, filling notebooks with her own questions and observations about the nature of time—how it is perceived, how strangely it passes, whether animals are aware of it too. Gauri, who has been married to Subhash for five years now, feels more guarded by space than by time. She has, deliberately or otherwise, forgotten the things she saw from the terrace the night Udayan was killed, and believes it is because she physically removed herself from Tollygunge that she has been able to move on and go back to “willfully anticipating [the future] in ignorance and in hope.”

This period of Gauri’s life is filled with her struggle to understand the nature of time and memory. Bela’s unstable grasp of how time works shakes up questions in Gauri, which she attempts to explain to herself through her studies in philosophy. Yet even she struggles to understand how her own memory works, and how she has been able to, against all odds, eradicate much of the past in order to make room for her own anticipation of the future.



Each day at noon, Gauri collects Bela from nursery school. Subhash is attending a postdoctoral program fifty miles away and is gone each day. Gauri checks the mail with Bela each day at this time; she rarely gets any, but sometimes a letter from her brother Manash arrives with news of what’s happening in Calcutta. Kanu Sanyal is alive but in prison; Charu Majumdar died in police custody the same summer Bela was born. Many of Udayan’s comrades are still being tortured in prison. Though the Naxalite movement has attracted the attention of some Westerners, and many have written the Indian government demanding the prisoners’ release, Indira Gandhi has declared an Emergency and begun censoring the press. Reading these letters, Gauri can’t stop herself from expecting some news from Udayan.

Even though Gauri knows that Udayan is gone, and has managed to expunge a lot of what happened between them in his final days from her memory, news of India always brings with it the hope that somehow, impossibly, Udayan will come back to her. The news of violence and continuing controversy over the Naxalite movement stirs these feelings up, and yet Gauri cannot help herself from reading them as a way of staying connected to her heritage and all she has left behind.



PART 4, CHAPTER 5

It is now 1976, seven years since Subhash first arrived in America. He has not returned to Calcutta in five years, and though Bijoli and his father write to him and beg him to come visit with Bela, he tells them she is too young for such a journey. Deep down, though, Subhash does not want to bring her to Calcutta because he is afraid that his own parents will regard him only as Bela's uncle, and never acknowledge the sacrifices he has made in being her father.

Bela is growing up right before Subhash's eyes. The two have a close relationship, and it is Subhash who puts Bela to bed each night and stays with her until she falls asleep. Some nights, Subhash falls asleep briefly beside his daughter—he has experienced this kind of closeness with only one other person: Udayan. Every night, when he leaves Bela's room, he wonders what will happen when she learns the truth.

On Saturdays, Subhash and Bela go to the supermarket. One weekend, while crossing the parking lot after they finish shopping, Subhash spots Holly. For many years, he has consciously tried to avoid running into her or thinking about her—but now, as he sees her with the man he recognizes as Joshua's father, he reflects on their relationship, unable to stop staring at her. Holly catches his eye, and she and her husband approach him. The two briefly catch up—Holly seems genuinely happy to see Subhash and to meet Bela. As Subhash watches Holly and her husband walk away, he can see from the way they look at each other that they are truly in love.

Subhash reflects on his own marriage—though he and Gauri share a bed and though Gauri does not complain aloud, he knows that she is unhappy; that the smiling, carefree girl he saw in the first picture Udayan sent, all those years ago, is gone forever.

Subhash takes Bela to the beach, and as he watches other families play together on the shore, he realizes he, Gauri, and Bela have never been on a vacation. He thinks about all the other things normal families do that they do not. He remembers something Bijoli said when he first told her of his plans to marry Gauri: "She's Udayan's wife, she'll never love you." At the time, Subhash had argued with his mother, convinced her words were not true. Now he knows that perhaps she was right. In spite of this realization, Subhash cannot imagine a world in which he had not married Gauri—he is a father now and cannot conceive of his life unfolding any differently.

Subhash's desire to return home but his fear of being exposed as Bela's uncle reveals the depths of how his life has become calibrated by the terrible conspiracy he and Gauri have entered into. Subhash's true desire is to return home, but he now feels duty not to his family but to the secret he has been charged with keeping.



Even the best thing in Subhash's life—his pure, loving relationship with Bela—is tainted daily by Subhash's constant fear that the secret he is keeping from his daughter will one day ruin both their lives.



Subhash's unexpected encounter with Holly in the grocery store parking lot allows him to see—for the first time, really—what a truly loving and supportive partnership looks like. He knows that what he has with Gauri is merely functional, and thus insufficient—the truth he knows deep down eats at him as he witnesses this display of love. His relationship with Gauri is one of duty, not desire.



Subhash is reckoning with the toll that the secret he and Gauri have now built their lives around protecting has taken on both of them.



Regardless of the insecurities and unhappiness that have colored Subhash's life recently, he cannot imagine having taken any other path. His love for Bela mends all other wounds, and his identity as a father is now one in which he feels more secure.



PART 4, CHAPTER 6

Bela demands to be played with more and more often. Gauri sometimes indulges her daughter, but never wholeheartedly engages in play, reading, or games. She begins to realize why many parents have a second child: to give their first a friend and playmate. Still, Gauri is determined to never become pregnant again. She continues sleeping with Subhash in spite of these feelings, attempting each time to “extinguish Udayan’s ghost” and “smother what haunt[s] her.” Through their exuberant but emotionless lovemaking, she learns that sex and love—the heart and the body—can be two different things.

Gauri broaches the topic of hiring a babysitter for Bela so that she can take a German philosophy class twice a week, but Subhash vetoes the idea outright. He tells Gauri that it is her responsibility to be home with Bela. Gauri feels many conflicting emotions—she is angry that Subhash wants to hold her back from pursuing academia, since she knows that Bela favors Subhash and would prefer to spend time with him. When Gauri raises the subject again a few days later, Subhash agrees to compromise, and come home earlier a few days a week so that Gauri can take the class in the evenings.

On days she is home with Bela, Gauri feels entwined but alone, and is often unaware of time passing. The simple tasks of gathering Bela from school, preparing dinner, feeding Bela, and cleaning up exhaust her not just physically but emotionally. She begins waiting impatiently for the times when Subhash takes over and resents him when he goes off for a few days to conferences or to do research. Gauri begins taking advantage of her evenings, leaving Bela home with Subhash and heading to the library to be alone. She wonders why she feels so antagonized by her husband and her child, and eventually realizes, with great shame, that motherhood is not bringing any sense of meaning to her life.

Gauri berates herself for “failing at something every other woman on earth [does] without trying,” and only feels more lost when she considers that her love for Udayan—the impetus for her agreeing to marry Subhash and bring Udayan’s child into the world with him—is no longer recognizable. She is only angry with him for leaving her stuck in such a situation.

Gauri is, to some extent, unraveling. The work she is doing to try and erase her memories of Udayan and make herself focus on the life she has made for herself isn’t successful, and she finds herself feeling like her relationships both with Bela and Subhash are burdensome obligations on which she can only briefly, sporadically focus.



Gauri is crawling out of her own skin—she wants to escape the routine motherhood has made of her life. Though Subhash thinks that Gauri should attend to her duties to Bela wholeheartedly, he eventually realizes that he is forcing Gauri into a role or a pattern is not good for her, and agrees that she should expand her horizons and seek at least a little happiness of her own.



Gauri is clearly emotionally disconnected from the life she has built. She can hardly bear the responsibilities of motherhood, and even simply being in her own home creates a sense of claustrophobia. Gauri is out of touch, though, with what she’s really feeling. As she takes this evening walk and the truth that she is unfulfilled by her role as a mother becomes clear to her, she struggles with what to do in the wake of such a realization.



Gauri at first blames herself, but then experiences the realization that everything she has done—and the miserable situation she’s landed herself in—is a result of trying to maintain a connection with someone who is dead.



At the end of the semester, Gauri's philosophy professor, a man named Otto Weiss, calls her into his office to discuss her final paper. He tells her that her paper—a forty-page paper submitted for a ten-page assignment—is ambitious, though in many ways a failure. Gauri apologizes, believing she is being reprimanded—instead, though, Otto praises Gauri's work and begins asking her about her life. Gauri confides in Otto that her first husband was killed, and that she married his brother to escape Calcutta.

Otto tells Gauri that she belongs in a doctoral program—they do not offer one at this university, but he offers to recommend her some books and help her research and apply to doctoral programs. He promises to see that she is admitted somewhere before returning her paper to her and shaking her hand.

Gauri has been feeling insecure, adrift, and insufficient. In her studies, though, she shines, impressing her professor. She confides in this man, and he becomes the only person other than Subhash who knows the truth of her life. Academia is in this way both an intellectual and emotional outlet for Gauri, and the one bright spot in her life.



With the promise of academic advancement on the horizon, Gauri feels a new chapter in her life opening up—the chance to shoulder a different kind of duty. Otto's promise to her is its own kind of conspiracy.



PART 4, CHAPTER 7

Each morning, Gauri watches as Bela walks down the lawn at the front of the apartment complex to the street to catch the school bus. For the first few weeks of first grade, she accompanied Bela, but now that Bela goes on her own, Gauri is grateful for the change, and happy to not have to get dressed and make small talk with the other mothers each morning before sitting down to work for her independent study with Professor Weiss.

One morning, after a night of rainstorms, Gauri hands Bela her lunch and sends her down to the street, grateful that the day is now her own until three in the afternoon. A minute later, though, there is a knock at the door; Bela does not want to cross the lawn, as the rain has brought out tons of writhing earthworms. Bela asks to be carried to the school bus; Gauri refuses. Bela then asks to stay home. Gauri wishes she could be like the other mothers, who do not consider a day spent with their child “a waste.” Gauri sees the bus coming down the street and drags Bela down the sloping lawn. The other mothers stare as Bela cries, but Gauri pulls Bela all the way to the bus. At the street, Bela shakes herself free, and tells Gauri that she doesn't like her, and will never like her again.

Now that Gauri has intensified her studies, she is even more grateful for any moment of peace, quiet, and solitude she can get. This is not lost on Bela, and as the chapter goes on, Lahiri will examine the painful separation happening between Bela and Gauri each and every day.



This scene demonstrates the ways in which Gauri feels like anything Bela asks of her is too big a demand. Gauri has sacrificed her life for Bela, in many ways—anything more her daughter wants from her is simply too much. Gauri wants to stop feeling this way, but try and try as she might, she cannot see Bela as anything other than a burden and a cruel reminder of all she has lost.



Though Gauri knows Bela's words were part of a tantrum, they haunt her all day. That night, after Bela is in bed, Gauri approaches Subhash and tells him that she wants to tell Bela about Udayan. Subhash protests that Bela, at six years old, is too young—to tell her now would do more harm than good. Gauri knows that Subhash is right. Subhash asks Gauri to promise him that when the time comes, they will tell Bela together. Gauri reluctantly agrees, knowing that the only thing Subhash needs from her is her help in maintaining the illusion that he is Bela's true father.

On campus, Gauri becomes aware of a middle-aged man—perhaps a professor—who often stares at her when they cross paths. Gauri is excited by the attention and begins imagining this man when she is in bed with Subhash. One day, she follows the man into the student union, intending to approach him for sex. As she follows him, though, she sees him go up to another woman and kiss her. Feeling rejected and alone, but still aroused, Gauri retreats to the women's restroom, locks herself in a stall, and masturbates. From that day on, she takes care never to make eye contact with the man again.

One afternoon, Gauri needs to go out and pick up some milk, but Bela does not want to go with her. Gauri decides to leave Bela alone while she goes to the store—she tells herself that it is just a two-minute walk, and Bela will be fine. Gauri goes out to the store, telling Bela that she is going to get the mail. Realizing that Bela can stay by herself for small periods of time, Gauri repeats the behavior again and again. As the days go by, the minutes Gauri steals away from her daughter increase. Soon, she is spending fifteen minutes or more out running errands at the post office or on campus, requesting applications for doctoral programs that Otto Weiss has suggested she look into. On these outings, Gauri wonders what her life would look like without Bela or Subhash.

One day, Subhash comes home early to find Bela playing in a pillow fort alone; she tells him that Gauri is out getting the mail, but Subhash knows he did not see Gauri down at the mailboxes. After a few minutes, Gauri returns with a newspaper. At first, Subhash says nothing to Gauri, and instead gives her the silent treatment for a week. One day, he breaks his silence, telling Gauri that she does not “deserve” to be a parent.

Gauri feels that her frustration with Bela—and her frustration with herself for being so impatient and disconnected—has reached a breaking point, and that the only way to change things is to bring it all crashing down. Subhash helps Gauri understand that her duty is to more than just herself and her own feelings—she has certain responsibilities to Bela, and to Subhash as well.



Gauri's spiral continues as she experiences a desperation for attention from someone—anyone—other than Subhash. Gauri is attracted to this man, despite the fact that she doesn't know him, perhaps because of the way he sees her, or how he doesn't. To this man, she is not a beleaguered mother or a reluctant wife; she is just a woman, free of attachments. Gauri is more attracted to this vision of herself than the man in question.



Gauri is living dangerously. She is so completely stifled by her life that she starts physically fleeing her daughter, and their home, for a few minutes each day. She is experimenting with what things would be like if she were responsible only for herself—if her only duties were to her studies and the pursuit of her own happiness. Gauri is living in a fantasy world—and an unhealthy one at that, which will only serve to further damage her relationships with her daughter and her husband.



Subhash discovers what Gauri has been up to, and he is enraged by his wife's irresponsible behavior. Subhash has allowed Gauri to pursue her studies and her independence, but knows that the way she is treating Bela is wrong and wants to make that clear to her. His words are violent though, and wounding—even if they are right.



Over the next few months, Subhash turns away from Gauri. In the spring, Gauri is admitted to a doctoral program in Boston, with a fellowship to boot. She begins taking the bus to the city two days a week, and arranges for undergraduates from the campus in Providence to look after Bela while she's gone. Subhash does not fault her for wanting to spend time away, but still harbors some resentment. He knows that there is no possibility of separating—the whole point of their marriage is to keep Bela safe and happy. Moreover, Subhash knows that Gauri, like Bela, would not survive without him.

Subhash, after realizing the extent of Gauri's dissatisfaction and resulting deception, finds himself in quandary. He cannot leave Gauri—she is dependent upon him—and in the back of his mind is always the lingering fear of being exposed as an "imposter." The point of his life—and Gauri's—is supposed to be to care for Bela at any cost. As Subhash doubles down on this goal, he knows that he cannot stop Gauri from drifting away from it.



PART 5, CHAPTER 1

Back in Calcutta, Subhash's mother Bijoli looks out on the two ponds, and the **lowland** between them—the area is now completely clogged with trash. The refuse is being allowed to pile up because real estate promoters want to plug up the city's remaining swampy land and build new homes atop it. Tollygunge has grown dirty and unrecognizable, no longer the quiet, clean neighborhood of Subhash and Udayan's youth.

At a crucial point in the narrative, Lahiri switches perspective, visiting Bijoli in Calcutta as she tends to the trash-laden lowland. The lowland, a symbol for connection between characters, is clogged with trash, reflecting the complete breakdown of trust and communication between Subhash and Gauri back in America.



Each day, at the hour of Udayan's death, Bijoli gathers flowers and walks to the edge of the **lowland**. An old woman now, Bijoli moves slowly and laboriously. At Udayan's marker, she washes his tablet and places flowers on the ground. It has been twelve years since Udayan's death. The neighborhood children whisper about Bijoli and her nightly ritual; she wishes she could either scare them away or make them understand her pain.

Bijoli's task is meant to be reminiscent of Sisyphus—the figure of Greek myth charged with rolling a stone boulder up a steep incline each day, only to have it roll back down. Bijoli cannot clear the trash, cannot repair the severed connections in her family, and cannot stop her city from changing.



A month ago, Bijoli's husband died in his sleep; their maid, Deepa, discovered his body one morning. Deepa takes care of Bijoli, washing her hair, sleeping over at nights, shopping at the market, and cooking meals. Deepa reads Bijoli articles from the newspaper every afternoon out on the terrace. When Bijoli realizes that Deepa has replaced everyone in her family, she wonders whether Udayan somehow "arranged" for this to happen. As a boy, Udayan spent time with the people who worked for their family—teaching them how to read, ensuring they had enough to eat at mealtime. As a young man, he brought their housemaids medicine and summoned doctors for them. In spite of all this, Udayan died being called a "miscreant" and "extremist"—someone who did not know right from wrong.

Bijoli's reflections on her life are inevitably tied to her memories of Udayan. She cannot reconcile her own image of her son—a kind boy who saw the value in all human life and encouraged everyone around him to see things the same way he did—with the image of him as a violent extremist that has been forced on her in the years since his death.



Bijoli feels her home has been "forsaken"—Udayan has not lived to inherit it, and Subhash has left the country. His departure has added to the sense of loss Bijoli feels—not to mention his controversial marriage to Gauri. Because Subhash and Gauri have stayed away from Calcutta for twelve years now, Bijoli feels the deep shame of having lost her only living child.

Bijoli is alone and blames herself for being alienated from her remaining son. The profound sense of isolation she feels is compounded by the fact that she lives in a house which was supposed to be a lively home for both her sons' families.



One morning, Bijoli heads out to the **lowland** with a large shallow basket and begins piling trash and waste inside of it. She knows she will never remove it all, but each day she returns and fills her basket several times. She does not stop when people point out the futility of her task—it satisfies her and passes the time. One day, remnants of a marriage celebration are piled around Udayan’s marker. The mass of garlands and fruit repels Bijoli, and she refuses to touch it. She is bitter that neither of her sons had a proper marriage celebration and becomes angry that someone would have desecrated Udayan’s memorial in such a way. She begins shouting out to her neighbors, demanding to know who did such a thing, but no one pays attention to her.

Deepa hurries out to help Bijoli home. On the terrace, Deepa gives Bijoli tea and hands her a letter from Subhash. He is planning to visit, though three months will have already passed from the date of his father’s death by the time he will arrive in Calcutta. He informs Bijoli of his plans to bring Bela with him and writes in his letter that Bela knows Subhash as her father—she is ignorant of her true parentage. Bijoli finishes reading the letter, hands it back to Deepa, and turns her mind to other things.

PART 5, CHAPTER 2

Bela and Subhash arrive in Calcutta at the beginning of monsoon season. Storms come to Tollygunge each afternoon, and Bela watches from the terrace as the sky darkens and then opens.

Bela has trouble feeling comfortable in the house—she cannot sleep in the heat under the mosquito netting; at meals, she struggles to eat with her hands, as is the custom, and must be given a spoon. She cannot drink the water everyone else drinks and must have hers boiled to avoid getting sick. “She’s not made to survive here,” her Bijoli concludes one morning.

After the first week in Calcutta, during which there is a mourning service for Subhash’s father, Subhash begins giving lectures at nearby universities and meeting with scientists. Bela spends her days waiting nervously for him to return. One day, Bela accompanies Deepa shopping, excited for the outing—but after many people on the street stop Deepa to ask about Bela, and then ask Bela questions about herself, she feels drained and scrutinized, and longs to return to the house.

Bijoli’s Sisyphian task, which she has undertaken with steady and unwavering dedication, finally becomes too much to bear when she is confronted with the remnants of a wedding. The refuse reminds her of all she never had—all her children never had—and all the ways in which she has failed both her children, the living and the dead. This scene also shows the deep isolation and insularity of grief—such pain is only felt by those who have known it, and is inscrutable to everyone around them.



Bijoli is so worn down that even the news of an impending visit from Subhash cannot lift her out of her depression. Though she has claimed to feel guilt over her estrangement to Subhash, this scene reveals that it is only Udayan she wants—Subhash cannot measure up to his dead brother.



Rain is a recurrent motif in the novel that heralds change—as Bela arrives in Tollygunge, rain portends a new stage of her life unfolding.



Bela is a foreigner in this place—a place which holds such weight and significance for her father. This is her heritage, but she feels disconnected from it and unsure of how she fits in here.



Bela’s adjustment to India mirrors Gauri’s adjustment to Rhode Island. Like Gauri, who was torn between wanting to explore and wanting to remain isolated, Bela tentatively begins going on outings, unsure of her place in this new country.



There is no dining table in the house, and Bela eats on the floor in the room where Bijoli sleeps. As she eats her meals, she looks at the pictures on the wall—the one of her dead grandfather, and the one of the teenaged boy whom her grandmother has told her is her father. Bela believes she is looking at a picture of Subhash as a young boy.

One afternoon, Bela asks Bijoli about her ritual of going out to the **lowland** each night. When Bijoli tells Bela that she goes down there to talk to Bela's father, Bela tells Bijoli that her father is inside the house. Bijoli, confused, becomes excited, until she realizes that Bela is talking about Subhash.

Bela and Subhash show Bijoli pictures of their lives in Rhode Island. When Bijoli asks why Gauri is not in any of the photos, Subhash answers that Gauri doesn't like to pose for the camera; plus, he says, she has been busy teaching and finishing up her dissertation. Bela thinks of how her mother is often so busy, locked in her study, that the two of them go long stretches of the day without seeing or speaking to one another. Bela spends a lot of time in the apartment with Gauri, but it is mostly silent time, sometimes filled with errands related to Gauri's schoolwork. Bela knows that her parents sleep in separate bedrooms and has wondered why.

One evening, Bela asks Subhash how old he was in the picture in Bijoli's room. Subhash explains that the picture is not of him—it is of Udayan, who died years ago of an "illness." When Bela tells Subhash that Bijoli often says the picture is of "her father," Subhash tells Bela that Bijoli is simply old and confused.

Bela and Subhash spend Bela's twelfth birthday at the Tolly Club—one of Subhash's old college friends is a member and invites them as his guests. Bela swims in the pool, talks with children her age, takes a pony ride, and eats delicious food. Bela notices her father watching golfers all afternoon, and at one point, he brings her to another area of the club where there are fewer people, and packs of jackals resting in the shade. Subhash explains that he and his brother used to sneak into the club and play in this area—when Bela asks why they had to sneak in, Subhash explains that things were different back then.

Soon after Bela and Subhash leave the club, Bela is overcome by longing for her mother. She begs to call her, but the phone line at the house is down. Bela asks if they can return to the Tolly Club another day, but Subhash says he wants to spend their last few days in India resting for the long journey back.

Though Bela is ignorant of the tension in the air, this passage demonstrates the constant threat Subhash must feel here—the threat of having the truth of Bela's parentage revealed.



Bijoli's confusion is palpable, and an enormous liability—Bijoli could at any moment reveal the truth of Bela's parentage and bring the life Subhash has worked so hard for tumbling down.



Bela's reflections on her life in Rhode Island reveal that she leads a quiet and largely solitary existence. She craves her mother's company, but the time that passes between them is silent and uneasy. Bela knows something is off, but this is how things have always been—she does not know any other kind of maternal relationship.



This part of the novel is not relayed from Subhash's perspective, but it can be surmised that he is wrestling inside with the constant reminders of Udayan—and Bela's questions about the man who is her true father.



After all these years, Subhash has at last been invited into the Tolly Club as a guest. His attempts to explain to Bela what his childhood was like are in vain—the neighborhood, and the country, have changed so much since his youth that Subhash's memories no longer line up with the vision of India Bela is seeing on this visit.



Bela's longing for Gauri reveals an intense homesickness. Though this place is her father's homeland, she longs to return to the familiar and the comforting. Subhash shares some of Bela's sense of dislocation, too.



PART 5, CHAPTER 3

Bela and Subhash arrive in Providence. As they approach their house, Bela can see that the grass in the front yard has grown nearly to her shoulders. While Subhash gets their bags from the trunk of the taxi, Bela runs through the overgrown grass and rings the doorbell. There is no answer, though, and Subhash has to come unlock the door. The house is dark—there is no food in the fridge, and Gauri does not answer their calls. Bela walks through the house, looking for her mother; when she comes back to the living room, she sees her father sitting on the sofa, holding a letter. Subhash reaches for Bela's hand.

Gauri's letter—written in Bengali, to avoid Bela's reading it—explains that she has left. She had been thinking of going for a while now. Gauri acknowledges that she has failed both Bela and Subhash and has decided to take a job teaching at a college in California. Gauri urges Subhash to break the news to Bela in the “least painful” way, and then states that she is leaving it up to Subhash to tell Bela, when and if he is ready, about her true parentage. Gauri closes the letter by stating that she hopes her absence will make things easier, rather than harder, for Subhash and Bela both.

Subhash relays a version of the letter to Bela, but it is Bela who winds up comforting Subhash, and promising that she will never go away from him. Subhash reels as he struggles to understand what has happened. Despite the awkwardness between him and Gauri, and the false nature of their arrangement, she had never expressed a desire to leave; he always assumed they would stick together at least until Bela was grown.

In the weeks after Gauri's disappearance, Bela notices that a shadow in the corner of the room resembles her mother's profile. In the shadow, Bela can see the shape of her mother's forehead, nose, and chin. She cannot tell whether a branch outside or an overhang of the roof creates the shadow. Bela is both upset and comforted by its consistency: it returns each morning to the place from which her mother has fled.

PART 5, CHAPTER 4

Subhash and Bela adjust to life in the wake of Gauri's abandonment. Bela is entering the seventh grade and is maturing into a young woman. She grows thin and quiet, and keeps to herself most of the time—“behaving,” Subhash observes, “As Gauri used to.” Subhash is shocked by the realization that Bela is “establishing her existence apart from him.”

As Subhash and Bela return to their home in Providence, it becomes clear that something is wrong. The house, which should be full of Gauri's presence, is instead full only of signs of her absence—the overgrown lawn, the empty rooms, the lack of signs of life all signal that Gauri has made a decision that will change all their lives forever.



Gauri's letter reveals that she has taken the cowardly way out, seizing the opportunity in the middle of Subhash and Bela's temporary absence to secure her own permanent absence from their lives. Gauri claims she doesn't want to cause either of them any pain, but she of course knows that her leaving will create pain in all their lives.



In the immediate wake of the letter, it is Subhash, not Bela, who is affected by Gauri's departure most intensely. Subhash has worked for years to make his arrangement with Gauri tenable, and is profoundly hurt to know that his struggle was for nothing—he has failed both his wife and his daughter, and by proxy his brother's memory as well.



One of the novel's most prominent themes, presence in absence, is perfectly encapsulated in this scene, as Bela reckons with her mother's disappearance and the looming reminders of her that will continue to echo through her own life.



Though it seemed at first that Gauri's abandonment would bring Bela and Subhash even closer together, it is becoming evident that it is having the opposite effect—Bela is becoming closed-off and withdrawn, more like her mother than ever before.



One day, Bela's guidance counselor calls Subhash. She is concerned by Bela's performance in middle school so far—she is unprepared and distracted, disconnected from her classmates and not a part of any clubs or activities. Most worryingly, Bela was recently seen walking down a highway by herself, balancing on the guardrail beside the shoulder lane. The guidance counselor suggests Subhash and Gauri come in for a meeting. When Subhash tells the guidance counselor that Gauri no longer lives with them, the counselor is shocked—she asks whether Subhash and Gauri sat down with Bela to discuss the separation before it happened, to prepare her. As Subhash hangs up the phone, he feels fury towards Gauri for having left Bela with him in one way and taken her away from him in another.

On the guidance counselor's recommendation, Bela begins seeing a psychologist once a week. She attends the sessions alone and does not discuss them with Subhash; the psychologist does not seek out Subhash to discuss Bela's progress with him, either. One afternoon, Subhash asks Bela if she would like to write Gauri a letter. She says no, and then begins weeping.

As the year goes by, Subhash can see Bela experiencing a "release." She grows calmer and more confident and begins making many friends in school. By eighth grade, Bela's appetite and grades have improved, and she has joined the marching band and a nature studies club at school. As she moves through high school she becomes an active member of the community, collecting discarded food from restaurants and bringing it to shelters, assisting at children's summer camps, and going door to door with other students collecting signatures for local action petitions.

The summer Bela graduates from high school, Subhash receives a letter from Deepa informing him that Bijoli has had a stroke. While Subhash travels back to Calcutta, Bela stays behind in Rhode Island, wanting to spend time with the friends she will soon leave behind for college.

In Tollygunge, Subhash finds that Bijoli's mind has truly left her now—she believes she is in the past, and speaks to Subhash in fragments, as if he were a young child. She tells him not to dirty his shoes playing in the **lowland** or stay out too late with Udayan and their friends. Subhash laments that he does not exist in his mother's mind anymore. Eventually, Bijoli is hospitalized; she has a heart attack and dies late one night, without Subhash by her side.

As Bela's behavior grows more and more worrisome and eventually attracts the attention of school officials, Subhash becomes even angrier at Gauri for inflicting such pain on him and on Bela. Gauri did not prepare them in any way for her swift exit from their lives, and her selfish actions have had very deep, very dangerous ramifications when it comes to Bela's development and happiness.



Even as Bela gets help in coping with her mother's abandonment, she is very clearly still torn apart by the unexpected and cruel departure, itself an act of personal violence and a complete denial of Gauri's duties as a mother.



As Subhash watches Bela heal and move on, he recognizes that she is becoming her own person independent of his desires and wishes for her. She must heal from the great violence that has entered her life in her own way, and though Subhash is her father, he is unable to help her or guide her in this respect.



Subhash returns to India to reconnect with his ailing mother, while Bela rejects the chance to return to her family's homeland—perhaps in part because of what happened the last time she was there.



Subhash and Gauri have struggled for years not to become lost in their painful memories of the past. As Subhash watches his mother succumb to her memories and enter a world which is neither the past nor the present, he acknowledges the difficulty in remaining tethered to reality in the face of such pain.



Subhash returns to Rhode Island. Bela goes off to a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, where she majors in environmental science. Subhash hopes that Bela will attend graduate school, but it is of no interest to her. Subhash senses that Bela carries disdain for Subhash's own life within the walls of a university—not to mention Gauri's faraway position as a teacher at a college as well.

After college, Bela moves to Western Massachusetts and takes a job on a farm as an agricultural apprentice. She visits Subhash on the weekends, as she is not very far away, and Subhash watches as Bela grows and changes. She lives simply and grows weathered and brown in the sun; she gets a tattoo, dyes her hair, pierces her nose. She soon moves on from the farm in Massachusetts and takes a series of jobs in places around the country, always in isolated, rural towns. She makes no money and is instead paid in food and shelter. She sends Subhash postcards and boxes of fruits and vegetables, never staying in one place for very long.

Subhash has maintained a quiet social life, but the only company he longs for is Bela's. She is skittish, though, and returns to Rhode Island infrequently and unpredictably. Even when she is home on visits, she is closed-off and quiet; Subhash fears that Bela is a little lost, and worries that she is, like Gauri, allowing her vocation to define her and direct her course.

Over the years, Subhash notices Bela becoming more political and socially active. On her visits home, Bela berates Subhash for not buying locally and for not composting his food scraps. Subhash is wary of Bela's rootless but passionate path—nonetheless, he lets her go and accepts her for who she was, embracing all the turns her life has taken. He admires her resilience in the face of Gauri's abandonment. Sometimes, Subhash worries about Udayan's influence on Bela—though it is irrational, he fears that Udayan has, in a way, returned, and claimed Bela “from the grave as his own.”

PART 6, CHAPTER 1

Gauri has a dream—or a nightmare—of sitting in her and Udayan's bedroom in Tollygunge with Udayan. In the dream, Udayan tells Gauri that Sinha has been arrested, and then begins undressing her. As he removes Gauri's hair from its braid, she realizes it has gone gray—she has aged, but Udayan is still in his twenties, yet is “blind to this disjuncture.” Gauri tries to tell Udayan that she is married to Subhash, but he does not listen and continues to undress her. As Gauri wakes from the dream, she wonders what Udayan would look like now, and reflects on the secrets she has kept for him all these years.

It seems as if Bela is following in Subhash's footsteps in her first years of college. She is studying something very similar to what he chose to study when he first came to America, but as she graduates, her desire to move away from the influence not only of Subhash but of Gauri, as well, becomes clear.



Bela is carving out a nontraditional path—just as Subhash himself did. As he watches his daughter grow, change, and experiment with who she is and who she wants to become, he is reminded of his own attempts to shirk tradition. He is grateful that he has been able to give his daughter certain freedoms he never had, but also wary of her becoming too distant from him.



Subhash laments Gauri's influence on Bela, in spite of her swift departure from their lives and her absence during Bela's formative years.



Subhash struggles with his competing desires to encourage Bela's independence and to prevent her from tearing off on a path he recognizes as similar to Udayan's—and therefore potentially dangerous. Subhash cannot escape his feelings of inadequacy and the sense that he is an imposter, and as he watches Bela grow up, he is unsettled by how, despite being raised by Subhash, she is becoming an image of Udayan.



Decades after Udayan's death, Gauri is still haunted by memories—and dreams—of him. The line between the two is blurred, but Gauri continues to be assaulted by visions of Udayan in which she must confess the things she has done in his absence—and when she wakes, she is forced to remember the things she did for Udayan that haunt her present.



When Gauri first arrived in California, it was the living that haunted her—not the dead. She feared Subhash or Bela turning up on her new campus and confronting her or exposing her. In twenty years, though, no one from her past has come to her, and she has not been summoned back to Rhode Island.

Gauri left because she felt she had made errors during the early years of Bela's life that she could never fix. Because she'd failed to build a good foundation with her daughter, she believed no attempt to build a relationship with her would succeed. She had also convinced herself that she and Subhash were rivals for Bela's attention and affection, though she now sees that she had "painted herself into a corner" with her own hands.

After moving around California to take various teaching jobs over the years, Gauri has at last settled in Southern California, where she teaches philosophy and forges close relationships with her students. Though initially Gauri wanted to live an anonymous life, she has found comfort in her relationships with her loyal, admiring students and colleagues. Gauri has published three books in her life, one of which grew out of the first essay she wrote for Otto Weiss's class. Gauri is fluent in German now, and attends conferences around the world a few times a year. On each plane ride, she brings the turquoise shawl Subhash gave to her back in Calcutta.

Gauri has lived a mostly isolated life and has steered clear of romance and physical intimacy alike—for the most part. She has had some dalliances with fellow academics but has never been "unraveled" by anyone other than Lorna, a female graduate student who came to Gauri's office one day, expressing her admiration for Gauri's work and asking her to serve as a reader on her dissertation. As Gauri and Lorna began working together, Gauri began experiencing an attraction to Lorna. She never acted on any of her desires, though, until one evening when Lorna showed up at Gauri's office with wine and cheese, ready to celebrate the completion of her dissertation. Lorna kissed Gauri, and the two began a physical relationship. After Lorna's dissertation defense, however, she was offered a job in Toronto, and moved away. The two still see each other occasionally at conferences, but their relationship is now strictly professional.

Gauri lives a simple life; she owns few things and sticks to a strict routine. She does not have many indulgences, feeling that her existence as it is now is indulgence enough.

Whether it's the living or the dead that Gauri fears, the web of secrets and untruths her life is based upon seems to dog her each day, no matter the physical distance she puts between herself and the things she is trying to outrun.



Gauri knows she made many mistakes in her relationships with both Bela and Subhash. At the time, those mistakes felt insurmountable; Gauri now sees that she could have repaired them if she had put in just a little more effort to commit to the family she agreed to create.



Gauri has made the life she always wanted for herself. She is widely published, successful in her own right, and has secured the most important thing of all—her independence. In spite of all of this, she holds on to small touchstones from her former life—most notably, the turquoise shawl Subhash gave her, itself a symbol of the potential for rebirth, escape, and the search for more.



For a woman who once imploded her life to pursue her own desires, Gauri has, in her "new" life, kept a cap on her feelings of desire for other people. Gauri has always been aloof and has always desired isolation—even as a girl in Calcutta, she preferred observing the world from her balcony over participating in it. Gauri has a difficult relationship to her own desires—emotional, material, and physical—and has only allowed for the expression of those desire in small, scattered doses.



Gauri is grateful for her freedom and independence—she knows how difficult her life could have been had she stayed in Calcutta, and that there was once a chance she'd not have been able to have a life at all.



One afternoon, Gauri receives a piece of patio furniture she'd ordered out of a catalog. When she removes it from its box, the smell of teak reminds her of the smell of her bedroom furniture back in Tollygunge. Gauri feels the smell breaks through the time and distance that have separated her from her memories of her previous life. She begins wondering about Bela, and why her daughter has never contacted her, but ultimately concludes the silence between them is "just punishment for her crime."

Gauri knows that what she has done to Bela is "a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed," and can never be undone. She hopes that Subhash has found happiness—she is grateful to him for having taken her away from Tollygunge, and, too, for releasing her when it was time.

Gauri is assaulted by memories of her past in this scene, and reveals that she does, after all, have a longing for many of the things she left behind—primarily Bela. Gauri accepts the silence between them, though, knowing that what she did was and is unforgivable.



Gauri knows she owes a debt to Subhash that she has not paid. She is remorseful about the actions she has taken in her life and how ungrateful she has been, and her quiet, internal expressions of gratitude are an attempt to ameliorate that.



PART 6, CHAPTER 2

It is a new millennium. Subhash spends his weekends taking walks through town, and as he does he marvels at how he has moved from a city with so little space to a city with so much of it. On one walk one day, through a new nature trail, he sees a sign saying that the ground he is standing on was the site of a 1675 battle between the Narragansett tribe and a colonial militia. Subhash researches the battle online and learns that there is a granite marker somewhere in the nature preserve commemorating the battle. On the day he sets out to find it, however, Subhash gets lost. Standing in the swamp, he is profoundly aware of his age—he is over sixty, now—and of how alone he is.

One day, on the nature path, Subhash is surprised when a man on a bicycle pulls up next to him and addresses him by name. Subhash recognizes the man as Richard, his old roommate. The two are surprised but thrilled to see each other, and they sit and talk for a while, catching up and telling the stories of their lives. Richard has a wife and grandchildren, and his life is full of work and travel. Subhash feels his own life is sparse in comparison.

Whereas Gauri has made a life for herself focused intensely on forward motion and a negation of the past, Subhash is consumed by history. He spends his time seeking out the history of the place where he lives, desperate to learn more about the people and events that came before him. His and Gauri's very different reactions to the paths they have chosen—paths that have taken them away from their heritage and their homeland—set the stage for the next section of the novel, which will be concerned with how each deals with the resurgence of the past.



Richard's reappearance is the first instance—from Subhash's point of view—of the past rising up once again. This section of the novel will focus on how the past inevitably makes its way into the present, and Richard's appearance—though happy at first—does serve to make Subhash feel insecure and to question the choices he has made in his life.



Subhash and Richard begin meeting frequently to walk the nature trails or have a beer in town. One weekend, the phone rings—it is Richard’s wife, telling Subhash that Richard has died suddenly from a blood clot. Subhash is devastated. He attends Richard’s funeral, and then the reception at Richard’s home; there, he meets a woman named Elise Silva, one of Richard’s neighbors. Subhash is attracted to Elise, and as the two begin talking, they discover another strange connection—Elise was one of Bela’s high school teachers. Elise now works part-time at the historical society. She is a widow. When Subhash asks her a question about the battle which took place on the nature path, Elise offers Subhash a spot on a tour of a house the historical society has been recently restored, and offers him her card. He accepts it.

For several nights after the funeral, Subhash cannot sleep. He is kept awake by his anxiety—he feels “a disproportionate awareness of being alive.” He is assaulted by memories of his childhood and cannot stop thinking of Udayan. He realizes that what is disturbing him so deeply that he is “still too weak to tell Bela what she deserve[s]” to know—in other words, the truth that Udayan is her father. It is “the great unfinished business of his life.” Subhash is still frightened to come clean to Bela, but knows that one day he will die—and he wants to have told her the truth before he does.

Subhash attends the tour of the historical society’s restored house and is shocked by the coincidence he discovers when he gets there—it is the house he used to share with Richard many years ago. As Subhash navigates the completely redone house, he feels that his presence on earth is being denied; he believes that his own past is refusing to admit him. He feels that Providence, the “arbitrary place” he landed after leaving Calcutta, is not, and has never been, his. He thinks of his childhood home in Tollygunge, which he still owns, and wonders if its current tenants are aware of that house’s own history.

A few days after the tour, Elise calls Subhash and asks if he’s all right—she noticed he seemed “shaken” on the tour. He tells her that she is fine. Elise then invites Subhash to join her hiking club on a trek through the Great Swamp—the site of the battle that has so interested Subhash.

Richard’s death throws Subhash into a bit of a tailspin, but also serves to introduce Subhash to Elise Silva—a woman who represents the balance of the past and the future. Subhash’s relationship with Gauri was tied too heavily to mending the wounds of their tangentially connected pasts, and could not support the weight of the unrealistic future they thought would fall into place. With the introduction of Elise, the potential for a new, more balanced relationship emerges.



Subhash’s unexpected confrontation with the idea of mortality forces him to realize that he does not want to go to his grave with the secret of Bela’s true parentage unrevealed. He wants to come clean and erase the secrets and conspiracies that have come to define his life, yet he has become so dependent on the structure they have given his world that he is afraid to do so.



Subhash’s uncanny experience of moving through the house he once lived in—already a place tied to memories, redone to reflect an even more distant past—makes him consider the history contained within houses all around the world. In specifically wondering about his own house, he is assaulted by memories of the past he has tried to repress, and forced to think about his family’s insignificance in the larger history of their home country.



Elise represents the opportunity for a new kind of future, and a reconciliation with or investigation into the past, all in one—just the right balance Subhash needs.



PART 6, CHAPTER 3

Bela emerges from her Brooklyn brownstone on her way to her job converting a dilapidated playground into a vegetable garden. She lives with ten other people in the single-family home—mostly artists and nomads who share similar values to Bela's. Bela lives a transient life—she moves from place to place, making friends she never sees again after she leaves whatever town she's moving on from. As protective as Bela is of her independent, itinerant lifestyle, she is nearing thirty-four now—she recognizes that she has been living half her life apart from her father, and sometimes craves a different pace, yet going home to Rhode Island always fills her with painful memories of Gauri. Everything in Bela's life, she thinks, has been a reaction to Gauri's abandonment; she lives how she does because of Gauri.

In this brief interlude, Lahiri allows her readers to see things from Bela's point of view. Bela is quick to acknowledge that her rootless, transient existence is very much a reaction to the abandonment she suffered in her youth. Self-aware, self-sufficient, and for the most part self-assured, Bela is grateful for the life she has—although Lahiri allows Bela's insecurities and fears to poke through, displaying her thought process at a crucial moment of decision in her life.



PART 6, CHAPTER 4

June arrives in Rhode Island, bringing near-constant storms. The rain wakes Subhash at night and falls heavily each day. Other consequential times in Subhash's life have been rainy ones—it rained the first night he spent with Holly, and on the day Bela was born. He thinks, too, of how the monsoon season in Tollygunge flooded the **lowland**, and wonders whether the rain falling each day now means something.

Subhash is correct in observing that eventful or pivotal times in his life have often been marked by torrential rain. The cleansing but threatening power of bad weather always lets Subhash know that something big is about to happen.



Bela calls Subhash to tell him that she is coming for a visit. He prepares her room, changing the sheets and placing a fan in the window. He meets Bela at the airport in Boston and drives her back to Providence. As the two make small talk in the car, Subhash wonders why Bela has never brought a significant other home. On the few occasions he has suggested Bela find someone to care for her, since he won't be around forever, she has rebuffed him for being dramatic. He considers how here his inquiries into her private life are considered meddling, whereas in Calcutta he would be arranging a marriage for her. He ultimately realizes that he and Gauri have set a poor example for Bela, where relationships are concerned; theirs is a "family of solitaires [who] collided and dispersed."

Subhash and Bela are both adults now, and as Subhash considers what his role has been in shaping his grown daughter's life, he worries that he has made some missteps and exposed her to harm. The idea that he, Gauri, and Bela were all "solitaires" who only hurt each other is a bleak one, though not entirely inaccurate. Subhash was a loner in his first years in Rhode Island, and Gauri proved to be aloof and isolated even back in Calcutta before their marriage. Bela is the same now, and Subhash wonders whether nature or nurture has made her this way.



At the house, Bela unpacks and then sits down with Subhash for dinner. As they eat, he asks her how long she is planning on staying this time; she tells him that “it depends” before confessing that she is pregnant. She tells Subhash that she is more than four months along—the baby’s father is not in her life and is not aware of “her condition.” Bela expresses her desire to keep the child. Subhash warns Bela that raising a child alone is difficult, especially when one lives as itinerant an existence as she does. Bela tells Subhash that she wants to give birth in Rhode Island and raise the child at home. As her words sink in, Subhash is blindsided by the coincidence of these circumstances. Bela is pregnant with a fatherless child; she has arrived in Rhode Island, needing him, in a veritable “reenactment of [her own] origins.”

After dinner, Bela goes out for a drive. She asks Subhash to come with her, but he declines; he stays home, reflecting on what he knows he must do. When Bela returns, he resolves to tell her the truth about who he is to her, though he is afraid she will hate him. After Subhash’s confession, the two of them stay up all night talking. Bela is confused at first and does not believe Subhash—she thinks that he is having some sort of stroke. Once she realizes what is happening, though, she becomes angry, and berates Subhash for having lied to her for so many years. She asks questions about Udayan—about his involvement with the Naxalites, about whether he knew she was going to be born. Eventually, the exhausted Subhash excuses himself and heads off to sleep. When he wakes in the morning, Bela is gone.

As Bela travels away from Rhode Island by bus to stay with a friend and calm herself down, she feels that the “unknown person” inside of her is the only one in the world to whom she feels any connection. Bela is relieved to at last have an explanation, to some degree, for why Gauri abandoned her, but deeply disoriented and confused by the sudden presence of a “third parent.” Bela decides to attempt to confront the “heavy stone” of pain her mother’s abandonment left in her life, now that she finally understands how it got there in the first place.

Subhash does not hear from Bela for several days. He wonders if she has gone to California to track Gauri down, and soon convinces himself that this is what his daughter has done. Subhash, exhausted, sleeps and sleeps—though he has unburdened himself, he feels heavy and fatigued, and he calls in sick to the research lab several days in a row.

When Bela tells Subhash the news that she is expecting a child—and wants to raise it on her own, without the father in the picture—she is, unknowingly, repeating the circumstances of her own birth and entry into the world. Subhash can’t help but wonder if things would be different for Bela if she had known the truth all along, and if she hadn’t had to bear the brunt of her parents’ arguing and suffering over something she was always kept in the dark about.



Bela’s announcement spurs Subhash to reveal the truth of her parentage, though he is afraid of the discord it will bring into their relationship. Subhash has long ignored the duty he has had to Bela: the duty to tell her the truth, and to help her to understand why her life has been so fractured and unstable. Subhash cannot hide the truth any longer, and does not want to be part of the conspiracy to keep Bela in ignorance.



Bela is forced to consider the role presence and absence, as well as secrets and lies, have played in her family and upbringing. She always knew something was off between her parents, and though she now has an explanation for it, she longs for a childhood in which she did not feel disconnected from her parents and so hyperaware of tension, pain, and sadness she could never know the root of.



Subhash is devastated—his worst fear has come true. He has told Bela the truth of her parentage and she has rejected him to go in search of more answers, denying Subhash the role of father he played for so long—or so he thinks.



At the end of the week, Subhash's phone rings—he picks up, assuming it is Elise calling to check on him. Instead, Bela is on the other end. He asks her where she is, and she tells him that she is in Massachusetts, staying with a friend, but that she wants to come back home tonight. She asks Subhash if she should take a cab, or if he will come pick her up from the bus station.

Bela returns home, and in the days that follow, she and Subhash begin to repair their relationship. Bela thanks Subhash for telling her about Udayan and tells him that knowing this piece of her own personal history helps her to feel closer to her unborn child—it is a detail both their lives will share. In autumn, after Bela's daughter is born, she tells Subhash one day that finally knowing what he did for her has made her love him more.

PART 7, CHAPTER 1

Gauri sits on her patio in California, eating toast and fruit and clicking around the internet on her laptop, as she often does. Every once in a while, on the internet or in the paper, Gauri notices a piece mentioning Naxalite activity in India and Nepal; Maoist insurgents are holding demonstrations and committing acts of violence and terror, "plotting to overthrow the government all over again." Gauri only sometimes looks through these articles—she does not want to know too much. She is surprised, though, by how the failure of the original Naxalite movement has succeeded in igniting yet another generation. She wonders what the movement is like now—who is involved, whether it is as "harrowing" as it was when she was adjacent to it, and whether Calcutta will ever experience the terror of her own youth again.

Sometimes Gauri performs an internet search for Subhash—she has read PDF files of articles he's coauthored and learned that he's still working at the same lab in Rhode Island. She has googled Udayan and Bela, too, but neither of them have left a **footprint** on the internet. Gauri expected not to find Udayan, but is surprised that Bela is unsearchable, and wonders if her daughter has made herself invisible to avoid Gauri's being able to find her.

Gauri has heard from Manash via email, and the two of them have established a correspondence. She has updated him about her separation from Subhash but invented a lie about Bela in order to avoid telling her brother that her daughter does not speak to her anymore. She has told Manash that Bela is grown and married.

Bela forgives Subhash and expresses her desire to return home to him, a place where she feels comfort and love. Though she was initially angry and overwhelmed by his confession, in the end, Subhash has always been, and always will be, Bela's one and only father.



The overwhelming knowledge of what Subhash did to secure a better life for Bela causes her to see her father in a new light and increases the gratitude and love she feels toward him. The sacrifice he made for her is something Bela can only understand fully once she herself becomes a parent and knows what it is to love a child.



Even years removed from the pain of her past, Gauri cannot escape the cyclical nature of time. This passage recalls Bela's circular idea of "yesterday" as a child, reminding Gauri that the past is a living, breathing thing, and that ideas can never die. Her involvement with the Naxalites brings her shame and pain, and though she has tried to emotionally and mentally remove herself from those negative emotions, she cannot escape the fact that the movement still has supporters.



The internet has provided Gauri with a way to—however unfairly—check in on some of the people she has left behind. Seeing as this part of the novel is set in the 2010s, it is highly likely that Bela's lack of an internet footprint is deliberate and intentional, designed to keep Gauri away.



Gauri's shame over her treatment of Bela has resulted in her lying to her family. This small fact allows readers to see how Gauri's whole existence is now calibrated by the life she left behind, despite how hard she has tried to distance herself from it.



One day, Gauri receives an email from a Bengali student of hers from many years ago; his name is Dipankar Biswas. He is the same age as Bela, and Gauri had, as a result, always felt “generous” toward him. Now, as Gauri reads his email, she learns that Dipankar wants to meet with Gauri to interview her for a book he is putting together. Gauri accepts his invitation. On the day of their meeting, Gauri finds Dipankar waiting for her at a quiet restaurant. They order food and catch up, and when Gauri asks Dipankar to tell her about his book, he reveals that he is writing a history of students at Presidency when the Naxalite movement was at its height. Dipankar wants to interview Gauri about her experience. Gauri’s eye begins twitching, and she defensively tells Dipankar that she was not involved with the Naxalites.

Dipankar assures Gauri that her involvement doesn’t matter—he just wants to know what the atmosphere was like. Gauri tells Dipankar that she does not want to be interviewed. Her eyelid twitches furiously, and she worries that Dipankar knows something about her—that perhaps her name is on a list. When she looks at him closely, though, she sees disappointment in his eyes, and realizes that he sees her merely as a “convenient source.” Gauri reluctantly agrees to tell Dipankar what she knows of the time but says that she does not want to be a part of the book.

Dipankar tells Gauri that he is planning to visit Calcutta to do some on-the-ground research, and laments that he cannot interview Sanyal. When Gauri asks him why he can’t, Dipankar replies that Sanyal is dead—he killed himself nearly a year ago. At home, Gauri goes to her computer and searches for articles about Sanyal’s death on the internet. She finds many, some of which celebrate his life, and some of which condemn him as a terrorist. She watches a video interview from a local news segment with Sanyal’s cook, who was the one to discover his body. In the back of the room, behind the nervous cook, Sanyal’s hanging corpse is plainly visible.

Gauri cannot stop thinking of the image for several days and finds that it stirs up a terrible empty feeling within her. A few days later, walking down a staircase outside a building on campus, a distracted Gauri falls—she catches herself with her hands, and hurts her wrist. She is taken to the hospital for X-rays, and then has her right hand is bound up, just as **Udayan’s hand** had been after his accident.

The motif within the early pages of the novels’ seventh part is clearly the inescapability of the past. Gauri has tried to outrun her mistakes, but in this meeting with Dipankar, she realizes once and for all how futile all her efforts to disguise the first half of her life have been. Gauri clearly carries her trauma from witnessing Udayan’s violent death, and nurses a fear that the same thing will happen to her if the truth of her involvement is ever revealed.



Gauri’s fears are assuaged as she realizes that no one is onto her or after her, highlighting how deeply frightened she is of being revealed as a conspirator in Naxalite violence.



Gauri repeats her pattern of using the internet to indirectly engage with the more painful aspects of her past. Finding out about Sanyal’s death disturbs her, and the footage she uncovers upsets her even more. The internet is a tool for playing with presence and absence—one of the novel’s major thematic concerns, and now a recurrent pattern of behavior in Gauri’s life.



Gauri’s injury, a strange and upsetting doubling of Udayan’s, seems to have a similar symbolic connotation. Udayan’s hand represented the failure and futility of the violent political movement he was a part of; Gauri’s sprained wrist represents the failure and futility of her attempts to evade the memories and mistakes of her past.



Gauri has a colleague help her go to the pharmacy and pick up her prescriptions, and then returns to her empty house. It is a Friday, and, not wanting to be alone in her home, she heads off to a hotel in a desert town for the weekend. At the hotel pool, she observes an elderly Indian couple taking care of a small boy. She converses with them, and they express their love for their grandchild. When they ask whether Gauri has any children, she admits to having a daughter, though when she is asked this question she usually says she does not have any children.

This scene reveals how deeply in denial Gauri has been about the truth of many aspects of her life. The past is so painful to confront, and what she did to Bela brings her so much shame, that she would rather lie and pretend she has no children than admit to her own failures as a mother.



Gauri returns from her vacation and begins physical therapy sessions for her wrist; over the course of the next several weeks, she regains her strength, and winds down her classes as she prepares for a semester's leave in the coming fall. One afternoon, she receives a letter in from Subhash, composed in Bengali. The letter is written formally and informs Gauri of Subhash's plans to sell his parents' house in Tollygunge, to which she still has a claim, and to take her name off the deed to the Rhode Island house so that it can be left to Bela. Subhash writes that both of them are getting older, and they need to prepare for "a phase of life when anything might happen."

Gauri's injury, combined with this letter from Subhash which speaks of preparing for the later stages of life, makes Gauri reflect on just how much time has passed, and how near both she and Subhash are to old age after all. Additionally, the letter brings Subhash's presence back into Gauri's life, after she had adjusted to so many years in his absence.



Gauri pauses, considering her painful and warped wrist. She resumes reading the letter. Subhash writes that he wants to resolve all of the legal matters between them by the end of the year—he does not think the two of them have anything to say to one another but concedes that if they were nearer to one another he'd do things face-to-face. He writes that he bears Gauri no ill will. Gauri reads through the letter twice before she realizes that "after all this time" Subhash is asking her for a divorce.

Gauri's attention moves to her wrist—a symbol of her failure to leave her past behind her—as she continues reading Subhash's letter. She realizes that he is asking for a divorce, and the emotional surge of understanding that at last it is Subhash who wants to remove himself from her overtakes her.



PART 7, CHAPTER 2

Gauri remembers the early days of 1970—the time of her marriage to Udayan, or, rather, of their elopement. They were married in the countryside, in the presence of "a few other comrades." Gauri did not care what her family would think of her—she longed to put them behind her and devote her life to Udayan.

Gauri's story returns to the past, where she reveals that her obsession with Udayan mirrored his obsession with the Communist party—it obscured everything else in her life.



Gauri and Udayan return to the home of Udayan's parents, where Gauri paints the part of her hair with vermillion powder and dons an iron bangle—markers of a married woman. Gauri's new in-laws welcome her warmly, telling her that what is theirs is now hers.

Despite their elopement, Gauri's new in-laws welcome her and Udayan into their home to live with them in a joint-family configuration—it is their duty to their son.



At first, Gauri and Udayan share a normal life, going on evening walks together and settling into his parents' house. Soon, though, Udayan asks Gauri to start doing things for him. He draws maps and tells her to walk to a certain place while running an errand, and to let him know whether a scooter or bicycle is parked outside. He gives her notes to deliver both to letterboxes and in person. Gauri willingly completes these small missions—she knows she has been “linked into a chain she [cannot] see.” She asks Udayan how her tasks are connected to his work, but he will not tell her.

Shortly after their first wedding anniversary, Udayan arranges a tutoring job for Gauri. She is to help a brother and sister in a nearby town pass their Sanskrit exams. Udayan instructs Gauri to use a fake name, and to do certain things while she is there—to part the living room curtains and say she needs some light, and to watch through the window for a policeman to pass by. Udayan wants Gauri to record the time the policeman passes, and to note whether or not he is in uniform. He tells Gauri that the policeman's route passes a safe house, and his comrades need to know his schedule—they need him “out of the way.”

As Gauri's students study ancient, sacred Hindu texts, Gauri half-listens, watching for the policeman each afternoon. One day, a Thursday, the policeman is not in uniform and is walking in the opposite direction of his normal path, bringing a small boy—his son—home from school. The following Thursday, Gauri observes the same behavior. After four weeks of seeing the policeman in civilian clothes, bringing his son home from school each Thursday afternoon, Gauri confirms the policeman's schedule with Udayan, who asks how old the son is, and then turns away from Gauri.

The week before going to America to live with Subhash, Gauri returns to Jadavpur—the neighborhood where she'd tutored the brother and sister. As she walks down their street, she looks at the letterboxes on the neighboring houses until she finds the name of the dead policeman, Nirmal Dey, affixed to one. The policeman's son is on the verandah, as is a woman a few years older than Gauri who is clearly his mother. She wears a white sari, like Gauri had worn until just a few weeks ago. Gauri considers her part in turning this woman's life upside down, and her role in a tragedy that the mother and son will mourn for the remainder of their lives.

When Udayan first asks Gauri to do slightly shady or suspect things on his behalf—really, on behalf of the Naxalites—Gauri is not particularly reluctant. She does want to know how she fits into the party's larger vision, but Udayan is reluctant himself to share this information with her, perhaps because he believes she is naïve and her awareness could compromise these missions.



Udayan preys upon the things Gauri shared with him early in her courtship—her desire to work, her desire to teach—in order to use her as a pawn in his party's schemes. Gauri is willing to go along with the subterfuge, and this time Gauri is pleasantly surprised when Udayan actually tells her how her work relates to the party's missions.



The juxtaposition of Gauri's halfhearted tutoring of her students in ancient, sacred text and her selfish, spying subterfuge highlights the ways in which her love for Udayan has blinded her to right and wrong. She is ignoring peace, grace, and tradition in order to aid people who seek to violently disrupt those very things.



As the narrative flashes forward, it follows Gauri as she seeks to know the whole truth of what she has done in support of Udayan's misguided politics. Realizing that she has forever impacted the lives of Nirmal Dey's family members, Gauri begins feeling tremendous guilt. She believes she has thrown this family's life into turmoil and does not yet see the way this event will one day be a part of the resentment, guilt, and pain that throw her own life into turmoil as well.



PART 7, CHAPTER 3

One afternoon, Bela takes her daughter Meghna to the beachy cove where Subhash first taught her to swim; on the way back, she notices a stand selling corn, and stops her car. No one is manning the stand, and there is an honor system in place—a price list, and a coffee can with a slit in the lid. Bela wonders who would be so trusting and begins visiting the stand once a week.

One Saturday, a man is there, running the stand. He has some lambs with him in a crate. Bela begins talking with him, and they find that they were both born in Rhode Island and had attended high schools near one another. The man introduces himself to Bela—and Meghna—as Drew. Throughout the week, Meghna asks about Drew and his animals, and each time Meghna and Bela visit the stand she plays with the lambs, chicks, puppies, and kittens Drew brings while Bela and Drew talk. Drew gives Bela free produce and explains that he lives on and works his family's farm with the help of some people from the community. One afternoon, Drew offers to give Bela and Meghna a tour of the farm and drives them over.

Bela and Drew begin seeing each other. Bela helps him with his farm stand, and Drew begins making small toys for Bela. The two grow closer, and soon Bela introduces Drew to Subhash and Elise, but Bela is still not fully honest with Drew—she tells him that her mother is dead. This is what she always tells people when they ask. Bela has repeated the lie so many times that she has begun to believe it herself.

Drew wants to escalate his relationship with Bela—he wants her to begin spending nights at his house, so that they can wake up together in the mornings. Bela insists she has Meghna to think of and does not want to take such a step casually. At the end of the summer, Drew tells Bela that he is in love with her, and that he wants to be a father to Meghna. Bela at last tells Drew the truth about her mother and explains that Gauri's abandonment is the reason she has never stayed with just one person or in just one place. She tells Drew, too, about Udayan, and the truth of her parentage. Drew listens intently and promises Bela that he isn't going anywhere.

The vegetable stand Bela encounters makes her consider her duty to others and is also a symbol of presence in absence—though no one is manning the stand, someone has set it up.



Drew is much like Bela—socially-conscious, tender, and interested in cultivating things from the earth. Though Bela is aloof and holds herself at a distance from others, she finds herself drawn to Drew—and the fact that Meghna likes him, and asks about him frequently, gives her a kind of permission to pursue a connection with him.



Bela grows closer to Drew, but also keeps him at arm's length by lying to him about her mother and keeping secrets about the truth of her life.



Bela is caught between her desire for Drew and her sense of duty to Meghna, and fears that she will not be able to reconcile the two. A poor example of how to handle the impulses of duty and desire has been set, after all, by Gauri, and (unbeknownst to Bela) Subhash, too. As Bela finally confesses the truth about her mother to Drew, though, she begins to heal, and becomes the first person in her family to consciously, responsibly negotiate duty and desire.



PART 7, CHAPTER 4

Gauri, having just flown into Boston, is driving to Providence. The roads, which she used to drive twice a week back and forth from graduate school, are familiar to her. Gauri tried writing Subhash but found that written words failed her—despite the fact that their marriage effectively dissolved years ago, Subhash's request for a divorce has “upended” her, and created in her the need to see Subhash in person. She feels “yoked to him” and “in unspoken collusion with him”—he is her only link to Udayan.

Despite Subhash's letter implying that he would be open to meeting with Gauri face-to-face, she has not asked or warned him that she was going to come. She checks into a bed-and-breakfast just outside Providence, and after freshening up, goes out to her car, preparing to drive to Subhash's new address. She cannot seem to make herself, though—she realizes that she has always felt like an imposition in Subhash's life, and the absurdity of approaching him after all these years hits her hard. She decides to just go by his house this evening and confirm he is there, telling herself that tomorrow she will confront him.

In the morning, Gauri checks out of the inn and drives back to Subhash's. Gauri marvels at how a tree in the yard, which was just a “twig” when Subhash planted it decades ago, has grown to three times her own height. Gauri gathers the divorce papers, which she has already signed, and steels herself to approach the house. She recalls looking for Nirmal Dey's house in Jadavpur many years ago—she is as “terrified” now as she was then. She knows Subhash will never forgive her but wants to thank him for being a father to Bela, and for bringing Gauri herself to America—and then for letting her go. Gauri exits her car, walks up the path, and rings the doorbell, excited deep down to at last see “a version of Udayan as an old man.”

PART 7, CHAPTER 5

Bela is home alone with Meghna—Subhash and Elise are out for breakfast. Meghna approaches her mother and tells her that there is someone at the door. Bela assumes it is perhaps Drew stopping by, but when she approaches the door, she does not see Drew's car parked there. When she opens the door, she is shocked to see Gauri standing in front of her. The two women are the same height now, and as Bela takes her mother in, Meghna comes to the door and encourages Bela to open it.

Gauri has been absent from the lives of Subhash and Bela for decades now—but the prospect of being legally erased has shaken her so terribly that she feels the need to meet with Subhash face to face. Their “unspoken collusion”—the conspiracy of secrets and lies they built their marriage and parenthood on—is a force Gauri may not be ready to let go after all.



Once Gauri arrives in Providence proper, she becomes overwhelmed with her fear of being rejected by Subhash. Though it was her choice to leave, and though she did so in a cruel manner that denied her and Subhash's connection, she does not want to be rendered a completely absent figure in Subhash's life, scrubbed from both his past and his future.



Though Gauri has many reasons for wanting to see Subhash—some of which are selfless—the deciding factor in her making the trek to Providence is her own selfish desire to see how her husband would have appeared as an old man. After all this time, Udayan's absence is still mitigated by Subhash's presence, and the thought of losing even that—her last link to Udayan—is painful, even unthinkable, to Gauri.



Bela is shocked into inertia by her mother's reappearance after so many decades. Lahiri's decision to point out that the women have grown to be the same height signifies both Bela's growth in her mother's absence, and perhaps Gauri's stuntedness in the wake of having abandoned her family and her history.



Bela lets Gauri in, and the three of them sit in the living room. Gauri asks if Meghna is Bela's daughter, and when Bela got married. Bela feels that these ordinary questions, coming from her mother, feel "outrageous." She does not want to share her life with her mother and does not answer her questions. As Gauri begins talking to Meghna, asking how old she is and when her birthday is, Bela shakes with rage. When Meghna asks Gauri who she is, Bela answers on Gauri's behalf—she tells Meghna that Gauri is an aunt; a friend of Meghna's grandmother whom Bela hasn't seen since Meghna's grandmother "died."

Meghna, disinterested, goes back to coloring. In the wake of Bela's shocking answer, Gauri realizes how deep and impenetrable the abyss between her and her daughter is. Though Bela is sitting only three feet away from her, she is utterly unreachable. Meghna asks Gauri to play tic-tac-toe with her, and Bela watches silently as the two play and converse. Once the tic-tac-toe game is over, Gauri sets the divorce papers on the table, and tells Bela to give them to Subhash. Gauri asks about Subhash's health, but Bela, again, will not respond to her mother.

Overwhelmed by the failure of her visit and the effort of her journey, Gauri says she'll be on her way. Bela puts a jacket and a pair of shoes on Meghna and tells her daughter to go out to the garden to pick a large bunch of flowers. Once Meghna is outside, and Gauri and Bela are alone, Bela unloads on Gauri. She tells her mother that she cannot stand the sight of her. She informs Gauri that she knows all about Udayan, but that the truth of her parentage does not excuse what Gauri did—nothing could. Bela tells Gauri that she is not her mother—she is "nothing," as dead to Bela as Udayan is, except for the fact that Gauri left by choice.

Gauri silently takes Bela's vitriol until Meghna knocks at the back door with her flowers. Bela goes to her and opens the door. Gauri approaches Meghna and bids her goodbye, then walks quickly toward the front door. Bela does not say goodbye, or even look up from what she is doing.

As soon as Gauri is out of the house, Bela opens the envelope and checks for the signatures. Though the visit was taxing and "bewildering," Bela is grateful that she was able to shield Subhash from having to confront Gauri; that it was she herself, and not her father, who was home when Gauri called.

Bela has so carefully engineered her life to remain inscrutable to her mother that Gauri's sudden appearance—and thus the opportunity for her to learn about Bela's life, despite Bela's best efforts to keep that from happening—feels like an invasion. In retribution, Bela cruelly tells Meghna, in front of Gauri, that Gauri is dead. This scene toys with the theme of presence as absence, as Meghna does not know that her own "dead" grandmother is present.



Gauri is unable to connect with the closed-off Bela—but Bela begrudgingly allows Gauri to interact, however briefly, with her own daughter. The idea of answering Gauri's questions—and thus fully acknowledging both her current presence and her longstanding absence—is too much for Bela to bear.



In this eruptive, heated confrontation, Bela unloads her feelings of abandonment, and anger on Gauri. Bela is in such pain that the most harmful thing—or the truest thing—she can think to say to Gauri is that she is "nothing." In negating Gauri's substance, Bela eases the pain of her abandonment. By telling Gauri she means to nothing to Bela, Bela has reclaimed her own narrative at last, and confirmed that Gauri is what she always wanted to be when she was raising Bela: gone.



Even in the heat of such a contentious moment, Meghna's re-entry with flowers seems to suggest that this young girl could, one day, be the bridge between these two women who have hurt and disappointed one another so terribly.



Bela knows that as violent as her interaction with Gauri was, it was better that she bore the brunt of the pain of Gauri's resurgence than her father.



As Bela listens to the sound of Gauri's car driving away, she feels strange—she has dreamed so many times of her mother's return, and yet now that it has happened, the visit itself feels like a dream; ephemeral and inconsequential. She marvels at how angry she was just minutes ago and considers the destructive nature of the hatred she feels for her mother. It has marked all her other relationships. Recalling the day her mother left, Bela feels the urge to strike Gauri, to harm her, to be rid of her forever.

After Gauri departs, Bela can still sense her mother's emotional presence in spite of her physical absence. She considers how this is true not only of this moment, but of her entire life—she has calibrated her whole existence around the contradiction of her mother's abandonment, and the ubiquity of her presence in Bela's thoughts.



PART 7, CHAPTER 6

Gauri arrives back in Calcutta—which is called Kolkata now, to reflect the Bengali pronunciation of the city's name. Gauri's taxi winds through the busy streets, which are more populous and more developed than when she left. Additionally, it is **Durga Pujo**—the city's most anticipated festival—and so people and vendors line the streets. Temporary structures built to honor the goddess Durga have cropped up everywhere, and Gauri sees Durga as “a daughter visiting her family,” coming down to the city to transform it for a time.

Gauri's arrival back in her hometown coincides with the symbolic Durga Pujo festival. This was the festival occurring at the time of Udayan's death, and visiting the city in the middle of it now must surely stir up painful memories for Gauri. Nevertheless, she chooses to rejoice in the presence of the benevolent goddess Durga, and the hopes of peace and prosperity she brings.



When Gauri had arrived in London earlier, she didn't leave the airport. She went to the booking office and scheduled a flight to India without emailing the organizers of her conference to explain why she'd be absent. Nothing matters to her now, after the things Bela said to her in Providence. Now, Gauri arrives at the guesthouse where she'll be staying after many days of travel and asks the caretaker to arrange a driver for her at eight the next morning.

Gauri has been so shaken by her encounter with Bela that she feels numb to everything else in her life. She has failed Bela and has finally been called out on it: nothing else in the world matters to Gauri, and at last her true pain and shame is laid bare.



Gauri wakes early the next morning, before the sun is up. She showers, dresses, and makes tea, and at seven a maid named Abha arrives. Abha and Gauri chat. At eight, Gauri's driver arrives, and she gets in his taxi. She instructs him to take her to her old neighborhood—she is looking for Manash. At Manash's old flat, she finds his family, but not him—he is visiting one of his other sons. Manash's family calls him using a cell phone, and Gauri speaks to her brother for the first time in years. Manash asks Gauri to wait for him to return to Kolkata and asks about Bela—Gauri assures Manash that he will meet her someday, though she knows this is a lie.

Gauri's competing desires to directly confront the people from her past and to preserve the lies and secrets she has constructed to obscure her own failings are on display in this passage. Gauri wants to reunite with her brother but is too afraid to show him the truth of who she really is, and what shape her life has taken in the years since they have seen one another. She would prefer to draw him into yet another web of secrets rather than confess.



Gauri gets back in her hired car and asks the driver to take her to Tollygunge. Once in the neighborhood, Gauri gives her driver money for tea and exits the car, telling him it will only be a short visit. She walks past the mosque and down the lane until she comes to the house in which she once believed she'd grow old with Udayan. The house has been renovated, and the courtyard with **Udayan's footprints** in it no longer exists. Gauri walks past the house, toward the two ponds and the **lowland**, only to find that both ponds are gone—new homes have been built over the lowland. She wonders if anyone else on the street remembers the lowland, and considers stopping someone to ask them, but does not. She looks out on the new block of houses, remembering Udayan's death.

Gauri shamefully recalls her involvement in Nirmal Dey's death—the death which marked Udayan as a target. No one knows what Gauri has done—she is “the sole guardian of her guilt.” Gauri remembers what Bela said to her about her being “nothing.” Now, as she looks out on what used to be the **lowland**, she feels a new solidarity with Udayan—“the bond of not existing.”

Back at the guesthouse, Gauri has a dream of Udayan—she remembers, in sleep, the night before the police came for him. Udayan had told Gauri that he could never become a father—not after what he had done—but would not tell Gauri what his crime was. He regretted aloud not having met Gauri sooner, and then held her hand as dawn rose around them.

The next morning, Gauri wakes up and steps out onto the balcony off her bedroom. She watches the dawn, and the empty roads. Gauri approaches the edge of the balcony, feeling “a clarity [and] an urge” rising up inside of her. She feels the purpose of her visit to India has been to die here and imagines what it would be like to throw herself off the balcony. Gauri thinks of the woman who found Kanu Sanyal when he hung himself, and wonders who would find her. She begins taking stock of the images that have haunted her over the years: her betrayal of Bela, her part in the conspiracy against Nirmal Dey, her first meeting with Udayan. Gauri shuts her eyes, recalling the thrill of loving Udayan, the pain of losing him, and the fury of realizing how he had implicated her in his misdeeds. Gauri opens her eyes, expecting to see Udayan, but he is not there.

Gauri's exploration of Tollygunge reveals that the neighborhood has undergone significant change. Two of the novel's most important physical symbols—Udayan's footprints and the titular lowland—have been eradicated from the landscape completely. This loss of symbolic reference demonstrates Gauri's lost, wandering sensibility in this section of the novel—she is alone in the world, without any hallmarks of her past, just as she always wanted to be, but she is not happy or fulfilled; she is more uncertain than ever.



Gauri's years of shame over her involvement in the policeman's death have imbued her with the impulse to hide and shrink herself. Now, at last, she feels she has reached the low point of this journey in self-erasure—she, like Udayan, no longer exists.



Perhaps because Udayan didn't feel he could be a father after what he'd done, and voiced that concern to Gauri, she always felt like she should not be a mother based on her involvement in the policeman's death.



This pivotal moment in Gauri's life represents the building—and release—of all the tension she has felt as a result of the trauma of witnessing Udayan's death, and the larger trauma of realizing her own role in it. Gauri hates herself for having been drawn into political violence by Udayan, and for not being able to save him from his own destruction. In this moment, she visualizes at last punishing herself for all the harm she has caused as a result of her own pain—but realizes that all she has wanted all along is the chance to reunite with her lost love.



Gauri continues to watch the street fill with people as morning begins. Abha approaches the inn, shouting up from the street to ask if there is anything Gauri needs. Gauri replies that she needs nothing. She knows at the end of the week, she will leave Kolkata and return to her life.

Gauri's death-drive has come to a head, and she has ultimately decided to remain alive. Though it means she will be alone and will have to continue to bear the weight of what she has done, she is resigned to such an existence after so many years of surviving it already. Gauri will be present in her life, but, it is implied, emotionally absent.



Several months later, Gauri is back in California. She receives a letter from Rhode Island. It is written in English and accompanied by a drawing Meghna made. As Gauri begins reading the letter, she sees that it is from Bela. The letter states that Meghna often asks about Gauri—Bela has not told her daughter the truth, but tells Gauri that one day, she will explain their family's whole story. If, once Meghna learns the truth, she wants to have a relationship with Gauri, Bela will be “willing to facilitate” one. Maybe, Bela writes at the letter's end, when she and Meghna are both ready, Bela and Gauri can try to meet once again.

Despite the bleak ending of Gauri's trip to India, there is one bright spot or promise of redemption as her narrative comes to a close. The note from Bela seems to say that in spite of all the pain, anger, and disappointment between the two women, Gauri's crimes are not unforgivable. Gauri seeing herself through Meghna's eyes—as someone interesting and desired—offers her a new point of view after so many years of seeing herself through a lens of shame, and understanding herself only as an obligation to others.



PART 8, CHAPTER 1

Subhash and Elise visit the western coast of Ireland for a week on their honeymoon, having rented a house in a small, quiet town there. Their wedding took place just a few days ago, back on Rhode Island, in a small red-and-white church Subhash had been admiring for many years. Subhash and Elise's marriage is “a shared conclusion to lives separately built,” and each of them take solace in and draw joy from this fact.

Subhash and Elise are happy and in love. In contrast to Subhash's relationship with Gauri, which was based on the undesirable but undeniable interconnectedness of their lives, Subhash and Elise have done the opposite: they have taken two very different lives and melded them out of love and desire rather than obligation.



Subhash and Elise take many walks to the shore and through the cold hills of the coast, and one day come upon a circle of large, ancient upright stones. Elise explains that the stones date to the Bronze Age, and perhaps served a funerary or commemorative purpose in their time. As Subhash explores the stones, he finds things people have left behind: hair bands, lockets, twigs, bits of thread. These tokens and offerings cause him to think of “another stone in a distant country”—the tablet at the edge of the **lowland** which bears Udayan's name.

The circle of stones in Ireland, though very far from Calcutta, nonetheless reminds Subhash of the lowland. It is flooded, just like the lowland was, and scattered with people's memories—just as the lowland bore Udayan's grave marker and the flowers and tokens associated with it.



Subhash feels Udayan beside him and remembers walking together across the **lowland** toward the Tolly Club, golf balls in their hands. The ground here too, Subhash notices, is “drenched [and] uneven.” Knowing he will never visit this place again, he takes the stones in one final time, walking from column to column. At one point he stumbles and steadies himself by reaching out for a stone. It is a marker, he thinks, “of what is given, what is taken away.”

Even at the novel's end, Udayan is present in his absence. Loss—especially sudden, violent loss—has been shown to have unpredictable but enduring reverberations throughout the lives of those adjacent to it. Subhash has moved on from the duty to Udayan he shouldered and finally taken steps in his life that are just for himself—not either for his brother or for the memory of him—and yet reminders of “what [was] taken away” linger still.



PART 8, CHAPTER 2

The narrative flashes back to the evening Udayan was killed. When the police vans approach his house, he sees them coming—he is on the roof. Ever since the explosion, he has felt a sense of both physical and emotional instability, and he is suddenly seized with a terrible vertigo. As he watches the paramilitary officers flood the courtyard of his home, he knows that he is too weak to leap from the roof to that of another building—instead, he runs back down the stairs, through the new part of the house and into the old, and out the narrow doors to the back garden.

Udayan runs quickly through the yard out back towards the **lowland** and enters the flooded pool where the water hyacinth is thickest—where it might hide him best. He takes a deep breath and goes under, pinching his nostrils closed with the fingers of his good **hand**. He feels pressure mounting in his lungs—he knows that the sensation he is feeling is carbon dioxide building up in his blood. He also knows that if he is able to fight the instinct to take a breath, his body can survive for up to six minutes underwater, as blood will flow to his vital organs; the doctor who treated his hand explained all of this to Udayan when he asked.

Underwater, Udayan feels a strange freedom—the freedom of not having to struggle to listen to anything. Since the explosion, his ears have been ringing constantly, causing him to have difficulty hearing. It is not silent, though, and Udayan can hear a “toneless exhalation” as sound conducts itself through the water. He wonders if the “deafness” he is feeling underwater is what it is like to visit a country where one does not understand the language.

Udayan mourns the fact that he has never been to China or Cuba and hears the final words Che Guevara had written to his children echoing in his head: “Remember that the revolution is the important thing, and that each one of us alone is worth nothing.” Thinking of these words now, Udayan laments that his own revolution “fixed nothing, helped no one.” He knows now that there will be no real revolution, and also wonders why his body is so desperate to save itself if he is “worth nothing” on his own.

For the first time in the novel, Lahiri introduces her readers to Udayan’s point of view. She demonstrates how on the night of his death, he was feeling ill, trapped, and desperate—he’d gotten himself in with the party completely over his head, a state of mind and being which is symbolized in his decision to hide out in the lowland.



Udayan’s last-ditch attempt at escaping police forces clearly seems doomed to fail. Udayan is desperate, though, and he has been spending weeks thinking of ways of evading capture for his involvement with the Naxalites. The lowland, a symbol of connection throughout the novel, now completely engulfs Udayan—it is the first time in the novel a character has actually entered the lowland, but his submergence symbolizes isolation rather than connection.



Underwater, Udayan is isolated—but at peace with his own thoughts for the first time in a long time. As he considers the nature of his isolation and the otherworldliness of this once-familiar place, his thoughts drift and morph.



Despite all of his hard work on behalf of the Naxalites and the hope of a Communist revolution in India, Udayan realizes at last that all his effort has been in vain. His actions have only served to isolate him from his family, his country, and his heritage. All the revolutionary ideals about the meaninglessness of the individual seem false and stupid now, at this moment of truth, as Udayan at last sees the value of his own life.



Udayan's body overcomes his mind and he surfaces involuntarily, gasping and choking. Two paramilitary officers have guns pointed at him, and one shouts into a megaphone, ordering him to surrender or face his family's death. Udayan stands up in the weedy, shallow water of the **lowland**, still coughing. He feels unsteady and dizzy, and as he walks out of the water with his hands above his head, he is disappointed to realize that Bijoli and Gauri have returned from shopping to witness his capture.

Udayan remembers how his involvement with the Naxalites began. He and his fellow students lamented their country's stagnant economy and deterioration of living standards. Independence, they felt, was a "travesty" which left half of India "still in chains." After the 1966 strike at Presidency, Udayan and his group had successfully shut down Calcutta University for sixty-nine days.

After the strike at school, Udayan went to the countryside to "further indoctrinate himself." He met desperate farmers, starving peasants, and witnessed the tragic effects of poverty. Udayan himself suffered during this time, never feeling well-fed or watered, and enduring terrible stomach cramps, but in miserable moments he reminded himself that his deprivation was only temporary.

Back in Calcutta, the CPI(M-L) formed. Subhash left for America, disapproving of the party's objectives. His brother's disdain filled Udayan with a "foreboding" feeling that the two would never meet again, but he shook it off. In Subhash's absence, Udayan had only his comrades for friends, and filled his time with carrying out "missions" alongside them. As the missions grew increasingly dangerous, Udayan "began living two lives." In one life, he was married to Gauri, living with his parents, working as a teacher, and pretending that the movement was behind him. In his life as a party member, however, he'd been enlisted in a mission to kill Nirmal Dey.

Udayan was not the one to stab Nirmal Dey in an alleyway, but he was the lookout, and he watched as the policeman bled out and died after his comrade's attack. Udayan dipped his **hand** in the policeman's blood and wrote the party's initials on the alley wall once the deed was done, making his part in the act a "crucial" one.

Udayan's crimes have caught up with him at last. Though it is clear, from his thought process while underwater, that he has some remorse about his choices, it is too late—he has put himself, and his family, well in harm's way.



Udayan's reflections on the choices that led him to this point reveal that his aims began nobly enough—he wanted to fight on behalf of his people, to correct the injustices and heal the wounds of colonialism, Partition, and poverty.



Udayan is revealed to not only be an idealist—he has witnessed the issues he has been fighting against first-hand. In complicating Udayan's character and providing him with real depth and motivation, Lahiri shows the dark side of duty, and the vortex-like pull of political violence.



Here, Udayan reveals that the intensification of his involvement with the CPI(ML) and the Naxalites was, in many ways, a direct result of his feelings of isolation and abandonment after Subhash left. Udayan had always had a double and a partner, and in the wake of his brother's departure for the U.S., Udayan felt alone for the first time in his life in spite of his marriage to Gauri and his living situation with his parents.



Though Udayan did not kill the policeman himself, the blood is quite literally on his hands.



At the edge of the **lowland**, Udayan listens as his parents plead with the police, professing their son's innocence, having no knowledge of the truth of the things he has done. Udayan is brought over to beg at his family's feet for their forgiveness and is able to look only Gauri in the eye. He knows that he has used her and involved her in his party's plots, but he still loves her. He sees Gauri look at him with "disillusion," and knows that she has already begun to revise everything they once shared.

The police put Udayan into the back of the van and start it up, but then cut the engine and pull him out again after a short drive. In the field where Udayan used to play with Subhash as a boy, the paramilitary officers untie Udayan's hands from behind his back and tell him to walk in the opposite direction, reminding him to pause after every step. Though the officers are telling Udayan he can return to his family, he knows that they are not telling the truth.

Udayan feels the bullets rip through him and hears only silence as he is pulled out of the world. He is not alone, though; Gauri is in front of him, in the peach-colored sari she wore to meet him at the cinema. Udayan sees Gauri coming towards him, her hair shimmering. He knows she is speaking to him but cannot hear what she is saying. He takes a step towards her, mesmerized by the sunlight on her hair.

Udayan's final moments are not redemptive, as Gauri's earlier recollection of the moment suggested. Instead, he knows that he is being judged and condemned by Gauri. In marrying her, he vowed to protect her—instead, he roped her into acts of political violence and took advantage of her intense love for him.



Udayan knows what is happening to him as the police prepare to execute him. The fact that he dies in the field where he and Subhash used to play, and where they both have so many happy memories, is a cruel and painful irony that demonstrates the influence of political violence on personal relationships.



Udayan sees Gauri in his last moments, recalling the day when they met outside of the cinema. This symbolic meeting, which represented their commitment to one another, serves to remind readers of Udayan's possible motivations for allowing his life to take such a wrong turn: perhaps, above all, what he wanted was to protect those he loved.





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