Exit West

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MOHSIN HAMID

Mohsin Hamid was born in Pakistan, but he spent much of his childhood in Palo Alto, California while his father pursued a PhD at Stanford University. After the age of nine, Hamid returned to Pakistan with his family and attended Aitchison College, a highly prestigious boarding school founded in the late 19th century. At the age of 18, he attended Princeton University and graduated summa cum laude (with highest honors). He attended Harvard Law School, but found it boring. In his spare time, he worked on a novel he had begun writing as an undergraduate at Princeton; in 2000, he published this work, *Moth Smoke*. *Moth Smoke* was a success in the United States and a huge hit in Pakistan (it was even adapted as a TV miniseries), enabling Hamid to devote himself to writing full-time. He didn't complete another novel until 2007, when he published *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which reflects both his experiences at Princeton and his reflections about the post 9/11 world. His third novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, was released in 2013, and his fourth, *Exit West*, appeared in 2017 and was a finalist for the Man Booker Prize. Hamid writes for dozens of magazines, journals, and newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Paris Review*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Part of Hamid's genius in writing *Exit West* lies in his decision to avoid naming Nadia and Saeed's home country, thereby universalizing their experience as refugees while referencing the global refugee crisis as a whole. Because there are so many conflicts currently driving people from their homes all over the world, it would be impossible to pinpoint the specific historical occurrences that pertain to *Exit West*. However, it's worth mentioning the vast number of refugees who have been forced to flee Syria in recent years due to the Syrian Civil War, as this was the most prevalent humanitarian catastrophe unfolding when *Exit West* was published in 2017 and beyond. The Syrian Civil War began in 2011 as an offshoot of The Arab Spring, a multi-nation period of protest and unrest originating in Tunisia in 2010. Since then, there has been a complex armed conflict in Syria between a group led by the country's war-criminal president, Bashar al-Assad, and multiple nongovernmental—and in some cases radicalized—forces trying to overthrow him. Since then, the rebel groups seeking to overthrow al-Assad have started fighting with one another, and the entire conflict has produced a large-scale refugee crisis, sending Syrians into foreign countries that refuse to welcome them.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A novel about the difficult complexities of forced migration, *Exit West* recalls other well-known contemporary tales of refugee life, such as Dave Eggers's *What is the What*, a story about a boy from Sudan who is separated from his family during the country's Second Civil War. Eventually making his way to America, the boy balances the bright possibilities presented to him by migration with the trials and tribulations of integrating into a new culture. The author Viet Thanh Nguyen's 2015 novel *The Sympathizer*, along with his 2017 story collection *The Refugees*, also come to mind as two books that—like *Exit West*—explore the ins and out of refugee life, examining the ways in which people are influenced by their experiences as immigrants.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Exit West*
- **When Published:** February 27, 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Migrant Literature, Contemporary Fiction
- **Setting:** The novel begins in an unnamed country, but its protagonists are quickly forced to migrate to Mykonos, London, and finally Marin, California.
- **Climax:** Each time Saeed and Nadia migrate to a new country, they experience conflicts that have to do with their abrupt arrival into a new environment, and each of these conflicts ultimately builds itself into its own climax. Having said that, the story's most prevalent narrative arc reaches its peak when the couple finally decides to end their romantic relationship.
- **Antagonist:** The most immediate antagonists in *Exit West* are the radical militants that take over Nadia and Saeed's home country, forcing them to flee. However, the hatred and xenophobia that leads people to divide others into groups based on nationality or race is the overarching antagonistic force that rears its head countless times throughout the novel.
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Early Mentors. In his formative years as a young writer in college, Hamid studied under the renowned authors Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates.

PLOT SUMMARY

In an unnamed city on the brink of civil war, Saeed and Nadia

meet while taking an adult education course. After days of watching Nadia, who wears long black robes in the style of the country's devoutly religious citizens, Saeed follows her out of class and asks if she'd like to get coffee. "You don't say your evening prayers?" she asks. "Not always," he says, and as he stumbles to make excuses, she interrupts, saying, "I don't pray." After a moment of silence, she adds, "Maybe another time," and leaves on her motorcycle. The following day, Saeed can't stop thinking about her at work, where he sells outdoor advertisements such as billboards.

The narrative cuts to a vignette of a white woman sleeping in her bedroom in Australia. As she dozes, a dark-skinned man slowly emerges from the darkness of her closet, a darkness that is blacker and more absolute than the rest of the lightless room. After he emerges from this mysterious door, the man walks quietly through the bedroom before slipping out the open window.

The narrative shifts back to Saeed and Nadia. Saeed lives at home with his parents in a small apartment that used to be quite elegant but is now somewhat tired, a "crowded and commercial" neighborhood having grown up around it. Still, the family is happy, and they often sit on the patio as Saeed looks through an expensive telescope, charting the city skyline and looking at the stars. On one such night the family hears the patter of gunshots thrumming the air and, after a moment, decide to go inside to enjoy the evening in the safety of their living room.

When Saeed and Nadia finally have coffee, he asks why she wears long black robes even though she doesn't pray. "So men don't fuck with me," she responds, smiling. Nadia grew up in a deeply religious household, but she never felt drawn to this kind of faith. When she decided to move out on her own even though she wasn't married, her parents and sister were incensed, and because she was unwilling to compromise, their relationship was destroyed. As such, she hasn't spoken to her parents or even her sister since the argument.

As Saeed and Nadia's courtship advances, the city plunges further into turmoil, as militant radicals overtake the neighborhoods, killing bystanders and government officials in order to establish dominance. Nonetheless, Saeed and Nadia manage to live somewhat normal lives, going to work, surfing the internet on their **phones**, and meeting each other in the evenings at Nadia's apartment, where they smoke marijuana and listen to records. One night, they sit on Nadia's balcony and eat magic mushrooms before drawing close and becoming physically intimate for the first time. This intimacy continues in subsequent meetings, but Saeed stops Nadia each time before they have sex, telling her—to her disappointment—that he wants to wait until marriage.

Before long, the government shuts off all cellphone service in an attempt to make it harder for the militant radicals to control the city. As a result, Nadia and Saeed are cut off from one another, unable to communicate until Saeed finally shows up at Nadia's house just as she's coming home from the bank, where she fought through a mob of people trying to withdraw funds from their accounts. As she pushed through the crowd, a man stuck his hand between her legs, and there was nothing she could do about it. In an extremely fragile emotional state, she raced home from the bank with all her money, where she was relieved to see Saeed waiting at her door.

Not long thereafter, Saeed's mother is hit by a stray bullet that kills her. When Nadia sees how distraught Saeed and his father are after the funeral, she decides to move in with them. Tensions escalate quickly in the city at this point, and Saeed, Nadia, and Saeed's father find themselves unable to lead the lives they once enjoyed. Because the militants have taken over the city, Nadia and Saeed's respective employers have either fled or gone out of business, leaving the two of them with no source of income and nothing to do but hide in the apartment during the days, listening to rounds of gunshots and the occasional airstrike sailing down from drones above.

Around this time, rumors start circulating about black doors that can transport people from one place to another, taking them far away. Apparently, these doors simply appear in the place of regular doors, and many of the city's inhabitants actively seek them out as a way of escaping the violent radicals. However, these doors brought the radicals into the city from the hills in the first place, so the militants are well aware of their existence, guarding them and killing those who try to leave through them. Nonetheless, Saeed and Nadia decide they must use one of these doors—they are determined to secure passage out of the city for themselves and Saeed's father. After paying a man to find a door for them, though, they discover that Saeed's father refuses to leave the city. "Your mother is here," he tells his son, adding that Saeed himself absolutely must go without him because only "death await[s]" him in this city.

When Saeed and Nadia pass through the door, they find themselves in Mykonos, Greece, where they come upon an encampment of refugees in the rocky hills along the beach. As Nadia sets up their tent, she stoops and kisses Saeed in the plain light of day, something they'd never done before because the militants in their country didn't allow lovers—even spouses—to touch in public. Surprised, Saeed shies away, and Nadia senses a bitterness in him that she has never seen before.

Saeed and Nadia quickly find several women and men from their country who warn them not to trust everybody in the camp. Saeed and Nadia therefore make sure to stay alert at night and when walking alone. One evening, though, they stay out a little bit later than normal because they're trying to catch fish for dinner. Seeing a group of men approaching in the distance, they decide to start moving away, but the men follow at a fast pace. Scrambling over the rocky terrain, they make their way up a steep slope, abandoning the fishing rod so as to

move faster and—hopefully—placate their pursuers. On the way up, Nadia slips and skins her arm on a ragged rock, but the young lovers keep moving, finally reaching the hilltop where, to their surprise, they encounter a number of armed guards standing watch over a small cabin. This, they know, means that a door has appeared inside the cabin, a door that leads to somewhere desirable, since the military only protects portals to wealthy nations. Saeed and Nadia stop, trapped between the guards and the men chasing them—but the men never crest the hill.

Slowly but surely, Nadia's injury becomes worse, their money dwindles, and their sources of food grow thin. Before long, they decide to visit a volunteer organization willing to tend to Nadia's injured arm. Here they meet a young female volunteer with a shaved head, who dresses the injury and connects meaningfully with Nadia, who's rather taken by the young woman's attentiveness. When the volunteer says she wants to help Saeed and Nadia, they tell her they want to pass through another door, and she tells them that she might be able to make this happen. From that point on, Nadia goes to the clinic every day to drink coffee and smoke joints with the volunteer until, one day, the young woman takes her and Saeed to a new door. Standing in front of the portal, the volunteer and Nadia hug tightly before the couple disappears through the door.

When Nadia and Saeed emerge on the other side, they're in a beautiful bedroom furnished like a luxurious hotel. As they wander downstairs, realizing they're in an empty mansion, other migrants slowly appear, milling about in the building and claiming its rooms for themselves. It turns out that they have traveled to a wealthy neighborhood in London where rich people keep second homes. Because so many of these mansions are vacant, migrants quickly fill them to capacity, refusing to leave even when British law enforcement arrives and threatens them from outside the houses. Fortunately, this tactic doesn't work, and the officers retreat. Meanwhile, Saeed grows increasingly uncomfortable about the fact that he's the only man from his country in the mansion. Indeed, the majority of the other migrants are from Nigeria, and they form an impromptu counsel that meets in the courtyard, a group Nadia decides to join even though she's not Nigerian. Still, Saeed continues to feel estranged from his own country, a feeling he alleviates by praying everyday. Nadia finds Saeed's behavior hard to understand, and the couple's relationship begins to suffer. Constantly arguing, they rarely engage in any kind of sexual activity, and start spending long periods of time apart, though they've heard an attack by angry Londoners against the migrants is imminent—an attack that could separate them permanently if they aren't together when it occurs.

When the nativist Londoners do finally strike, Nadia and Saeed both sustain minor injuries. Overall, though, the migrant population triumphs—only losing three lives—and is able to branch out from the mansions, establishing work camps on the outskirts of the city. Saeed and Nadia move to one of these camps, where they work on building permanent housing for migrants like themselves while sleeping in tents onsite. Although the work keeps them occupied and distracted, they continue to bicker, and each night they lie rigidly side by side. Finally, in a last-ditch attempt to save their relationship, they decide to go through another door, hoping this one will take them to a place where they can rekindle their love.

Having left London behind, Saeed and Nadia find themselves in the rolling oceanic hills of Marin, California. Unlike the other places they've migrated, the refugee population is spread out in Marin, so they make a small encampment set off from anybody else. Although they have to hike down the hills to work, they enjoy a rewarding view of the ocean and are even able to obtain joints from one of Nadia's coworkers at the local food cooperative. Each night they share a joint, an experience that almost recalls the way things were between them before they had to leave their city. One night, though, Nadia suddenly makes a fleeting suggestion that they go their separate ways, and the next morning the couple agrees that this is for the best. Without embracing Saeed, she leaves their crudely-fashioned home, setting off to lead her own life. After several months of intermittent communication and meet-ups, they each fall into their own separate existences, "and eventually a month [goes] by without any contact, and then a year, and then a lifetime."

Fifty years later, Nadia visits her home city for the first time since leaving all those years ago with Saeed. The country's conflict has long since subsided, and as Nadia walks through the streets, she sees Saeed, and the two agree to meet at a nearby café, where they share stories about their lives and talk about how different things would be if they had gotten married. Nadia asks Saeed if he has ever traveled to the Chilean deserts—as he once told her he wanted to—and he nods and says that he'd love to take her sometime if she ever has a free evening. Smiling, she says that "she would like that very much," and then they part ways, not knowing "if that evening would ever come."

CHARACTERS

Saeed – A young man living in an unnamed country that is undergoing a gradual but dangerous transformation at the outset of the novel as religious militants increasingly take control in a violent fight against the government. Saeed lives with his parents in an apartment in what used to be a desirable part of town, but which is now deteriorating amidst the violence ravaging the rest of the city. Working during the day at an agency that sells outdoor advertisements, Saeed attends a business course in the evenings, where he meets Nadia. After watching her in class, he asks her to coffee despite the fact that her long black robes suggest she's highly religious and thus uninterested in dating people like Saeed, who only prays

occasionally. What he soon learns, though, is that he's actually more religious than Nadia. While she wears the robes not from religious feeling but to ensure that no one messes with her, he believes prayer is "personal" and that religious practice varies from individual to individual—an idea that allows him to increase or decrease his level of spiritual commitment as he sees fit. In their home country, this mild difference produces little friction. But after the two of them fall in love and flee their increasingly violent and dangerous country for first Mykonos, then London, and finally California, Saeed becomes increasingly more devout. Over the course of the couple's travels, he begins to pray multiple times per day as a way of connecting to the past life and the family—both his dead mother and his father who refused to flee—that he's left behind. And, further, he seems to blame his relationship for the feelings of loss he experiences in regards to that lost home. This behavior grates on Nadia, who thinks Saeed is too resistant to change and overly obsessed with his native culture, and so they eventually go their separate ways. Ultimately, Saeed fully engages with his desire to reconnect with his homeland by falling in love with a preacher's daughter whose own dead mother hailed from Saeed's original home city.

Nadia – A young woman from the same unnamed country and city as Saeed. She attends the same night class as Saeed, who asks on their first date why she wears religious robes if she doesn't pray. "So men don't fuck with me," she responds, smiling. This is a perfect representation of Nadia's way of navigating the world: in order to control how others treat her, she uses cultural touchstones to her advantage, a practice that shows her sense that a person's cultural identity is malleable, not fixed by his or her citizenship or beliefs. For Nadia, it is not belief or belonging that are important, but rather her independence and autonomy. As she and Saeed travel as refugees from country to country, Nadia becomes increasingly excited about the changes they experience, ultimately embracing the multi-cultural nature of migrant communities, while Saeed retreats into himself and searches for ways to reconnect with his home culture. As a result the love she shares with Saeed begins to wane, and Nadia finds herself drawn to others, including a female volunteer who treats her wounded arm while she and Saeed are living in Mykonos. Eventually, Nadia suggests that she and Saeed break up, and when she finally leaves him standing in their shanty in California, she feels dazzlingly "alive," ready to branch out on her own.

Saeed's Father – A man who has the "slightly lost bearing of a university professor" because he is, in fact, a university professor. Although Saeed's father taught for many years at a respectable institution, though, he has been unable for financial reasons to fully retire, instead working for "reduced wages" as a visiting faculty member at lesser schools. Married to a former grade-school teacher, he sometimes wonders if he made the right decision regarding his career path; though he originally thought teaching was a noble profession, he wonders as his city plunges into violent turmoil if it wouldn't have been better to work as a high-powered, money-minded businessman who'd be able to use his money to help his family survive in such times of duress. Still, he leads a happy life with Saeed's mother. When Saeed's mother is killed by a stray bullet, though, Saeed's father finds himself distraught and rudderless. However, when Saeed and Nadia tell him that they've secured a passage out of the country, he refuses to leave, telling Saeed that he can't bring himself to leave behind his wife's grave and his many friends and relatives. Saeed comes to feel intensely his connection to his country and his family after he has left them behind. Saeed's father feels that connection so powerfully that he can't even bring himself to leave them behind in the first place, even if staying is likely to be dangerous. Later, when Saeed and Nadia are living in London, they learn Saeed's father has died of pneumonia.

Saeed's Mother – A woman who has "the commanding air of a schoolteacher, which she formerly was." Like Saeed's father, Saeed's mother worries about Saeed even though he's an adult. When he comes home one morning after having failed to tell his parents where he was all night—a night made all the more harrowing by the fact that radical militants took siege of the stock exchange that very day—Saeed's mother is so overwhelmingly relieved to see him that she finds herself wanting to smack him for causing her so much stress. In this moment, the novel captures an aspect of the complications of love: how it creates connection but also vulnerability, joy but also personal pain, and can lead to instincts of both care and violence. Not long thereafter, Saeed's mother is killed by a stray bullet. Her funeral is small and the grieving process is somewhat hindered by the fact that it's dangerous for mourners and well-wishers to travel to the family house to pay their respects. Upon seeing how distraught Saeed and his father are at her funeral, though, Nadia decides to move into the apartment, offering whatever help she can as a way of easing their burdensome grief.

Saeed's Boss – A kind man who runs a company that sells outdoor advertisements to local companies. Unfortunately, it isn't long before Saeed's boss has to cease operations because the radical militants have driven prospective clients either out of the country or out of business. When he lets his workers go, he does so with teary eyes, promising that they'll have their job backs if the company ever opens its doors again.

The Musician – Nadia's first lover, whom she meets at a jam session before the city has been taken over by radical militants. The first person she ever has sex with, the musician presents himself as a promiscuous man uninterested in pursuing an emotional relationship. Still, the couple meets frequently to have sex, and Nadia assumes the musician doesn't want anything beyond their physical relationship. She breaks things off with the musician when she and Saeed start dating. After

Nadia divulges that she wants to end things, the musician suggests they go have sex one final time. She agrees, and the casual couple goes to his apartment for the last evening they ever spend together. Hamid reveals, though, that the musician almost immediately comes to regret that he focused that night on having sex and on not telling Nadia how he deeply he truly felt about her. The musician's regrets in the book are another example of the way that people think about the path they have taken, and wonder what a different path might have been like. The musician's own path, though, is soon cut off: unbeknownst to Nadia, the musician is killed just "a few short months" later.

The Volunteer – An eighteen- or nineteen-year-old Greek woman who lives in Mykonos and works as a volunteer at a clinic that provides services to refugees like Nadia and Saeed. When Nadia badly cuts her arm in the process of running from a band of suspicious men up a rocky hill on the beach, she goes to this clinic with Saeed. Here, the volunteer treats Nadia's arm—though she has no formal medical training—and engages her in conversation. The two women quickly form a close connection, and Nadia returns to the clinic everyday to smoke joints and pass the time with the volunteer. A kind woman, the volunteer asks Saeed and Nadia what she can do to help them, and when they tell her they want to somehow leave the island, she brings them to a door that will take them to London. Before Nadia steps through the portal, the volunteer hugs her tightly and whispers something in her ear. Months later, Nadia finds herself having sexual fantasies about the young woman as her relationship with Saeed deteriorates.

The Woman in the Leather Jacket – A Nigerian woman who looks like a "gunslinger." Saeed and Nadia meet this woman in the mansion of refugees in London, and Saeed finds himself thoroughly intimidated by her. She even stops him one day and refuses to let him pass, taunting him until he's notably flustered and frightened, at which point she allows him to continue on his way. And although the woman in the leather jacket never actually does Saeed or Nadia any harm, her general demeanor represents the fact that not all refugees are similar, or get along, simply because they're forced into the same situation.

The Bearded Man – An elderly migrant who lives in a mansion nearby the one Saeed and Nadia occupy in London. Like all of the other residents in his mansion, this man hails from Saeed and Nadia's country. This ultimately attracts Saeed to him, since Saeed desperately wants to reconnect with his homeland, culture, and religion. Indeed, the bearded man provides Saeed with an outlet for this desire by leading prayers and even inviting him and Nadia to move into the mansion to be among fellow countrywomen and –men (a proposition Nadia shoots down because it would mean giving up their private room to live in communal spaces divided by gender). When rumors circulate that angry Britons are going to attack the refugee population, the bearded man advises his community to organize themselves according to "religious principals," and though Saeed likes the sound of this, he also recognizes a certain dogmatic quality in such words—a quality that reminds him of the way the radical militants spoke while taking over his city.

The Preacher – A black preacher Saeed meets in Marin, California. The preacher is American, but his wife—who is dead—originally came from Saeed's country, so he understands a little bit of Saeed's language and knows about his religious practices. As such, Saeed finds himself drawn to the preacher and even volunteers to work at the shelter the man runs. It is here that Saeed encounters the preacher's daughter, whom he finds arrestingly beautiful.

The Preacher's Daughter – A young woman Saeed meets through the preacher. Saeed resolves to avoid the preacher's daughter upon first seeing her because he feels guilty about how taken he is by her beauty. Despite this, though, he finally has a long conversation with her when she asks him to tell her about his country during a remembrance ceremony for her deceased mother, who was originally from Saeed's home city. Hamid notes that while Nadia never meets this girl in person, she senses her presence vicariously, because Saeed's overall mood lifts after he meets her. And when Saeed and Nadia finally part ways, it isn't long before Saeed falls into a relationship with and marries the preacher's daughter.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LOVE AND CONNECTION

The migrants in *Exit West* must navigate vast cultural rifts, both in the foreign countries to which they flee and amongst themselves. Saeed and Nadia find themselves needing to connect with refugees from other nations and cultures, a task made necessary by the fact that each encampment they join—first in Mykonos, then in London, and finally in Marin—is made up of people from all over the world. Establishing a sense of unity in these communities becomes a difficult but necessary task; since the citizens of the countries they enter aren't willing to help them survive, Saeed and Nadia must turn to other migrants for help. The already difficult task of connecting with fellow refugees is further complicated by Saeed and Nadia's own struggles to maintain a different kind of connection: the romantic bond they try desperately to nourish throughout their travels. As such, Hamid considers how certain connections—to foreign countries, to other cultures, to new identities—can alter and in some cases

destabilize old unions, ultimately illustrating the extent to which refugees are forced to grow both culturally and individually during the process of migration.

When Nadia and Saeed first arrive at the refugee camp in Mykonos, it isn't hard for them to find a group of people from their country. Although the camp itself is populated quite diversely, the two lovers find it rather easy to ignore the fact that they now represent only one of many nationalities; "In this group," the narrator remarks, "everyone was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was." Because the camp itself is full of people from so many different places, the mere idea of foreignness is somewhat of a moot point—after all, *nobody* in the encampment can claim nativity, and so there's no way to single any group out as different or out of place. In its own way, this gives Nadia, Saeed, and their fellow refugees a sense of unity, for they're all connected by circumstance (the circumstance being, of course, that they've been forced to flee their respective countries).

Despite the sense of unity that prevails over the refugee camp in Mykonos, factions form within the camp, breaking up the community according to nationality. This is evidenced by the fact that Nadia and Saeed "quickly locate a cluster of fellow countrywomen and -men" upon arriving. Of course, it makes sense that they would actively seek out their own "countrywomen and -men," since so little is familiar and this is their first experience as refugees. Still clinging to their old lives, the couple finds comfort in trying to reestablish a sense of stability. At the same time, what they're used to is an entirely different kind of life—a life with certain patterns and rules that don't necessarily apply in their new circumstances. Although the refugee camp itself is rather harmonious, Nadia and Saeed find that the simple act of leaving home has seemingly already begun to place a strain on their romantic connection. For example, when, outside their new tent in Mykonos, Nadia goes to kiss Saeed—something they could never do in public in their own city—he turns away; "what she thought she had glimpsed in him in that moment was bitterness, and she had never seen bitterness in him before, not in all these months, not for one second." Two things are happening in this moment. First, Nadia surprises Saeed by kissing him, and in doing so transgresses the previously established norms that governed their relationship at home. Second, Saeed surprises Nadia by acting unlike himself, becoming for an instant unrecognizable. In both cases, the couple faces the startling changes that displacement has already wrought upon their romantic connection.

Nadia and Saeed find it harder to establish a connection with their fellow countrywomen and -men once they move to London. This is because the mansion they and many other refugees occupy is filled primarily by Nigerians and people from other countries, rendering them the sole representatives of their homeland. Nadia, for her part, openly embraces this new experience, bravely insinuating herself into a group of Nigerians and the counsel meetings they hold. Indeed, she delights in these meetings because they "represent something new in her mind, the birth of something new." Thrilled by the prospect of connecting with these strangers, she finds the people she meets in the mansion both "familiar and unfamiliar." "Together in this group they conversed in a language that was built in large part from English," the narrator notes, "but not solely from English, and some of them were in any case more familiar with English than were others. Also they spoke different variations of English, different Englishes, and so when Nadia gave voice to an idea or opinion among them, she did not need to fear that her views could not be comprehended, for her English was like theirs, one among many." The phrase "one among many" is useful to keep in mind when reading *Exit West*, as it ultimately highlights a crucial difference between Nadia and Saeed: Nadia enjoys becoming "one among many" in a diverse group of transplants, while Saeed feels bound to his own culture, wishing he didn't have to suddenly join something new in order to survive. This, it seems, is why he seeks out a group of his countrymen living in a mansion nearby. When one of the elders in this house tells him that he and Nadia can move in with them and sleep on the floor, Saeed repeats the news to Nadia. "Why would we want to move?" she asks, and when Saeed replies by saying, "To be among our own kind," she points out that the only thing tying them to these people is the fact that they're from the same country. "We've left that place," she states, making it clear that she doesn't share the sense of connection that Saeed feels to their home city. Thus, as the lovers' cultural connections begin to diverge, they find it harder to maintain their own romantic bond.

As Saeed and Nadia get further and further from their home (both literally and figuratively), they also grow further apart from each other. By the time they're living in Marin, both seem to understand that their romantic partnership has suffered as a result of the journey. Saeed, for his part, still tries to stay in touch with his own culture by praying and becoming close with a preacher whose dead wife was from Saeed's country. Meanwhile, Nadia continues to distance herself from her past life and culture (and therefore Saeed). Neither she nor Saeed wants to acknowledge the rift growing between them. The narrator observes, "neither talked much of drifting apart, not wanting to inflict a fear of abandonment, while also themselves quietly feeling that fear, the fear of the severing of their tie, the end of the world they had built together, a world of shared experiences in which no one else would share." The fact that Saeed and Nadia don't want to "abandon" each other suggests that they think of their relationship as one of the last things connecting them to their home country and the lives they led there. If they give one another up, nobody around them in Marin will know about their pasts, since only they can provide each other with this "world of shared experiences." Even Nadia, who more readily welcomes change and integration, struggles to let this connection die, but in the end she is the one to suggest that they go their separate ways.

In the aftermath of their split, Saeed and Nadia gradually see less and less of each other, learning how to live as independent people in this foreign country, and they slowly stop checking in with one another, too, until "eventually a month went by without any contact, and then a year, and then a lifetime." When they finally do see one another again, it is in their home city after "half a century" has passed. That their final meeting takes place in their native country underscores the ways in which their love waned as they traveled further from their home city, ultimately illustrating the extent to which migration—and the deterioration of community bonds—can impact the most personal of relationships.

BORDERS, DIVISION, AND FEAR

The migrants in *Exit West* find themselves searching for safety despite constant threats from people who want to enforce borders, such as the radical militants in Saeed and Nadia's city, who try to keep people from leaving, or the British government, which tries to rid London of refugees. Fortunately for Saeed and Nadia, the world has opened itself up in a mysterious but beautiful way, as doors are appearing that transport anyone who walks through them to other parts of the world. In this way, the enigmatic doors transcend arbitrary boundaries set by governments to restrict movement between nations. Unfortunately, though, using these doors leads to new kinds of divisions that have less to do with physical demarcation than with socially constructed separations. By highlighting the prevalence of nativism and xenophobia, Hamid encourages readers to recognize humanity's unsettling tendency to divide itself according to prejudice, hate, and, above all, fear.

In response to the sudden influx of refugees arriving through doors in London, England's government tries to reject newcomers, rallying law enforcement and xenophobic residents alike to help deport or scare away migrants like Saeed and Nadia. When referring to the violent protestors who want to push refugees out of London, Hamid uses the term "nativist," a word that refers to those who believe that the interests of a country's native-born people must be protected against immigrants. That the nativists feel their interest must be protected against refugees suggests that they fear that newcomers will diminish or negatively alter something about their country. In a conversation about the angry nativists rallying outside their living quarters, Nadia suggests that "the natives were so frightened that they could do anything," up to and including murdering the migrants whose presence they were protesting. Nadia sees that the hatred which these Londoners are directing at her and her fellow refugees is primarily rooted in insecurity and fear. "I can understand it," Nadia continues. "Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived." When Saeed points out that millions of people *did* arrive in their country before they fled, Nadia remarks, "That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose." Under this interpretation, the nativist Londoners want to keep refugees out of their country because they see them as a threat to their very existence.

Of course, the nativists aren't the only ones in *Exit West* who commit themselves to the separation and division of different kinds of people. In fact, even the migrant community divvies itself up according to national or cultural affiliations. Although Nadia is apparently comfortable joining groups of migrants who don't hail from her country, Saeed strongly feels the impulse to find a group of fellow countrymen in London, especially since the refugees living in the mansion with him are all from different places. "Here in this house he was the only man from his country, and those sizing him up were from another country, and there were far more of them, and he was alone. This touched upon something basic, something tribal, and evoked tension and a sort of suppressed fear," Hamid writes. This fear, which comes from being isolated and singled out as different, leads Saeed to join a group of his fellow countrymen, an act that makes him "feel part of something, not just something spiritual, but something human, part of this group." Hamid seems to be underlining the fact that nativists aren't the only ones who divide people into groups. Indeed, even migrants like Saeed, who ultimately want to integrate into an undivided community, find themselves gravitating toward others based on their cultural or national affiliations.

Unlike Saeed, who feels uncomfortable in the mansion of refugees because he can't relate to migrants from other countries, Nadia eagerly embraces the house's multi-cultural dynamic. This is evident in the fact that she starts attending council meetings held by the mansion's Nigerian contingent—meetings in which she is the only "obvious non-Nigerian" in attendance. When she first appears at one of these gatherings, the group of Africans "seem[s] surprised to see her" and regards her quietly. Before long, though, an elderly woman whom Nadia has helped climb the stairs invites her to come stand by her side, and the group as a whole accepts her presence. Whereas Saeed actively tries to avoid situations in which he's the only person from his country, Nadia willingly puts herself in this position, and although doing so is perhaps uncomfortable at first, she ultimately gains an entirely new community of friends and supporters.

Throughout *Exit West*, Hamid shows that fear is the strongest generator of social division, encouraging both nativists and refugees to establish boundaries between groups of people based on essentially arbitrary factors, such as where they were born. In the end, Hamid suggests that it is Nadia's example that readers should follow, since she is capable not only of embracing new and diverse communities, but also of understanding that it is fear that motivates people to erect social boundaries—and this understanding ultimately enables

her to better transcend such boundaries.

RELIGION

Rather than mining the specifics of a given faith, in *Exit West*, Hamid explores the ways in which religious practice in general can influence an individual's relationships, memories, and sense of self. Because the country where Saeed and Nadia live remains unnamed throughout the novel, the religion Saeed practices is also never identified (though certain elements, like calls to prayer, suggest that it is rooted in Islam). Nonetheless, religion brings itself to bear on Saeed and Nadia in different ways. After fleeing his country, Saeed uses religion to reconnect to what he has lost, praying as a way of remembering his parents and his homeland. Nadia, on the other hand, has always dressed in religious garb to protect herself from unwanted advances even though she isn't actually spiritual—and migrating to new countries doesn't change this. Although these ways of engaging with religion differ from one another, it's worth noting that both Saeed and Nadia benefit first and foremost from the cultural and social aspects of religion. As Saeed finds comfort in shared rituals and Nadia finds personal freedom (or safety) in religious dress, Hamid suggests that religion itself is something people can use to their advantage—even if they're only engaging with the customs and not the actual theology.

After Saeed leaves his country, religion becomes a comforting way of interacting with the memory of his parents and his homeland. Although in the beginning of *Exit West* he admits to Nadia that he rarely prays, by the time he's living in Marin, he prays several times per day. In this way, Hamid traces Saeed's growing spirituality, charting the young man's slow gravitation toward his parents' religious customs. "When Saeed was a child he had first prayed out of curiosity," Hamid writes, describing Saeed's original interest in prayer. "[He] would see [his parents] preparing to pray, and see them praying, and see their faces after they had prayed, usually smiling, as though relieved, or released, or comforted, and he would wonder what happened when one prayed, and he was curious to experience it for himself." Watching his parents pray, young Saeed associates the act with relief, release, and comfort. It's unsurprising, then, that he turns to religion once more after having lost his parents and having been forced to leave his country. Unlike the things he has lost, he can take this religious ritual wherever he goes, thereby retaining a part of his past. This is why he prays multiple times a day; doing so soothes him and links him to his childhood. "When he prayed he touched his parents, who could not otherwise be touched," Hamid notes, illustrating that Saeed's gravitation toward religion allows him first and foremost to travel back in time, rejoining him with his dead parents. In this moment, Hamid is suggesting that, by praying, Saeed is able to engage with his parents' by engaging the worldviews they held. As such, religion emerges in *Exit West* as something that has the potential to reinvigorate a migrant's lost sense of connection to their homeland.

In addition to providing him with a way of regaining elements of his old life, religion also gives Saeed something to focus on when facing hate and xenophobia. While living in London, he and Nadia are forced to contend with the fact that London nativists and law enforcement actively want to push them out of the country. Having found a group of fellow countrymen who are deeply pious, Saeed listens to a bearded man urge others to buoy their religious faith as a way of organizing against the people who wish to do them harm. This man "advocated a banding together of migrants along religious principles, cutting across divisions of race or language or nation." In this moment, Saeed's elder countryman argues that people should look to religious principles rather than arbitrary geographical or cultural groupings, and band together in accordance with these ideals. This manner of thinking suggests that people should strive to be a certain way, should try to be people who, because of their "principles," are intrinsically good. Interestingly enough, this aligns with Saeed's own conception that religious devotion and prayer will make him into a certain kind of person. Hamid notes that "prayer for [Saeed] became about being a man, being one of the men, a ritual that connected him to adulthood and to the notion of being a particular sort of man, a gentleman, a gentle man, a man who stood for community and faith and kindness and decency, a man, in other words, like his father." With religion signifying all these things, Saeed suddenly finds something to latch onto amidst the hate and tumult aimed at him by angry nativists. In other words, religion symbolizes a way of addressing and coping with the difficulties of being a migrant.

Whereas religion connects Saeed to his past and gives him a sense of self-improvement, for Nadia it provides something a bit more tangible: personal space and safety. This is even the case before widespread turmoil ravages her country. She admits as much to Saeed when he asks on their first date why she wears long black robes even though she doesn't pray: "So men don't fuck with me," she says. While Saeed eventually turns to religion in order to connect with his parents, Nadia uses religion to keep unwanted attention at bay, since the assumption is that a woman dressed in such conservative clothing should be left alone. This indicates how strongly Saeed and Nadia's fellow citizens respect religious custom—a respect Nadia uses to her advantage. By presenting herself as devoutly religious, she enables herself to act freely, behaving in a way nobody would ever guess. Indeed, she smokes marijuana, takes mushrooms, has casual sex, and lives an altogether independent life as a professional woman. At least, this is the case before she's forced to leave the country, but even after fleeing to Greece, England, and the United States—places that boast religious freedom—she refuses to give up her long black robes. "[One] morning [Saeed] asked Nadia why she still wore

her black robes, since here she did not need to, and she said that she had not needed to wear them even in their own city, when she lived alone, before the militants came, but she chose to, because it sent a signal, and she still wished to send this signal," Hamid writes. When Nadia asserts that she wants to send a signal by wearing religious robes, she confirms that her engagement with her country's religious practices has little to do with spiritual faith. Instead, her participation in religion is primarily practical and cultural, since the robes carry implications about the kind of person wearing them. Once again, then, Hamid demonstrates that the cultural elements of religion are often as meaningful as religious belief itself, in this case empowering Nadia to lead the life she wants to lead.

ESCAPE

The most obvious manifestation of the theme of escape in *Exit West* comes when Saeed and Nadia flee their city through one of the many mysterious portals that transport people all over the world. However, this is not the only way these characters escape their lives. In fact, Hamid showcases a handful of smaller forms of escape—like the use of technology or recreational drugs—that Saeed and Nadia indulge in order to distract themselves from their everyday lives. Nadia and Saeed both use their **phones** to access "an invisible world," one that is "all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near." Of course, this is especially meaningful to them because they live in a world in which violent radicals and government agencies alike want to limit their ability to traverse borders. Indeed, *Exit West* is a book about boundaries and travel, a book that explores the kinds of escape available to people who need to avoid danger, discontent, or both. By putting on display the ways humans ply themselves with everyday distractions—miniature escapes—Hamid sets readers up to better empathize with forced migrants like Saeed and Nadia, people who are eventually left without any choice but to pursue escape in a more literal and life-altering manner.

Even in a city overrun by violence, Nadia and Saeed are able to access other parts of the world through the internet on their phones. For Saeed, this is a great gift, but it's also something of an ominous force, and something he wants to keep under control. Hamid writes, "Saeed partly resisted the pull of his phone. He found the antenna too powerful, the magic it summoned too mesmerizing, as though he were eating a banquet of limitless food, stuffing himself, stuffing himself, until he felt dazed and sick, and so he had removed or hidden or restricted all but a few applications." Weary of the "magic" his phone possess—its ability to whisk him too far away into other worlds—he limits himself to a single hour of internet browsing per day. In turn, this limiting suggests that, although Saeed is comfortable indulging temporary distractions, he doesn't want to be fully removed or transported away from his life. Instead, he wants to remain present, avoiding getting too absorbed in alternate realities because he ultimately prefers his actual life.

Whereas Saeed uses his phone to escape his life in a controlled manner, Nadia has no problem using the internet to the fullest extent as a way of distracting herself from her otherwise dreary everyday life in a war-torn city. Hamid makes this clear when he writes: "In contrast to Saeed, Nadia saw no need to limit her phone. It kept her company on long evenings, as it did countless young people in the city who were likewise stranded in their homes, and she rode it far out into the world on otherwise solitary, stationary nights." The young people of this city are "stranded in their homes" at night because the government has enforced curfews to protect citizens from the fighting going on in the streets in the evenings. It's not hard to see, then, that this would be a lonely time for people, like Nadia, who live alone. As such, it makes sense that Nadia rides "far out into the world" on her phone, watching videos of "women exercising, men copulating, clouds gathering, waves tugging at the sand," all in an effort to transcend her present reality—a reality in which people are killed for trying to flee violence and hate, which she can only escape by using her phone.

Technology isn't the only form of diversion that helps Saeed and Nadia escape from their everyday lives. In fact, recreational drug use also provides the couple with a way to take their minds off the violence and turmoil that surround them. Nadia particularly enjoys smoking marijuana and frequently suggests that Saeed and she roll joints while hanging out. Of course, it's relatively unsurprising that Nadia is more interested in drugs than Saeed is, since this ultimately aligns with her tendency to use the internet rapaciously and without limitation. But Saeed also enjoys using drugs, as evidenced by his experience taking mushrooms in Nadia's apartment—indeed, the relaxing but revelatory shrooms provide him with a new kind of escape, one that has less to do with drifting away from his immediate surroundings and more to do with reframing his relationship to the world. As he looks at Nadia's lemon tree and considers how wonderfully connected it is to everything, he begins to feel that "surely conflicts could be healed if others had experiences like this." Thinking about connection and "gratitude" and "peace," he suddenly gains a new perspective on his current circumstances, ultimately revitalizing his hope in humanity and, thus, his everyday life. In this way, recreational drug use provides him with an escape which enables him to look at his situation from afar and return with a new outlook.

Finally, it's worth considering noting that Saeed and Nadia's different ways of approaching small-scale escape ultimately mirror their respective attitudes when it comes to literally escaping their city. Although Saeed recognizes that they need to find a way out of the country for their safety, the thought of leaving behind everything he's ever known is devastating to him; he "desperately wanted to leave his city, in a sense he always had, but in his imagination he had thought he would

leave it only temporarily, [...] and this looming potential departure was altogether different, for he doubted he would come back, and the scattering of his extended family and his circle of friends and acquaintances, forever, struck him as deeply sad, as amounting to the loss of a home, no less, of his home." In the same way that Saeed is reluctant to completely distract himself from his everyday life by using the internet, he's hesitant to leave behind his home, though he knows he must do so in order to stay alive. Nadia, on the other hand, is more comfortable with the idea of escaping the city. Much like her tendency to "ride" the internet "far out into the world," she more readily embraces the fact that she and Saeed must flee. "Nadia had long been, and would afterwards continue to be, more comfortable with all varieties of movement in her life than was Saeed, in whom the impulse of nostalgia was stronger," Hamid writes. This description is in keeping with Hamid's earlier demonstration of the couple's opposing mentalities on a smaller scale. By showing the different ways Saeed and Nadia engage with the internet on their phones—the contrasting manners in which they indulge or resist distraction and momentary escape—Hamid helps readers understand the psychology of the need for escape, and in doing so successfully illuminates what for most readers is an incomprehensible experience of deciding whether or not to flee a war-torn home.

SYMBOLS

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

CELLPHONES

Throughout *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia turn to their cellphones in order to connect not only with one another, but with the outside world. In fact, they get local numbers immediately upon arriving in Mykonos. This way, they don't have to wait long before they can reach out to people they know, tell them they've made it through the doors safely, and access the internet. Sitting next to one another on the ground after setting up their tent, they scroll through the news on their phones and read about "the various routes and destinations migrants [are] taking and recommending to each other." In this way, their cellphones become portals into a universe of information that is directly applicable to their current circumstances—an ethereal community of refugees that can communicate over vast distances without any hindrance, thereby transcending the borders that otherwise separate migrants from each other. However, Saeed and Nadia's phones also help them to escape from everyday life and, eventually, from their relationship. Indeed, although they rely heavily upon text messaging in the early stages of their courtship to build their bond, it isn't long before Saeed and Nadia willingly distract themselves from one another by peering at separate screens. As such, depending upon the context in which they're used, these devices take on the dual power of uniting and separating, essentially representing the tenuous, fragile ways humans connect with or push each other away.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead Books edition of *Exit West* published in 2018.

Chapter 1 Quotes

His name was Saeed and her name was Nadia and he had a beard, not a full beard, more a studiously maintained stubble, and she was always clad from the tips of her toes to the bottom of her jugular notch in a flowing black robe. Back then people continued to enjoy the luxury of wearing more or less what they wanted to wear, clothing and hair wise, within certain bounds of course, and so these choices meant something.

Related Characters: Nadia, Saeed

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears at the beginning of *Exit West* and functions to not only establish Saeed and Nadia's physical appearances, but also to suggest something about their personalities and the ways in which they comport themselves. This is especially notable in Nadia's case, for the choices she makes regarding her everyday wardrobe ultimately send a certain message to onlookers—namely, that she is quite religious and extremely devout. Indeed, her decision to wear a "flowing black robe" is particularly meaningful because her and Saeed's city has not yet been taken over by radical militants who eventually enforce certain dress codes. As such, the way Nadia presents herself is essentially an enactment of her personal agency and her power to dress however she chooses. Of course, what's interesting about her decision to wear such conservative clothing is that she actually uses her robes to misrepresent her personality, since she isn't religious. Dressing this way, then, gives her the opportunity to manipulate society's perception of who she is and what she believes. This misdirection ultimately enables her to hide her atheism, thereby enjoying a private and thrilling sense of freedom that comes along with having full control over other

people's expectations and assumptions.

It was the sort of view that might command a slight premium during gentler, more prosperous times, but would be most undesirable in times of conflict, when it would be squarely in the path of heavy machine-gun and rocket fire as fighters advanced into this part of town: a view like staring down the barrel of a rifle. Location, location, location, the realtors say. Geography is destiny, respond the historians.

Related Characters: Saeed's Mother, Saeed's Father, Saeed

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the apartment and surrounding area in which Saeed and his parents live. Unfortunately, what used to be a respectable and even enviable neighborhood in their native city has become "undesirable" because of the specific place it occupies in town—a place that is openly exposed to violence as radical militants stream into the nearby locales. When Hamid notes that "historians" uphold that "geography is destiny," he addresses the fact that so much of the world's turmoil—its "conflict[s]," wars, and disputes—has to do with land and ownership. Indeed, people in all corners of the world concern themselves with who lives where and who has rightful ownership over certain areas. In this way, matters of geography have shaped the course of history. Of course, this is a salient point in a book that concerns itself with migration, xenophobia, and division along cultural and national borders. If "geography is destiny," then the appearance of magical doors capable of whisking people to the far reaches of the earth suddenly complicates the future of border control and, thus, the very concept of ownership over any particular stretch of land.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Refugees had occupied many of the open places in the city, pitching tents in the greenbelts between roads, erecting lean-tos next to the boundary walls of houses, sleeping rough on sidewalks and in the margins of streets. Some seemed to be trying to re-create the rhythms of a normal life, as though it were completely natural to be residing, a family of four, under a sheet of plastic propped up with branches and a few chipped bricks. Others stared out at the city with what looked like anger, or surprise, or supplication, or envy. Others didn't move at all: stunned, maybe, or resting. Possibly dying. Saeed and Nadia had to be careful when making turns not to run over an outstretched arm or leg.

Related Characters: Nadia, Saeed

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hamid describes the state of Saeed and Nadia's city on the night they first go on a date, after which they move through the streets on their way to Nadia's apartment. In doing so, they must navigate "tents" and "lean-tos" as well as a vast array of bodies splayed out sleeping (or "dying") on the ground. By cataloguing what the young couple witnesses in this moment, Hamid brings readers into the experience of living in a city that is—as he has previously stated—"swollen by refugees." Migrant life is on display here, meaning that Nadia and Saeed can't simply ignore the fact that the regions surrounding their city are undergoing even worse bouts of violence, since the people they see sleeping on the sidewalks have fled their own homes and flocked to the city for safety. Of course, it isn't long before Saeed and Nadia find *themselves* living in tents in refugee communities established in foreign countries, so this harrowing look at the fear and desperation of migrant life is both informative and foreboding. Indeed, like many of the people they pass on the street, they too will soon try to "re-create the rhythms" of their lives in strange new environments.

At the same time, this passage allows the book to comment on the way that the West often thinks about migrants. In this passage, there are forced migrants on the streets of Saeed and Nadia's city, but Saeed and Nadia themselves are not at all migrants. And they see the migrants more as "bodies" than as people. The West does the same thing, and when Saeed and Nadia are forced to become refugees they get viewed by Westerners as being "bodies" rather than

people. The book then both universalizes and complicates the concept of migrancy: it reinforces that *anyone* can end up becoming a refugee, but that non-refugees always have the tendency to view refugees as being less than or even somehow deserving of their refugee status. And in revealing this tendency of people, the book criticizes such a narrow and selfish worldview.

> In times of violence, there is always that first acquaintance or intimate of ours, who, when they are touched, makes what had seemed like a bad dream suddenly, evisceratingly real. For Nadia this person was her cousin, a man of considerable determination and intellect, who even when he was young had never cared much for play, who seemed to laugh only rarely, who had won medals in school and decided to become a doctor, who had successfully emigrated abroad, who returned once a year to visit his parents, and who, along with eighty-five others, was blown by a truck bomb to bits, literally to bits, the largest of which, in Nadia's cousin's case, were a head and two-thirds of an arm.

Related Characters: Nadia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout roughly the first third of Exit West, Hamid crafts the gradual buildup of tension and violence as it slowly but surely overtakes Nadia and Saeed's city. Because such dynamics develop over time, though, it's not always easy to fully understand how much a place and its people have been influenced by mounting violence. Hamid demonstrates this by showing Nadia's sudden realization that things have taken a turn for the worse in her city. "In times of violence," he writes, "there is always that first acquaintance or intimate of ours, who, when they are touched, makes what had seemed like a bad dream suddenly, eviscerating real." An important component of this sentence is the word "touched," for it subtly implies a sense of progression, as if violence is passed along from person to person, "touch[ing]" one citizen at a time until it finally reaches somebody in Nadia's circle of "acquaintance[s]."

Furthermore, the fact that Nadia's cousin is the first person she knows to die as a result of the militants' presence is significant because it ultimately shows her that anybody and everybody—regardless of how much time they spend in the city—is in danger. After all, her cousin only visits his parents "once a year," and this time simply had the misfortune of being "blown [...] to bits." This is why Nadia feels like the "bad dream" of violence in her city is "suddenly, eviscerating real": if such a thing can happen to her cousin, who is hardly ever even in the city, then it can certainly happen to her, since she lives her entire life amidst the violence and commotion.

Chapter 3 Quotes

> Nadia and Saeed were, back then, always in possession of their phones. In their phones were antennas, and these antennas sniffed out an invisible world, as if by magic, a world that was all around them, and also nowhere, transporting them to places distant and near, and to places that had never been and would never be.

Related Characters: Saeed, Nadia

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Nadia and Saeed's connection to their phones—their attachment to the distant worlds displayed on their screens—is most pronounced before their government cuts off cellphone and internet service, at which point they find themselves at a loss, desperate to connect with each other and the outside world. In order to fully bring this dynamic to fruition and emphasize how devastating this loss would actually feel, Hamid makes sure to establish just how integral cellphones are to Nadia and Saeed's respective lives. Indeed, they are "always in possession of their phones," perhaps because they delight in the fact that these devices can "transport them to places distant and near." Plus, the young couple texts and instant messages one another actively in the initial stages of their relationship, meaning that their devices become essential to their courtship. In this way, Hamid portrays technology as something that not only provides people with an escape from everyday life through browsing, but that also puts them in touch with others.

Saeed was certain he was in love. Nadia was not certain what exactly she was feeling, but she was certain it had force. Dramatic circumstances, such as those in which they and other new lovers in the city now found themselves, have a habit of creating dramatic emotions, and furthermore the curfew served to conjure up an effect similar to that of a long-distance relationship, and long-distance relationships are well known for their potential to heighten passion, at least for a while, just as fasting is well known to heighten one's appreciation for food.

Related Characters: Nadia, Saeed

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears shortly after Saeed and Nadia's city enforces a curfew that keeps the young couple from seeing one another at night. Unable to spend time together, their courtship flares into something stronger, something that has "force." Saeed, for his part, interprets this as love, and perhaps it is—after all, their relationship lasts for a long time and is arguably a positive thing in Saeed's life, though it eventually sours. Because the relationship doesn't end up working out, this moment is worth considering, for Hamid underhandedly suggests that Nadia and Saeed's courtship prematurely advances because of the "dramatic circumstances" in which they've found themselves. He claims that such "dramatic circumstances"—meaning the violence and turmoil that keeps the budding lovers from spending time together—lead to "dramatic emotions," ultimately "heighten[ing] passion." As such, he illustrates the extent to which Nadia and Saeed's love is shaped by their situation as imminent refugees. Their bond, it seems, is strengthened by the fact that there is something dividing them from one another. When they finally travel to new countries together, though, there's nothing keeping them apart—in fact, they're forced to spend the vast majority of their time together. This is perhaps why their relationship doesn't work out: it was originally built upon the premise that they must fight to be together, and so they're unprepared when suddenly they find themselves in new circumstances when there is nothing keeping them apart.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Saeed's father encountered each day objects that had belonged to his wife and so would sweep his consciousness out of the current others referred to as the present, a photograph or an earring or a particular shawl worn on a particular occasion, and Nadia encountered each day objects that took her into Saeed's past, a book or a music collection or a sticker on the inside of a drawer, and evoked emotions from her own childhood, and jagged musings on the fate of her parents and her sister, and Saeed, for his part, was inhabiting a chamber that had been his only briefly, years ago, when relatives from afar or abroad used to come to visit, and being billeted here again conjured up for him echoes of a better era, and so in these several ways these three people sharing this one apartment splashed and intersected with each other across varied and multiple streams of time.

Related Characters: Nadia, Saeed, Saeed's Father, Saeed's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

This passage addresses the dynamic that runs between Saeed's father, Saeed, and Nadia in the aftermath of Saeed's mother's death. Living together in the family's small apartment, these three people navigate not only their own sense of grief, but each other's burdens, too. As Saeed's father mourns his wife—finding her "objects" everywhere he turns—Saeed himself explores a room he hasn't used since childhood, ultimately enacting his own sadness by remembering past days, before his city was torn by violence and his mother was killed. Meanwhile, Nadia is in a particularly tricky position because she is simultaneously an outsider and part of the family; however close she is with Saeed, there's no denying that she never knew his mother and thus can only strive to support her lover and his father in their time of need. By showcasing this interesting relational dynamic, Hamid spotlights the delicate nature of how humans connect with one another, especially in times of hardship and war—something Saeed and Nadia eventually find themselves having to do more and more often as they eventually move through the world as refugees trying to support each other while also tending to their own emotions.

It might seem surprising that even in such circumstances Saeed's and Nadia's attitudes towards finding a way out were not entirely straightforward. Saeed desperately wanted to leave his city, in a sense he always had, but in his imagination he had thought he would leave it only temporarily, never once and for all, and this looming potential departure was altogether different, for he doubted he would come back, and the scattering of his extended family and his circle of friends and acquaintances, forever, struck him as deeply sad, as amounting to the loss of a home, no less, of his home.

Related Characters: Nadia, Saeed

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

This is an explanation of Saeed's attachment to his home city. Hamid provides this insight after Nadia and Saeed have hired an agent to find them a door through which they can escape to another country. Although it's obvious to everybody—including Saeed—that he must leave, Hamid shows that coming to terms with forced migration is "not entirely straightforward." Indeed, the process of deciding when to escape is complicated, for Saeed has never envisioned having to uproot himself from his culture "once and for all." In this moment, then, it becomes clear that it's important for Saeed to feel as if he can "come back" to this city if he wants to, returning so that he doesn't have to conceive of his departure as a "loss of home." Finality, then, is portrayed as one of the most emotionally difficult aspects of becoming a refugee. This aligns with the fact that as Saeed and Nadia leave behind their native city, Saeed actually feels more and more connected to it and the culture he left behind. If he can't return home, then he can at least take on various practices that remind him of home and, thus, reconnect to a familiar lifestyle.

Nadia was possibly even more feverishly keen to depart, and her nature was such that the prospect of something new, of change, was at its most basic level exciting to her. But she was haunted by worries too, revolving around dependence, worries that in going abroad and leaving their country she and Saeed and Saeed's father might be at the mercy of strangers, subsistent on handouts, caged in pens like vermin.

Nadia had long been, and would afterwards continue to be, more comfortable with all varieties of movement in her life than was Saeed, in whom the impulse of nostalgia was stronger, perhaps because his childhood had been more idyllic, or perhaps because this was simply his temperament.

Related Characters: Saeed, Nadia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Hamid outlines one of the primary differences between Nadia and Saeed. Namely, he accentuates the vastly dissimilar ways in which they approach travel and change. Whereas Saeed harbors a strong "impulse of nostalgia," Nadia is "excit[ed]" by the prospect of change, which, even "at its most basic level" seemingly invigorates her, making her "feverishly keen" to leave behind the life she's always known in favor of that which is unfamiliar. Of course, this doesn't necessarily *have* to mean that Saeed and Nadia are ill-suited to one another, but it does hint at the fact that they have opposing worldviews. And because they're forced to travel so extensively with each other, this fundamental difference regarding how to approach change ultimately brings itself to bear on their relationship.

Indeed, Saeed quickly finds himself depleted by their constantly shifting circumstances and thus indulges his "impulse of nostalgia" by committing himself to prayer in an attempt to reconnect with his "idyllic" childhood. Nadia, on the other hand, embraces the variety of life as a refugee, and when the couple finally parts ways at the end of the novel, she suddenly feels "alive," a sentiment that aligns with the notion that change is "at its most basic level exciting to her." As such, this passage provides readers with a crucial lens through which to view and understand the forces that eventually pull Nadia and Saeed apart.

❝ [I]t was an easy promise to make because she had at that time no thoughts of leaving Saeed, but it was also a difficult one because in making it she felt she was abandoning the old man, and even if he did have his siblings and his cousins, and might now go live with them or have them come live with him, they could not protect him as Saeed and Nadia could, and so by making the promise he demanded she make she was in a sense killing him, but that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind.

Related Characters: Saeed's Mother, Saeed, Saeed's Father, Nadia

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nadia struggles to accept that Saeed's father won't be coming with her and Saeed through the door. During her last one-on-one conversation with the old man, he asks her to promise him that she'll stay by Saeed's side at least until they're out of danger, though he also expresses his desire that the young couple will soon marry and have children. In this moment, Hamid slyly hints at the coming demise of Saeed and Nadia's relationship, saying, "It was an easy promise to make because [Nadia] had at that time no thoughts of leaving Saeed." By using the words "at that time," Hamid implies that Nadia does, at some *other* time, think about "leaving Saeed," signaling to readers that—at the very least—their relationship is headed toward uncertainty and second thoughts.

On another note, Nadia also finds it "difficult" to promise Saeed's father that she'll take care of his son because doing so means essentially accepting the old man's decision to stay behind. Although she fights him at first, insisting that he come with them, she eventually relents and tells Saeed's father what he wants to hear, but this ultimately requires that she come to terms with the fact that she's about to abandon an elderly man in a dangerous city. This is why she feels as if she's "killing him," and Hamid's assertion that "when we migrate [...] we murder from our lives those we leave behind" only accentuates the sense of grave finality Nadia experiences in this moment.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ In the late afternoon, Saeed went to the top of the hill, and Nadia went to the top of the hill, and there they gazed out over the island, and out to sea, and he stood beside where she stood, and she stood beside where he stood, and the wind tugged and pushed at their hair, and they looked around at each other, but they did not see each other, for she went up before him, and he went up after her, and they were each at the crest of the hill only briefly, and at different times.

Related Characters: Saeed, Nadia

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs shortly after Nadia and Saeed arrive in Mykonos. Having set up their tent in the refugee encampment that snakes up a hill on the beach, the couple walks up to the peak and surveys this unfamiliar island, charting unknown territory for the first time, perhaps trying to acquaint themselves with their new surroundings. An important thing to keep in mind is that they each crest the hill after having had their first argument, which occurs when Nadia stoops to kiss Saeed outside the tent and he moves away, surprised by her public display of affection (though nobody sees this interaction).

That they stand at the "top of the hill" separately, then, is quite significant, as it signals to readers the first time they actively want to be apart from each other. And although they look upon the same landscape—taking in the same sights and letting the same winds ruffle their clothes—they do so as individuals, not as a couple, a fact that suggests their bond has already begun to erode even though they have only just left behind their home and Mykonos is only the first stop on their long journey as refugees.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ The residents of the house were terrified, most had seen firsthand what the police and soldiers could do, and in their terror they spoke more to one another than they otherwise might, strangers speaking to strangers. A sort of camaraderie evolved, as it might not have had they been on the street, in the open, for then they would likely have scattered, and the devil take the hindmost, but here they were penned in together, and being penned in made them into a grouping, a group.

Related Characters: Saeed, Nadia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the relational dynamic inside the mansion of refugees in London. Threatened by British police officers who have demanded that they leave the house, the many migrants squatting in the mansion's bedrooms unite in their fear. Many of them, it seems, have had similar experiences with dangerous "police and soldiers," and though this commonality might go overlooked in other circumstances, now the "residents of the house" develop a "camaraderie" based upon their similar histories and the threat of violence currently facing all of them at once. Indeed, they are "penned in together" and thus unable to "scatter" and go their separate ways. Instead, they unite as one multicultural people, and this transcends the various cultural and national divisions that might otherwise keep them from thinking of themselves as a cohesive whole. This moment also captures that way that threats against refugees often have the opposite of their intended effect: the British police and authorities are trying to separate and "break" the refugees, but in practice they are forcing the refugees to stick more closely together despite their many differences.

Chapter 8 Quotes

From dark London, Saeed and Nadia wondered what life must be like in light London, where they imagined people dined in elegant restaurants and rode in shiny black cabs, or at least went to work in offices and shops and were free to journey about as they pleased. In dark London, rubbish accrued, uncollected, and underground stations were sealed. The trains kept running, skipping stops near Saeed and Nadia but felt as a rumble beneath their feet and heard at a low, powerful frequency, almost subsonic, like thunder or the detonation of a massive, distant bomb.

Related Characters: Saeed, Nadia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

In the first paragraph of this passage, Hamid emphasizes the demarcations that keep refugees like Saeed and Nadia from interacting with the rest of London's population. Because officials have cut off electricity in the parts of town where large migrant populations are living, the delineation between the affluent public and the groups of suffering refugees is especially observable. Indeed, Nadia and Saeed pass their time in "dark London" wondering "what life must be like in light London." In doing so, they envision "elegant restaurants," "shiny black cabs," and office buildings. That the young couple is fantasizing about relatively ordinary things like "cabs" and office buildings highlights just how profoundly they have been cut off from the "normal" society.

In this way, Hamid shows that refugees like Saeed and Nadia aren't asking for much when they migrate to a new country—indeed, they merely want to join society and lead regular lives without having to face the threat of violence. Instead, though, they're forced to live in the "dark," listening as even London's trains—a mode of public transportation normally made available to everybody—deny them access by skipping their stops.

Together in this group they conversed in a language that was built in large part from English, but not solely from English, and some of them were in any case more familiar with English than were others. Also they spoke different variations of English, different Englishes, and so when Nadia gave voice to an idea or opinion among them, she did not need to fear that her views could not be comprehended, for her English was like theirs, one among many.

Related Characters: Nadia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the council Nadia takes part in while living in the mansion of refugees in London. The council itself meets in the courtyard and is comprised primarily of people Nadia thinks are from Nigeria, though she soon learns that this is a vast generalization, since so many of the councilmembers are from different regions, some of which are actually outside Nigeria's borders. She also discovers that these people make up an amalgamation of culture, one in which English becomes a shared language that allows them to give "voice to" "idea[s] or opinion[s]," thus enabling them to create an open forum where people can share their thoughts regardless of their cultural or national affiliation. The idea of being "one among many" is thrilling to Nadia because it represents the exact kind of invigorating sense of

change and progress she always seeks in her life. As somebody who was originally eager to leave behind her homeland, she's excited by the idea of belonging to a collective of people from other places. As such, her sense of unity reveals itself to be one rooted in multicultural connection, something that seemingly transcends linguistic boundaries by combining "different variations of English"—different individualities—in order to forge a comprehensive and varied whole.

Saeed for his part wished he could do something for Nadia, could protect her from what would come, even if he understood, at some level, that to love is to enter into the inevitability of one day not being able to protect what is most valuable to you. He thought she deserved better than this, but he could see no way out, for they had decided not to run, not to play roulette with yet another departure. To flee forever is beyond the capacity of most: at some point even a hunted animal will stop, exhausted and await its fate, if only for a while.

Related Characters: Saeed, Nadia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hamid spotlights Saeed's strong commitment to his relationship with Nadia. In response to the uncertainty of living in London under the threat of nativist British mobs who want to harm the refugee community, Saeed considers his love for Nadia, wanting to "protect" her but also realizing that there's only so much he can do to keep her safe in such hostile and unpredictable circumstances. To make things worse, the couple has "decided not to run," meaning that—for the first time in their experience as refugees—escape is not an option. Of course, this only increases Saeed's feeling of vulnerability regarding his inability to "protect" Nadia, but the decision also denotes a recognition of the fact that running away is in fact a gamble in and of itself, a game of "roulette" that might result in even worse circumstances.

By establishing this notion, Hamid does two things. First, he prepares readers to better understand just how discontent Nadia and Saeed are when they later reverse their decision and opt to go through yet another door. Second, he makes clear just how contingent and vulnerable the lives of refugees are, as they have little control over whether they can improve their situations.

Perhaps they had decided they did not have it in them to do what would have needed to be done, to corral and bloody and where necessary slaughter the migrants, and had determined that some other way would have to be found. Perhaps they had grasped that the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist, and the extinguishing party too would have been transformed in the process, and too many native parents would not after have been able to look their children in the eye, to speak with head held high of what their generation had done. Or perhaps the sheer number of places where there were now doors had made it useless to fight in any one.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after the angry nativist mobs in London stop attacking the refugee community. Hamid postulates in this paragraph that these xenophobic Britons finally realized either that enforcing national borders is impossible in a world full of portals, or that defending these borders is such an obviously ignoble thing to do that nobody can commit him- or herself to the task for very long before realizing the error of his or her ways. After all, to enforce such divisions eventually requires extreme violence, and would require Londoners to "corral and bloody and where necessary slaughter the migrants" who, it should be noted, merely seek safety. Of course, doing this would be a shameful, deeply hostile and immoral act, something no parent could possibly brag about to his or her children. By clarifying the various considerations that must have gone into the nativists' decision to leave the migrant population alone, Hamid suggests that advocating for the division of humans based on cultural or national groupings is an intrinsically uphill battle. Unity, love, and connection, he seems to say in this moment, always wins out over bigotry and xenophobia.

Chapter 9 Quotes

Saeed did not ask Nadia to pray with him for his father, and she did not offer, but when he was gathering a circle of acquaintances to pray in the long evening shadow cast by their dormitory, she said she would like to join the circle, to sit with Saeed and the others, even if not engaged in supplication herself, and he smiled and said there was no need. And she had no answer to this. But she stayed anyway, next to Saeed on the naked earth that had been stripped of plants by hundreds of thousands of footsteps and rutted by the tires of ponderously heavy vehicles, feeling for the first time unwelcome. Or perhaps unengaged. Or perhaps both.

Related Characters: Saeed, Nadia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, Nadia and Saeed find themselves unable to connect when it comes to prayer and cultural practices. Although Nadia only wants to "engage" with her boyfriend in order to support him through the grief of discovering his father has died, Saeed finds himself incapable of fully welcoming her into the communal prayer. This is perhaps because he knows Nadia isn't religious, and knows she won't be "engaged in supplication" as she sits by his side. In turn, he most likely feels as if her presence is inauthentic. Of course, this viewpoint overlooks the relational significance of Nadia's gesture—for her, prayer is besides the point; she wants to demonstrate to Saeed that she's there for him, willing to support him even though she herself doesn't ascribe to his specific spiritual beliefs. Unfortunately, Saeed turns away from her, leaving her feeling "both" "unwelcome" and "unengaged"—two things a person in a healthy romantic relationship doesn't usually experience.

The use of the word "unengaged" carries a further significance as well. Since Nadia's conversation with Saeed's father before they left, there has been an assumption that Nadia and Saeed will eventually get married. In other words, the two have shared an implied engagement. In this moment, Nadia seems to explicitly feel for the first time that there is not really such an engagement, and that there relationship is not necessarily one that will last.

Every time a couple moves they begin, if their attention is still drawn to one another, to see each other differently, for personalities are not a single immutable color, like white or blue, but rather illuminated screens, and the shades we reflect depend much on what is around us. So it was with Saeed and Nadia, who found themselves changed in each other's eyes in this new place.

Related Characters: Saeed, Nadia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the ways in which Nadia and Saeed change while living in London and toiling in the refugee work camps. Spending their days apart and hardly talking in the evenings, both Nadia and Saeed discover that they can now look upon each other with something akin to objectivity, as if with each "move" they've gained a certain amount of distance, vantage points from which they can observe one another anew. This, it seems, is how migration influences romantic connections. As Nadia and Saeed adapt to their shifting environments, it's only logical that their "personalities" also morph, "for personalities are not a single immutable color, like white or blue, but rather illuminated screens, and the shades we reflect depend much on what is around us." Whereas Saeed responds to his new surroundings by increasing the amount he prays and trying to reconnect to his past, Nadia embraces the many changes in her life. And while Hamid suggests that these kinds of personal transformations are natural—that neither is right and neither is wrong—he also illustrates that such shifts in identity can open up rifts inside otherwise strong relationships.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Now, though, in Marin, Saeed prayed even more, several times a day, and he prayed fundamentally as a gesture of love for what had gone and would go and could be loved in no other way. When he prayed he touched his parents, who could not otherwise be touched, and he touched a feeling that we are all children who lose our parents, all of us, every man and woman and boy and girl, and we too will all be lost by those who come after us and love us, and this loss unites humanity, unites every human being, the temporary nature of our being-ness, and our shared sorrow, the heartache we each carry and yet too often refuse to acknowledge in one another, and out of this Saeed felt it might be possible, in the face of death, to believe in humanity's potential for building a better world, and so he prayed as a lament, as a consolation, and as a hope, but he felt that he could not express this to Nadia, that he did not know how to express this to Nadia, this mystery that prayer linked him to, and it was so important to express it.

Related Characters: Saeed, Nadia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hamid clarifies and expands upon Saeed's relationship to prayer, a practice to which the young man turns in order to enact a "gesture of love for what [has] gone and would go and could be loved in no other way." It's worth noting Hamid's use of the word "touch" in this description of Saeed's belief in the power of prayer; "When he prayed he touched his parents," Hamid writes, "who could not otherwise be touched." This image—of Saeed "touch[ing]" his parents—lends itself to the idea of connection, for what is "touch" if not a physical link between two people. But Saeed's parents are dead, so the only way he can "touch" them is through prayer, which also inspires in him "a feeling that we are all children who lose our parents."

Saeed's feeling, then, is yet another belief in the power of prayer to unite people. As such, Saeed's gravitation toward religion is primarily a gravitation toward cohesion and unity, which is why he so desperately wants to "express" this feeling to Nadia, with whom he finds himself less and less connected. Unfortunately, though, he doesn't know how to articulate these thoughts, perhaps because he knows Nadia is uninterested in spirituality. Still, though, he's wrong to think she can't comprehend his appreciation of unity, for she too seeks this sort of connection, though she does so not by praying, but by embracing multiculturalism and diverse communities. Nonetheless, the couple yet again finds itself unable to transcend its differences, and Saeed refrains from sharing his ideas about prayer and unity with Nadia.

But while fear was part of what kept them together for those first few months in Marin, more powerful than fear was the desire that each see the other find firmer footing before they let go, and thus in the end their relationship did in some senses come to resemble that of siblings, in that friendship was its strongest element, and unlike many passions, theirs managed to cool slowly, without curdling into its reverse, anger, except intermittently.

Related Characters: Saeed, Nadia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears shortly before Nadia and Saeed decide to finally go their separate ways. In this paragraph, Hamid outlines the emotions keeping the couple from leaving one another, emphasizing the effect of "fear" on their decision to stay together. Whereas in the beginning of their relationship they helped one another mitigate their respective "fears"—supporting each other through the violence and unrest roiling their city—now their relationship itself has become the object of their "fear." Indeed, they worry about what will happen to each other in the aftermath of their breakup. After all, they've built an entire life together and have helped one another through so many difficult experiences—experiences that no doubt have shaped who they are and how they view the world. This is why their bond has "come to resemble that of siblings." Similar to how a brother and sister witness each other grow up and harbor an intrinsic love for one another, Saeed and Nadia can appreciate the ways in which they've matured. By allowing readers to bear witness to the slow "cool[ing]" of this bond, Hamid ultimately demonstrates that not all love is meant to remain romantic, suggesting that sometimes love outlasts "passion."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

In a city "swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace," Saeed and Nadia meet for the first time while taking a course on "corporate identity and product branding." At first, they don't notice each other, except that Saeed notes that Nadia wears long black robes that cover nearly her entire body. Because the citizens of this city aren't forced at this point to dress or behave according to religious principals, Nadia's decision to wear such clothing actually signifies something about her personality, Hamid notes.

Exit West *begins in a time of tension, a friction that is palpable from the opening sentence. Hamid's assertion that the city is still "mostly" at peace underhandedly emphasizes that the society isn't* completely *at peace, ultimately framing unity and accord as fragile. Furthermore, by calling attention to Nadia's decision to dress in long religious robes, Hamid prepares readers to consider the effect religion has on the ways in which people view one another.*

Hamid admits that "it might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class," but this, he suggests, is the way life works—"one moment we are pottering about our errands as usual and the next we are dying." Sitting in class one day, Saeed notices a beauty mark on Nadia's neck that sometimes dances with the pulse of her heart, and this encourages him to speak to her. "Listen," he says one day after class, "would you like to have a coffee," at which point he stops to consider her religiously conservative clothing before adding, "in the cafeteria?" Observing him, she responds, "You don't say your evening prayers?"

Saeed and Nadia's first interaction is fraught with cultural implications surrounding the way Nadia presents herself in public. Even before Nadia mentions prayer, Saeed is already hyperaware of her religious robes. This is why he pauses in the middle of asking her to coffee, hastily adding "in the cafeteria" so as not to offend the conservative values he assumes she has due to the way she dresses. Seeing this hesitation and skittishness, Nadia capitalizes on Saeed's insecurity, taking the opportunity to chastise him for not saying his prayers and, thus, playing directly into his assumption that her religious beliefs will factor into their interaction.

Saeed stammers to find an excuse, telling Nadia that he doesn't always get around to praying but that nobody's perfect. "I think it's personal," he says. "Each of us has his own way." As he struggles to speak, she interrupts. "I don't pray," she states, adding, "Maybe another time." With this, she walks into the parking lot, where she finds her motorcycle, puts on her helmet, and roars away.

When Nadia reveals that she doesn't pray, she defies Saeed's assumption that she is devoutly religious. Getting on her motorcycle, she further shatters his belief that he can judge a person based on her clothing. To be fair, his assumptions aren't ludicrous—after all, religious robes are one of the few kinds of clothing that actually do signal a certain kind of worldview or belief. On another note, Saeed's suggestion that prayer is "personal" and that everybody has his or her "own way" of practicing religion is worth keeping in mind, since Exit West *is a book that explores the ways in which different cultural and religious practices differ and intersect with one another. In this moment, Saeed reveals his belief that spiritual practice can be flexible and specific to each person.*

After their confusing conversation about prayer, Saeed can't stop thinking about Nadia. The next day, he finds himself distracted at work, unable to write a sales pitch to a soap company. Although he's one of the younger employees at his agency, which sells outdoor advertising placements to local companies, his boss has taken a liking to him, which is why he asked him to pitch the soap company. The task is rather important, since the economy is "sluggish from mounting unrest," but Saeed can't focus. By the end of the day, he has only barely scraped together enough information and research to submit for his boss's approval. Nonetheless, when he hands it in at the last possible moment, his boss seems "preoccupied," writing several small suggestions in the margins and telling Saeed to send it to the company. "Something about his expression made Saeed feel sorry for him," Hamid notes.

In this scene, readers witness the initial effects of Nadia on Saeed. Judging by his inability to concentrate at work, it's clear he feels connected to Nadia, though at this point this connection is more of an idea than an actual bond. Still, the percolating romance gives him something to focus on, an escape from his current reality, which is perhaps a healthy thing, since clearly other elements of his everyday life—like having to contend with the failing economy—are less than ideal. Indeed, the mounting tension in the city brings itself to bear on Saeed's company, worrying his boss so much that he doesn't even notice Saeed's sloppy work. In this way, Hamid subtly shows readers the pervasive effects of the violence spreading through the city.

As Saeed's sales pitch makes its way through the internet, a married woman sleeps in a wealthy neighborhood in Australia. Her husband is away, and her house's alarm system is off because she forgot to turn it on. Although it's dark outside, her bedroom is suffused in the faint illumination of her charging laptop. However, the door to her closet, which opens into the bedroom, is "a rectangle of complete darkness—the heart of darkness." From this elemental blackness, a man is emerging. First his head and "woolly hair" appear in the frame, "wriggl[ing] with great effort" as his hands clutch either side of the doorjamb, pulling him into the faintly lit room. Slowly but surely, his body emerges from the black door until he's fully in the room, at which point he slips by the sleeping woman and escapes through the open window.

This short scene introduces a new element to Exit West, *putting the idea of escape and transition into readers' minds. Without fully explaining what's happening, Hamid presents a mysterious door, a portal through which a man with "woolly hair" enters into a wealthy woman's private bedroom. As such, two people who are typically separated either geographically or culturally come into close contact with one another, though the woman herself is asleep and is thus unaware of what's going on. Still, the idea of her privacy—her right to declare her bedroom as her own—is destabilized in this moment, as this unknown man passes through it. Thankfully, it's clear he doesn't want to do her any harm, since he immediately escapes through her open window, suggesting that his presence in the bedroom is nothing more than a transitory moment, a stop on the way to some other place. The moment thus plays with the stereotype of the "scary" immigrant, who turns out not to be scary at all. And at the same time shows how the "white people" of the world are metaphorically asleep and unable to see what is actually going on, while still seeing immigrants as being threats.*

Meanwhile, Saeed goes to a bakery to get bread for dinner, which he will have with his parents—with whom he lives. Hamid notes that this is common amongst "independent-minded" single men in his city with "decent posts and good educations." And in any case, Saeed likes his parents. His mother has the "commanding air" of schoolteacher, and his father has the "slightly lost bearing of a university professor." Although his mother no longer works, his father still teaches, despite the fact that he's forced to accept lower wages and lesser positions because he's past the age of retirement. Indeed, Hamid's parents originally "chose respectable professions in a country that would wind up doing rather badly by its respected professionals." Unfortunately, they have almost no "security" or "status" after having toiled in otherwise commendable jobs for the entire lives.

The fact that Saeed's parents "chose respectable professions in a country that would wind up doing rather badly by its respected professionals" once more illustrates the decline of Saeed and Nadia's country. Not only has the city itself fallen on uncertain times marked by sporadic violence and unrest, but Saeed's parents have no "security" when it comes to their careers, rendering them especially vulnerable to the slow deterioration of their previous lives. This lack of stability is ultimately denotes a lack of cohesiveness and unity in their home community, since the values that once bound their city—values that informed their respective decisions to pursue careers as teachers—have fallen away, leaving them with nothing but fear and uncertainty in a shifting socioeconomic context.

Saeed and his parents live in a small apartment in a building that used to be elegant and "ornate," though it's now "crumbling" and overcrowded. Because it's in a highly commercial area, what was once "upscale" about their home has now become "undesirable," especially because the location itself is "squarely in the path of heavy machine-gun and rocket fire" when "fighters advance into this part of town." "Location, location, location, the realtors say," writes Hamid. "Geography is destiny, respond the historians." In due time, he notes, Saeed's home will erode under the stress of war and conflict, "a day's toll outpacing that of a decade" as the façade slips to ruin.

Once again, Hamid underlines the effects of violence and discord on the city. Most importantly, he calls attention to the ways in which such discord and division influence a person's sense of place. When he says, "geography is destiny," he prepares readers for Saeed and Nadia's eventual experience navigating geographically specific acts of violence. Although he hasn't yet provided readers with enough information about the city's conflict for them to fully understand the ways in which "geography" factors into Saeed and Nadia's problems, Hamid lays the groundwork in this moment for considerations about safety, borders, and escape.

Saeed's mother and father met at a movie theater when they were Saeed's age. Seeing his father across the lobby, his mother went over and stood in front of him, speaking energetically to a friend so he'd notice her. Before long, he spoke to her, and they connected instantly because they're "both readers, and, in different ways, debaters." After their wedding, they enjoyed a vigorous sex life together for many years, though in recent times they've stopped engaging in physical activity quite as often. "In the last year of the life they shared together," notes Hamid, "the year that was already well under way when Saeed met Nadia, they had sex only thrice." As for the cinema where they met, it has been replaced by an arcade, but Saeed still notices his parents smiling as they pass the building.

Hamid's description of Saeed's parents' relationship establishes the novel's focus on romantic connection and sensuality. From this brief but detailed summary of Saeed's parents' sex life, readers come to understand that sexual activity is something of a barometer in Exit West, *an indicator of a relationship's vitality. At the same time, though, Saeed's parents' union seemingly remains strong even as their sex life tapers off, ultimately suggesting that physical engagement can sometimes fade away without destroying a couple's love.*

Saeed's family keeps a telescope in the living room. This telescope was passed down from Saeed's grandfather to his father, who subsequently gave it to Saeed. Because the city sky is too bright for the stars to be visible, Saeed can only see celestial formations on "cloudless nights after a daytime rain." On these occasions, the family brings the telescope onto the balcony and sits together while Saeed scans the sky, beholding the light from the stars, which his father reminds him was emitted centuries ago and is only now reaching earth. In this way, looking through the telescope is like looking into the past, a fact Saeed's father acknowledges by calling the experience "time-travel."

Saeed's use of the family telescope is one of several ways he escapes his everyday life. Looking into the sky, he's able to project his vision into space, away from his home city, which is slowly succumbing to violence and conflict. And as his father points out, looking through the telescope also enables him to "time-travel," ultimately connecting him to the idea of the past—a comforting thought for somebody living in a tumultuous period. In this manner, the telescope provides Saeed with a way of transcending his current circumstances.

On the same day that Saeed sends his pitch to the local soap company, the family sits on the balcony in the evening while Saeed looks through the telescope. Instead of letting the lens sweep across the sky, though, he points it at the horizon of buildings, capturing "windows and walls and rooftops" in the eyepiece. "Behave yourself, Saeed," his mother chides, and as his parents joke about how he must be spying on naked women, he angles the telescope into the sky, where he finds Mars. Taking out his **phone**, he compares what he's found to an application that charts constellations and gives information about planets. Somewhere in the distance, gunshots echo through the streets. After a moment, Saeed's mother proposes that the family move inside.

When Saeed's family hears gunshots in the street, the threat of violence encroaches not only upon their geographical location, but also upon their everyday lives. No longer can they sit outside and casually enjoy the evening without hearing intermittent reminders of the city's plunge into violence. In this moment, Hamid once again illustrates the very tangible effects of unrest on a city's inhabitants, suggesting that the division between safety and danger—the division between tranquility and fear—is growing weaker and weaker.

When they finally get coffee, Saeed asks Nadia why she wears long black robes even though she doesn't pray. Both of their **phones** are on the table, resting face-down between them "like the weapons of desperadoes at parley." Nadia smiles, takes a sip of coffee, and says, "So men don't fuck with me."

The position of Saeed and Nadia's phones is noteworthy in this scene. Having placed their screens face-down on the table, they've essentially closed themselves off to the outside world, the distractions that might otherwise threaten to interrupt the connection they're busy forming in real life. This willingness to make a personal connection is, it seems, something of a big deal for Nadia. After all, it's clear she's accustomed to putting up boundaries between herself and others, as evidenced by the fact that she only wears her religious robes to keep men away.

CHAPTER 2

Nadia grew up in a devoutly religious house where the walls were lined by excerpts of sacred texts. "Her constant questioning and growing irreverence in matters of faith" worried her father, a serious and ill-tempered man. Still, he and the rest of her family—her mother and sister—were beside themselves when Nadia announced, even to her own surprise, that she was going to move out to live on her own. This sparked a terrible argument and, as a result, Nadia hasn't spoken to her family since leaving home, though everybody—her father included—regrets this. Unfortunately, there's no way for them to repair the rift, for they never again see one another because of "the impending descent of their city into the abyss," which comes "before they [realize] they [have] lost the chance" to repair their relationship.

Nadia's experience losing her connection with her family shows that she's accustomed to putting boundaries between herself and others, boundaries often related to differing worldviews. Indeed, Nadia's family stifles her sense of independence, forcing religion on her in a way that encourages her to leave them behind once and for all. Once on her own, though, she actually wields religion to her benefit, dressing as if she's highly devout as a way of keeping others at bay. In this way, she empowers herself by calling upon the same tradition that previously kept her from living the way she wanted.

These days, Nadia works at an insurance company and lives alone in an apartment above her landlord, a widow. One day, while absentmindedly drawing at work, she receives an instant message from Saeed, who asks if she wants to get dinner. That night, they visit a Chinese restaurant that has been operated for three generations by the same family until they recently "sold up and emigrated to Canada." During the meal, Saeed and Nadia talk about their dreams of travel—neither of them has ever left the country. Still, Nadia wants to go to Cuba to see the "beautiful old buildings and the sea," and Saeed wants to go to Chile and the Atacama desert, where there is virtually no light pollution, meaning that a person can lie down and look at the Milky Way in the clear sky.

Nadia and Saeed's respective desires to travel denote a yearning to step away from their everyday lives. Like anybody, they want to broaden their horizons by journeying to remote destinations and seeing new things. While this desire is quite average, it's clearly heightened by the fact that their own country is slipping into chaos. As such, the idea of travel becomes similar to escape. After all, even the owners of the Chinese restaurant they're sitting in have abandoned their family business in order to flee the country, a fact that makes it all the more apparent that Nadia and Saeed's longing to travel is perhaps related to their city's tenuous circumstances.

When the meal is over, Nadia invites Saeed to her house. "Nothing is going to happen," she states. "I want to make that clear. When I say you should come over, I'm not saying I want your hands on me." Saeed agrees, and they start making their way through the streets, which are lined by refugees in tents and lean-tos. These migrants try to "re-create the rhythms of a normal life, as though it were completely natural to be residing, a family of four, under a sheet of plastic propped up with branches and a few chipped bricks." As Saeed and Nadia progress through the city, they're stopped by soldiers at a checkpoint, but easily pass through.

Saeed and Nadia's trek through the city forces them to confront the fact that war, violence, and fear surround them even as they go about living their everyday lives in the exciting first stages of their budding romance. There is, it seems, no ignoring the many refugees who have trickled into the city. By giving readers a glimpse of these migrants' lives, Hamid reveals the hardships that await people who are forced to sneak into cities that are not their own. Living in squalor, they're clearly cut off from the resources that might have sustained them in their home countries before whatever violence that occurred finally pushed them out. Now, these refugees must reestablish the "rhythms of a normal life" despite the fact that they're living in tents and lean-tos in the streets of a completely foreign city. As such, Hamid frames the act of crossing borders and divisions as perilous and trying.

When Nadia obtained her apartment, she told her widowed landlord that she too was a widow, claiming her husband was killed in battle. In order to avoid the landlord's suspicion, then, she can't have men over, a problem she circumvents by going upstairs and dropping down to Saeed a key wrapped in a black robe, which he puts on and uses to cover his head. In this manner, Saeed sneaks into the building and into Nadia's apartment, where they listen to old American vinyl records. When Nadia asks him if he'd like to smoke a joint, he accepts and even offers to roll it.

Once again, Hamid puts on display the gradual progression of Saeed and Nadia's romance. As they bond over vinyl and marijuana, their connection essentially offers them a psychological escape from what they've just seen in the streets: squalor and sadness. As such, readers see the ways in which people existing in conflict areas turn to everyday things—like flirtatious courtship or recreational drug use—to cope with their stressors.

Meanwhile, in the district of Shinjuku in Tokyo, a man in a "crisp white shirt" concealing his many tattoos sits at a bar and drinks whiskey he didn't pay for but is, apparently, "entitled" to drink. It's past midnight, and the man steps out for a cigarette in the alleyway. As he lights up, he hears something behind him, which is odd, since the alley is a dead-end—a dead-end he checked for people when he originally came outside. Nonetheless, two Filipina teenagers are standing next to a "disused door to the rear of the bar, a door that [is] always kept locked, but [is] in this moment somehow open, a portal of complete blackness." The girls speak in scared voices as they walk by the smoking man without looking at him. Touching a knife in his pocket, he sinisterly follows them as they walk away in their "tropical" clothing.

This is the second vignette in Exit West *in which a person—or, in this case, two people—emerge from a mysterious blackened door in a completely unexpected place. In this scene, it becomes even clearer that the new arrivals have come from somewhere else, as Hamid explicitly identifies them as Filipinas and notes that they're wearing "tropical" clothing. Furthermore, the man's decision to follow these girls—fingering a knife in his pocket as he goes—showcases the kind of reception people often receive when they travel to new places. Violent suspicion, it seems, is what awaits those who flee their own countries.*

"In times of violence," Hamid writes, "there is always that first acquaintance or intimate of ours, who, when they are touched, makes what had seemed like a bad dream suddenly, eviscerating real." Nadia discovers this for herself when her cousin is "blown by a truck bomb to bits, literally to bits." Hearing about her cousin's death only after his funeral, she plans to visit the graveyard alone, but Saeed accompanies her. As Nadia stands above the grave, Saeed prays, and though Nadia doesn't join him, she stoops and touches the mound of dirt and closes her eyes.

As Saeed and Nadia's bond strengthens, the city around them slips into violent disarray. As such, their relationship takes place in a fraught context of grief and adversity. When Saeed gets on his knees to pray and Nadia doesn't join him, readers are reminded of Saeed's previous assertion that prayer and religious practice is "personal," that it's different for everybody. As he prays, Nadia honors her cousin in her own way, closing her eyes as she touches the grave.

Contrary to what people might think because of her conservative robes, Nadia enjoys a casual and active sex life. When she and Saeed start getting to know one another, she decides to cut things off with a musician she's been sleeping with rather frequently. She met this man at a "jam session," went home with him that night, and lost her virginity to him. Since then, they've gotten together regularly, though their relationship remains primarily physical. Although she thinks he doesn't, this man actually has quite strong feelings toward her, "but pride, and also fear, and also style, [keeps] him from asking more of her than she offer[s] up."

Once again, Hamid shows how Nadia defies the expectations people place upon her based on her conservative religious robes. The robes offer her a kind of escape from the world—she uses religious expectations here to escape religious restrictions. While those who look upon her in public would assume she's chaste and disapproving of casual sex, she's actually sexually active enough to have two love interests at once, though she ends her relationship with the musician before anything physical has happened between her and Saeed. Furthermore, the musician's inability to articulate his feelings about Nadia illustrates the importance of communication when it comes to nurturing romantic connections—an idea that becomes relevant for Saeed and Nadia's own bond as they grow closer.

When Nadia tells the musician she wants to end things, he suggests they go to his apartment to have sex one last time. She agrees, but he finds himself upset later when, after she's left, he regrets never having revealed how he truly feels about her. He keeps thinking about this "until his death," which, unbeknownst to him, is "only a few short months away." Nadia, for her part, thinks about the musician intermittently throughout her life, periodically wondering "what became of him."

In this moment, the difficulty of parting with a lover comes to the forefront of the novel. To make things worse, Nadia's split from the musician is especially difficult because it includes a vast uncertainty. Indeed, the violence and unrest in Nadia's country exacerbates the emotional impact of their breakup by literally separating them from one another. In this way, Hamid suggests that sometimes severing romantic connections means living with lifelong questions.

CHAPTER 3

While Saeed uses his **phone** quite often to contact Nadia, he limits himself when it comes to browsing the internet. For him, the virtual world is too distracting, too deeply alluring. He prefers the present, and so he only allows himself one hour per day of internet surfing, otherwise using only the few applications he's left on his phone like the one that helps him identify constellations in the sky. Nadia, on the other hand, uses her phone quite actively, reveling in its ability to keep her company; "she rode it far out into the world on otherwise solitary, stationary nights," Hamid writes. "She watched bombs falling, women exercising, men copulating, clouds gathering." She even orders magic mushrooms using her phone from a drug dealer who, in a few short months, is decapitated and strung up in public.

Living alone in a city undergoing violent conflict, Nadia embraces her phone as a portal through which she can escape her everyday life. To watch "women exercising, men copulating, [and] clouds gathering" is, to her, a way of transcending her current circumstances, which are otherwise stressful and emotionally trying. Saeed, on the other hand, is able to resist his phone's distracting qualities to a certain extent because he has other things to distract him, like his parents or the telescope.

The day before Nadia receives her mushrooms—which she and Saeed will take together—she finds herself trapped at a red light next to a man who starts yelling at her after she ignores his greeting. He swears at her, telling her only whores drive motorcycles and growing increasingly angry. He becomes so angry that Nadia worries he's going to attack her, but she simply remains calm on her bike, gripping the throttle and staying behind the safety of her tinted visor. After a while, the man shakes his head and drives away, letting loose a "sort of strangled scream, a sound that could [be] rage, or equally could [be] anguish."

In this moment, Nadia encounters the strong divisions that are making their way through her own city. Indeed, citizens are becoming highly critical of one another, a fact made clear by this angry man's inability to accept that Nadia—a woman—should be allowed to ride a motorcycle. This kind of divisive thinking leads the man into "rage," but Hamid also suggests that such a worldview invites "anguish," as this pathetic man ultimately turns on his own community when he directs such vitriol at Nadia, a fellow countrywoman.


The day Nadia's shrooms arrive, militant radicals take siege of the city's stock exchange. While Nadia follows the conflict on TV with her coworkers, she texts Saeed about the unfolding horror. By afternoon, the government descends upon the exchange in full force, having decided that the death of the hostages is a price they'll have to pay in order to establish power and send a message of strength to militants and citizens alike. When all is said and done, "initial estimates put the number of dead workers at probably less than a hundred." Saeed and Nadia naturally assume there will be a curfew placed upon the city, but the government holds off from implementing one that evening, perhaps as a way of showing citizens they have the situation controlled. As such, Nadia invites Saeed over, and he drives to her apartment in the family car.

Yet again, the formative stages of Nadia and Saeed's relationship progress within a context of violence, division, and fear. Even as the stock exchange is overrun by dangerous militants, the two young lovers are able to connect with one another using their phones, strengthening their bond despite the dismal circumstances. And when the government doesn't enforce a curfew, they find themselves carrying on like everything is normal, eager to continue their courtship, which no doubt by now has become something of a psychological escape for both of them.



Once inside Nadia's house, Saeed puts food in the oven so that it'll stay warm. They then go onto the balcony, where Nadia asks him if he's going to take off the robe she dropped down to him. He says he'll take his off if she does the same, so they both slip out of the robes, only to discover that they're both wearing sweaters and jeans. For the first time ever, Saeed looks at Nadia without her robe on, trying hard not to let his eyes wander below her face. They then sit down and Nadia opens her hand to reveal the shrooms. "Have you ever done psychedelic mushrooms?" she asks.

Once more, Nadia and Saeed turn not only to each other for an emotional escape from the distressing violence taking hold of their city, but also to recreational drugs. As they do so, they enjoy opening up to one another for the first time—indeed, when Nadia takes off her robe to reveal her plain clothes, the new couple reaches something of a landmark, since they've clearly grown close enough that Nadia feels comfortable allowing Saeed to move beyond the boundary she normally places between herself and the world (of course, this is the figurative boundary represented by her religious robes).

They take the mushrooms, but after a while, Saeed still feels nothing and determines he must be immune to their effects. Because of this belief, he finds himself unprepared when suddenly a "feeling of awe" washes over him as he regards the small lemon tree on Nadia's balcony. Floored by the thought of the tree's roots in the clay pot and the unity of the pot and plant with the balcony and, thus, with the very earth the building stands upon, he feels that the tree itself is reaching up in "a gesture so beautiful" he can't help but be "filled with love, and reminded of his parents, for whom he suddenly [feels] such gratitude, and a desire for peace, that peace should come for them all, for everyone, for everything, for we are so fragile, and so beautiful, and surely conflicts could be healed if others had experiences like this."

Hamid emphasizes the notion of connection and unity as Saeed marvels at the mysterious ways in which the world is held together. Mapping out how the lemon tree is physically connected to its pot and therefore everything the pot touches, he extrapolates this vision of unity so that it includes all of humanity, eventually resolving that "peace" should come from the idea that all humans are "fragile" and related. The fact that Saeed thinks about "peace" in this moment reveals just how prominently violence and division factor into his everyday life, for even in his attempt to escape or transcend his circumstances through the use of recreational drugs, he still can't help but think about the turmoil plaguing his city.

Thinking this way, Saeed turns his attention to Nadia and sees that she's looking back at him. Her eyes, he thinks, are like great worlds unto themselves. When Saeed partially returns to himself several hours later, he and Nadia hold hands while facing each other. Looking into one another's faces, they lean in and kiss. In doing so, they realize morning has come and that they're kissing in broad daylight, so they go back inside where, finally, they eat the food Saeed brought all those hours ago.

In this moment, Saeed and Nadia connect profoundly with one another—this is unsurprising, considering that Saeed is in the middle of thinking about unity and love. Turning his eyes upon Nadia, suddenly everything he's been considering about connection and peace and unity is brought to bear on the way he feels for her, showing once again just how much the beginning stages of their relationship are shaped by the reactions they have to the violence in their city.

While Saeed and Nadia are high on mushrooms, Saeed's **phone** dies, meaning that his parents are unable to reach him. Panicked, they call and text him with "terror," worrying something has happened to him after the tumultuous hostage situation the previous day. When Saeed finally returns home, his father goes to bed and "in his bedside mirror glimpse[s] a suddenly much older man." His mother, for her part, is "so relieved to see her son that she [thinks], for a moment, she should slap him."

Although Saeed and Nadia have just spent an important and meaningful night together, there's no denying that their connection in this scenario has affected Saeed's parents, plunging them into worry and fear. As such, Hamid suggests that in such fraught circumstances people like Saeed are forced to consider the extent to which they can devote themselves to a person outside their family. The more personal connections Saeed cultivates, it seems, the more he has to maintain—a task made difficult by the fact that moving through the dangerous city from one person to another inevitably causes loved ones to worry.

Later that same day, an old man stands with a Naval officer on the perimeter of his own property, staring at his house in La Jolla, California, which is surrounded by other soldiers. The old man himself used to be in the Navy, but the officer standing next to him pays little attention to him, brushing off his questions when he asks whether Mexicans or Muslims are the ones "coming through." The officer tells him that he can't answer such queries, and the old man asks what he can do to help. "I'll let you know," the officer says, offering to take the old man to stay with relatives or friends. As he goes to answer the question, the old man realizes he has nowhere to go.

The third vignette in Exit West, *this scene demonstrates the cultural ignorance displayed by people who seek to fortify their borders and keep people out. When the old man asks the officer if the people "coming through" are "Mexicans or Muslims," he reveals a culturally insensitive—or culturally lazy—perspective, one that prioritizes keeping people out over taking the time to learn who they are in the first place. Such an attitude, Hamid implies, leaves a person alone in life, for the old man has nobody to turn to now that his house has been taken over by both the Navy and whomever it is that is "coming" to America "through" his house.*

Not long after the stock exchange siege, the militant radicals start "taking over and holding territory throughout the city." Nobody knows how these fighters are arriving in such vast numbers and so quickly. The city finally institutes a curfew and installs checkpoints with razor wire and "infantry fighting vehicles." On the first Friday of curfew, Saeed goes with his father to a communal prayer while his mother stays and prays at home, "newly particular about not missing a single one of her devotions."

Saeed's mother's new spiritual habits exemplify the ways in which people turn to religion in times of uncertainty. For his mother, "not missing a single" "devotion" is a way of controlling her life in an otherwise incontrollable context. What's more, even Saeed seems to have changed his relationship to prayer. After all, he originally told Nadia that he frequently misses his daily prayers, but now he shows a renewed interest in religion as he goes to participate in a communal prayer—an act that he perhaps hopes will provide him with the feeling of interpersonal unity he wished for while high on mushrooms.

Work slows down for both Nadia and Saeed because so many clients are fleeing the country. Nadia's two bosses have even fled themselves, never returning from their holiday vacations and leaving their workers to pass the time in the office, where Nadia spends the majority of her days on her **phone**. In the midst of all this, Nadia and Saeed start meeting during the day, often at a burger restaurant between their offices. Sometimes beneath the table they touch each other, Saeed putting his hand on the inside of Nadia's thigh, Nadia placing her palm on his zipper. Unfortunately, they can't see one another at night unless Saeed stays over until morning—something he doesn't want to do because he doesn't want to make up an excuse to his parents and also because he fears leaving them alone.

Again, readers see the ways in which Saeed's personal connections come into conflict with one another. On the one hand, he wants to spend as much time as possible with Nadia, enthralled by the exciting initial stages of their relationship. On the other hand, he knows that spending time with Nadia means leaving his parents home alone, which ultimately worries him almost as much as it seems to worry them. With this dynamic at play, Saeed is forced to navigate the intersection of his closest relationships.

For the first two weeks of the curfew, Nadia and Saeed don't see each other on the weekends because fighting between their neighborhoods makes travel impossible. Finally, though, Saeed is able to visit on the third weekend, when the couple gets into Nadia's bed and takes off their clothes. After a little while, Nadia asks if Saeed has brought a condom, but he tells her he doesn't think they should have sex until they're married. She laughs at this, but he merely shakes his head. "Are you fucking joking?" she asks. Then, calming down, she smiles and sees that Saeed is mortified by her reaction. "It's okay," she says. "We can see."

Saeed and Nadia's differing views regarding premarital sex are essentially the reversal of what people in public might assume about them. In other words, while a person might see Nadia's religious robes and think she is against premarital sex, Saeed is actually the one who wants to wait until marriage to become intimate in this way. In the same way that Saeed believes religious practice is flexible from person to person, then, Hamid shows that people approach love, intimacy, and connection in different ways.

Lying in bed together, Saeed shows Nadia photos on his **phone** of famous city skylines with all the lights turned off and bright stars overhead. When Nadia asks how the photographer got everybody to turn off their lights, Saeed explains that the photographs are edited, that the photographer takes pictures of the sky in a deserted place where the stars are brightest. These sections of the sky, he explains, are the exact sections that will slide over the city in several hours. In this way, the photographer is able to capture the same sky that will blanket the city, but he avoids the city's blinding qualities by editing out the lights from the buildings. "Nadia thought about this," Hamid writes. "They were achingly beautiful, these ghostly cities […]. Whether they looked like the past, or the present, or the future, she couldn't decide."

As Saeed and Nadia lie in bed and look at these photos, they broach yet another kind of connection, one that aligns with the abstract vision of unity Saeed had when he was high on mushrooms. Indeed, these pictures embody a cosmic unity, one in which different localities are brought together by the fact that they each exist beneath—albeit at different times—the same sky. This notion ultimately sets forth a concept of geographical unity that transcends the arbitrary borders humans have installed to divvy up the world into countries.

A week later, all **cellphone** service in the city vanishes. An announcement is made on TV that the government has decided to do this as a "temporary antiterrorism measure." Worse, internet service also disappears. Because neither Saeed nor Nadia have working landlines, they suddenly find themselves cut off from one another, "deprived of the portals to each other and to the world provided by their mobile phones." Stuck in their apartments each night because of the curfew, they begin to feel "marooned and alone and much more afraid."

Especially after readers have just witnessed Saeed and Nadia peering into a phone to behold beautiful pictures that represent global connection and unity, the loss of internet and cellphone service is particularly devastating. Without these devices, the protagonists are cut off from the internet's broad horizons, and even their own relationship is hindered because they can't contact one another. As such, it is in more ways than one that they're suddenly "deprived" of an important "portal"—a "portal" through which they've heretofore been able to not only reach each other, but also escape the everyday terror of their lives.

CHAPTER 4

Saeed and Nadia suddenly have no way to connect, since their evening class has ended. Saeed calls all the insurance companies in the city but has no luck finding Nadia's. He also goes to the burger restaurant where they usually meet, but Nadia isn't there. Meanwhile, Nadia rushes home during her lunches to build up a store of supplies from the grocery store. When the weekend comes, she goes to the bank to withdraw her funds and discovers a giant crowd made up of people who all want to do the same thing. Trying to push through, she gets trapped in the middle of the group, unable to move as a man's hand pushes "down her buttocks and between her legs," where he tries to "penetrate her with his finger, failing because he [is] outside the multiple fabrics of her robe and her jeans and her underclothes."

Exit West *is a book about boundaries and access. It's also interested in examining romantic connections and intimacy. In this moment, these considerations coalesce with one another, though in a most unfortunate way. As Nadia tries to fend for herself in her war-torn city, she finds her personal space violated; the most intimate boundary of all—the physical—is under attack when this unknown man thrusts his hand between her legs, not only violating her body, but also anonymously wielding an unfair power over her, since she can't move and thus can't defend herself as her very own borders come under attack.*

Unable to move her arms, Nadia can only squeeze her legs shut, "her body sealing itself off" as the crowd lurches and the man's hand disappears from between her thighs. Shaken, she withdraws as much money as possible from the bank and hides it in her shoes and bag before going to a currency converter and a jeweler, divvying her savings into different kinds of value. Feeling followed, she rushes home "only to find a man waiting at the entrance, looking for her, and when she [sees] him she steel[s] herself and refuse[s] to cry, even though she [is] bruised and frightened and furious, and the man, who ha[s] been waiting all day, [is] Saeed."

It's noteworthy that Nadia "steels" herself upon seeing Saeed at her door, willing herself not to break down in front of him. It seems in this moment that she wants to build divisions between herself and the world (including Saeed), ultimately doing so as a way of protecting her emotions. Of course, this desire to wall herself in makes sense, given that her personal boundaries have just been thoroughly invaded and violated.

Upstairs, Nadia tries again to convince Saeed to have sex with her, "not because she [feels] particularly sexy but because she [wants] to cauterize the incident from outside the bank in her memory." Once again, Saeed refuses her advances, reminding her of his desire to wait. "Are you saying you want to get married?" she asks, and when he confirms this, she says, "To me?" Once it's clear this is the case, she feels a "great tenderness well up in her for him," but she merely says, "I don't know." He accepts this, kissing her before he leaves. Stopping him on his way out, she gives him a black robe so he can come over whenever he wants. After he's gone, though, her happiness fades as she listens to "the demolition blows of distant artillery, the unmaking of buildings, large-scale fighting having resumed somewhere."

Nadia's yearning to "cauterize the incident" that took place outside the bank by having sex with Saeed stands in contrast to her initial reaction upon seeing him, which was to "steel" herself against showing any emotion. However, this desire actually makes sense, for she wants to have sex with Saeed not necessarily as a way of connecting, but as a way of putting the fiasco at the bank out of her mind. This shows once again that she approaches sexual activity in a much more casual manner than Saeed does, ultimately leading to yet another conversation about how he wants to get married before making love.

As Saeed ventures home, a "brave man" not far from Nadia's neighborhood stands in the light of his **phone's** flashlight listening to the same gunshots as Nadia. He's in front of a door, "a door black even in the dimness," a door from which another man is slowly emerging. The brave man waits and listens for sounds coming from the stairwell, touching a pistol in his pocket. He is, Hamid notes, excited and "ready to die," though he doesn't "plan on dying" but instead plans on *living* and "doing great things." The man before him—now fully in the room—quivers on the floor while regaining his strength, "a knockoff Russian assault rifle by his side." When he stands up, the brave man brings him into the stairwell. As the brave man returns to his post by the black door, the second man joins the fighting outside "within the hour."

This scene is yet another vignette of somebody emerging from an unsuspecting door. This one, however, seems to provide a vague explanation as to how the radical militants are gaining such a pervasive hold over the city: they're entering it in mysterious and secretive ways that are hard to track, somehow crossing the country's borders and eluding the government checkpoints that Nadia and Saeed encounter whenever they travel through the streets. Of course, this makes combat even more difficult, as the militants most likely also find equally mystifying ways of escaping battle when necessary.

Radical militants continue to ravage Saeed and Nadia's city. One day when Nadia passes her family's house, she sees that it looks deserted and wonders if her parents and sister have perhaps fled. The next time she walks by, the house has been "crushed by the force of a bomb that weighed as much as a compact automobile," and for the rest of her life, she wonders in vain what happened to her family. During this time, Saeed's boss is forced to go out of business, tearfully promising his employees that they'll have jobs if the agency ever reopens. Likewise, Nadia's office stops giving out paychecks, and so the workers slowly trickle out.

Once again, uncertainty accompanies the changes inflicted upon Nadia and Saeed's city by the militant radicals. In the same way that Nadia will never know what happened to the musician, her ex-lover, she will also never know whether or not her family managed to escape the city unharmed. In turn, this uncertainty—this questioning—becomes her only connection to past loved ones. In other words, her only tie to people like her parents is the very uncertainty that makes it impossible for to be with them in the first place.

The city's inhabitants begin to look at windows differently. "A window was a border through which death was possibly most likely to come," Hamid writes. As such, people put couches and other furniture against the windows. Saeed's family does just this, rearranging the furniture so that Saeed's bed blocks the tallest windows in the sitting room. Meanwhile, rumors circulate throughout the city about doors that can take people "elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country." "A normal door," some people say, can become a "special door" without warning. As such, the city's residents also begin to look at their doors differently, seeing them as potential portals that might someday whisk them away.

Finally, Hamid provides readers with insight into how the characters in the book's periodic vignettes are simply appearing into unlikely rooms and countries: there are doors that bend the laws of physics and, in doing so, render borders and divisions utterly useless. This phenomenon is especially significant for people like Saeed and Nadia, who would benefit greatly from leaving behind their country and transporting themselves elsewhere. Suddenly, it seems, the entire idea of geographical demarcation means nothing, for the world has opened itself up, connecting unlikely places with one another and offering passage to anybody who finds one of these strange portals.


Each morning, Saeed and Nadia wake up in their separate apartments and peer at the nearest doors. Unfortunately, these doors don't turn into the mysterious portals, instead remaining "on/off switches in the flow between two adjacent places, binarily either open or closed." Still, though, looking at their doors in this way changes their perceptions, making the doors themselves "partially animate" like "objects with a subtle power to mock, to mock the desires of those who desire to go far away."

When Saeed and Nadia stare at the doors in their rooms and feel as if they're being "mock[ed]," what they feel is the tug of possibility, the call of a new life. As Exit West *progresses, readers begin to intuit that Nadia and Saeed want to—even* need *to—escape; something the doors can perhaps help them do.*


Nadia and Saeed spend more time together now that they don't have jobs, and Saeed suggests that Nadia move in with him and his family, telling her they don't have to get married to live in the same apartment. The only thing is that they'd need to remain chaste under his parents' roof. Although hesitant at first, Nadia finally decides to move in with Saeed when Saeed's mother is killed by a "stray heavy-caliber round passing through the windshield of her family's car." When Nadia sees how distraught Saeed and his father are at the funeral, she determines to stay with them for the night "to offer what comfort and help she [can]." From then on, she never spends another night in her own apartment.

Nadia's decision to move in with Saeed is beneficial to both of them. First of all, Saeed and his father seem to need her to help them cope with the death of Saeed's mother. Second of all, Nadia herself no doubt understands that it's unsafe to live alone in the city during such a turbulent period, especially as a young woman. Plus, if the militants were somehow to discover that she's not actually a religious widow—as she claims to be—she would no doubt become even more of a target. As such, Hamid shows that Nadia and Saeed's romantic connection once again advances in response to external circumstances; their relationship, it seems, is inextricably intertwined with the city's burgeoning conflict.

CHAPTER 5

The usual funeral and formal grieving process for Saeed's mother is truncated by the city's dangerous circumstances. The relatives who visit do so only briefly, since it's risky to travel through the streets. During these visits, Nadia busies herself with serving the guests, and nobody asks about the nature of her relationship with Saeed, though it's clear they want to know. In this period, Saeed prays a fair amount, as does his father, but Nadia refrains from doing so. Still, she calls Saeed's father "father," and he calls her "daughter," and all three of them get along despite the grief hanging over the house. At night, Nadia sleeps in the living room, apart from Saeed, though sometimes the young couple spends time together after Saeed's father has fallen asleep, holdings hands and sometimes kissing but never advancing beyond this point.

As his life gradually becomes more and more challenging, Saeed throws himself into prayer. Although in the beginning of the novel he hardly seemed interested in religion, now he turns to it in this time of grief. Nadia, for her part, clearly retains her skepticism regarding religion, though she doesn't let this interfere with Saeed's newfound commitment to prayer. In this way, Hamid implies that Saeed was correct when he upheld, in his first conversation with Nadia, that prayer and spiritual practice are personal and flexible.

Saeed and Nadia return to Nadia's apartment to gather her belongings, taking with them—among other things—her record player and lemon tree, which they place on the balcony. As for the record player, Nadia hides it along with her records, since music is forbidden in the city by the militants, though there's no longer any electricity anyway, so there's no way to listen in the first place. Still, her conscientiousness proves wise, since the militants do appear one night to search the apartment, looking for a certain "sect." After demanding to see everyone's IDs, they leave—luckily, none of their names are "associated with the denomination being hunted." Unfortunately, this isn't the case for their upstairs neighbors; the militants cut the man's throat and take his wife and daughter as hostages. Within two days, blood from the man's severed neck starts seeping through the floorboards and into Saeed's apartment.

At this point in Exit West, *fear begins to play a more significant role in Saeed and Nadia's lives. After all, they now live under the constant threat of violence. Their neighbor's death signifies the militants' strong belief in the importance of affiliation—because this man's name is somehow related to a certain "sect," they kill him and kidnap his family. In turn, readers see that the militants seek to divide the population of Saeed and Nadia's city into various groups, some of which they condemn and subsequently kill.*

Horrified at the violence all around them, Saeed and Nadia start to transgress against their own agreement to remain chaste in his father's apartment. Each night, they become intimate after his father has gone to bed, though they still stop before having sex. His father, it seems, is too preoccupied and sad to pay much attention to their amorous activities, and the young couple is only spurred on by the fact that the militants have started making violent examples out of unmarried lovers.

As a way of coping with the constant fear of living in their war-torn city, Nadia and Saeed intensify their own romantic connection. As such, their love becomes not only a relational bond, but a method of escape, a way of turning away from the terror of violence surrounding them on all sides.

Public executions occur frequently as the militants cement their control over the city. Amidst the horror, Saeed's father travels every day to his brother's house, where he sits with other old men and old women and talks about the past, often reminiscing about his wife, whom they all knew. On his way back, he stops and lingers at her grave. While doing this one day, he witnesses a group of teenagers playing soccer in the street and feels warmed by the memory of having done this himself as a boy. When he looks closer, though, he sees the young men aren't using a ball, but rather the severed head of a goat. Disgusted, he looks even closer before ripping his eyes away, for what he sees leaves him aghast: the young men aren't playing soccer with a goat's head—they're playing with a human head.

Once again, Hamid shows how fear has pervaded seemingly every element of his characters' lives, such that Saeed's father can't even walk home from his wife's grave without witnessing a sickening act. Still, he doesn't stay holed up in the house. Instead, he dedicates himself to maintaining his connections by visiting a community of friends and family and stopping to say hello to his wife's grave. Even so, life in this city is quickly changing for the worse, making it all the more apparent that Saeed, Nadia, and Saeed's father are going to either have to find a way to exist safely (an all but impossible task) or somehow escape.

Nadia and Saeed resolve to find a passage out of the city. One of their friends puts them in touch with an agent who claims to have access to the mysterious doors that transport people to other lands, so they set out one evening wearing the garments and stylings required by the militants. Terrified, they pass a hanging body and try to carry themselves innocently, knowing all the while that they're being watched by drones flying overhead. When they reach the place they were told to go, the agent tells them not to turn around, approaching them from behind and demanding that Nadia uncover her head. When the agent asks for the money, Saeed gives it to him and wonders whether he's "making a down payment or being robbed."

When Saeed and Nadia walk through the streets, Hamid notes that there are drones watching them from the sky. This ultimately introduces a new form of connection into the storyline, adding to the book's previous considerations of how technology like cellphones put people in touch with one another. Now, Hamid calls readers' attention to a much broader form of connectivity as the drones fly above and watch the two lovers with cameras connected to unknown sources, thereby joining Saeed and Nadia with other people in other parts of the world.

While Saeed and Nadia wait to hear back from the agent—who's busy searching for a new unguarded door—many people pass through doors around the world. One family in particular can be seen through a series of security cameras at a luxury resort in Dubai, where they emerge confusedly and walk outside into the bright light, where they're then picked up by still more security cameras and hovering drones, which chart their progression along a beach boardwalk, past tanning vacationers. The family drifts in and out of the **cellphone** frames of people taking selfies, making their way through the strange resort area until they're intercepted and taken away by officers who jump out of a van "with grilles on its windows."

Advancing the idea of a vast network of drones and surveillance originally mentioned when Saeed and Nadia are walking to meet with the agent, the cameras and various devices that chart this unknown family of refugees connects them to the larger world, but in a negative way. Indeed, when they become part of this network of surveillance cameras, they become the targets of people who want to restrict their movement, people who want to send them back to wherever it was from which they came. In turn, Hamid warns about the perils of technology, showing that it can sometimes put people in touch with others who want to harm them.

Saeed and Nadia are forced to go to the bathroom outside in trenches now, and Nadia's lemon tree withers away on the balcony. And though they both desperately want to leave the city, their attitudes differ from one another. While Saeed has always wanted to leave, he has also always thought that he'd do so under different circumstances, "temporarily, intermittently, never once and for all." He dislikes the idea of parting with his friends and "extended" family, seeing it all as "amounting to the loss of a home, no less, of his home." Nadia, on the other hand, is more eager to migrate because the prospect of change is "at its most basic level exciting to her." Still, she worries that doing so will mean having to depend upon others, putting her "at the mercy of strangers."

Saeed and Nadia's differing views regarding escaping their country reflect their divergent personalities. Whereas Nadia is independent and eager to make a change in her life because she can see that her current circumstances are unfavorable and even dangerous, Saeed is conflicted because he has more of an attachment to his home. Indeed, his mother's grave is in this city, as well as all the fond memories he's had in his apartment with his family. Of course, Nadia lives alone and has lost her family, with whom she had very little connection in the first place, a discrepancy that partially accounts for their different viewpoints.

"Nadia had always been, and would afterwards continue to be, more comfortable with all varieties of movement in her life than was Saeed, in whom the impulse of nostalgia was stronger," Hamid notes. Still neither Saeed nor Nadia anticipate how Saeed's father feels about the prospect of leaving; when a note arrives from the agent saying a door is open and that they must meet him the following day, Saeed's father says: "You two must go, but I will not come." Beside himself, Saeed threatens to carry his father over his shoulder, forcing the old man to go, but this doesn't work. When Saeed asks him why he wants to stay, he replies, "Your mother is here." At this, Saeed relents, understanding what it means for his father to stay in the city, and the two men spend the last night of their lives together.

Saeed's connection to his home—which stands in such opposition to Nadia's comparative easygoing attitude when it comes to leaving—mirrors his father's unwillingness to escape the city. However, Saeed is younger than his father, so he has fewer things keeping him there. His father, on the other hand, would be leaving behind a lifetime's worth of memories and relationships—something that is, in the end, so unfathomable to him that he refuses to depart, ultimately choosing to face fear instead of acting out of self-preservation.

After convincing his son to let him stay, Saeed's father calls Nadia to his room and says he's "entrusting her with his son's life, and she, whom he call[s] daughter, must, like a daughter, not fail him, whom she call[s] father, and she must see Saeed through to safety, and he hope[s] she [will] one day marry his son and be called mother by his grandchildren, but this [is] up to them to decide." All he asks, he says, is that she stay with Saeed until they're out of danger. Nadia makes the promise, but in doing so feels as if she's abandoning the old man, leaving him to die. "But that is the way of things," Hamid writes, "for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind."

Hamid's statement that "when we migrate, we murder from our lives what we leave behind" sets forth the idea that travel and displacement sever the ties between a person and his or her origins. This seems especially true of refugees, who have left their countries not because they've chosen to do so, but because circumstances have forced them to, meaning that—more often than not—it isn't safe for them to return. As such, when Nadia and Saeed prepare to leave their city once and for all, they must come to terms with the fact that they may never regain the connections, relationships, and affiliations they're about to lose.

CHAPTER 6

Saeed's father says his farewell to his son and Nadia the following day, leaving the house without telling them where he's going so that they can't follow him. After double-checking that they have everything, the couple leaves the house, too, walking to the rendezvous point and wondering all the while if the agent has set them up and "sold them out to the militants," which they know is a possibility. When they arrive, they discover that the meeting place is in an abandoned dentist's office, an office that has long since been raided of its painkillers and other medicines. Inside, they encounter a man dressed quite similarly to a militant, but he only tells them to sit in the waiting room with several others, all of whom are too tense to speak.

When Saeed and Nadia enter the waiting room of the dentist and see the other people waiting in silence to be transported somewhere else, readers witness a strange kind of connection, one predicated on fear and the desire to escape. Indeed, these people are all in the same situation, seeking passage out of the city in order to save their lives. In this way, they're connected to one another emotionally and circumstantially by the very same horror they're from which they're running.

When Saeed and Nadia are called into the dentist's office, the agent stands before a black door that used to lead to a supply closet. "You go first," he says to Saeed, and although Saeed originally planned to go ahead of Nadia, he suddenly changes his mind, thinking that it's probably more dangerous for her to go second. "No, she will," he declares, but the agent doesn't care, merely shrugging and looking at Nadia, who walks toward the door—not having considered ahead of time who would go first—and is "struck by its darkness, its opacity, the way that it [doesn't] reveal what [is] on the other side, and also [doesn't] reflect what [is] on this side, and so [feels] equally like a beginning and an end." Nadia turns to Saeed, squeezes his hands, and steps through the door.

The process of escape is portrayed in this moment as both a "beginning and an end." On the one hand, Nadia looks into the black door and knows it will take her to a new life in a foreign country. On the other hand, she also knows that the door will take her away from everything she's ever known. As such, Hamid frames migration as a complicated emotional process, one full of contradictory feelings.

"It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and being born," Hamid writes. This is what Nadia feels as she moves through the blackness, "gasping" and "struggle[ing]" to emerge on the other side, where she lies cold and sore on a bathroom floor. Right behind her, Saeed fights to come through. As he does so, Nadia looks around and sees that they are in a public restroom. Once Saeed fully exits the portal, the couple hug until they feel their strength return, at which point they stand up. Saeed wheels around, as if wanting to go back through the door, but he simply pauses in front of it before walking away.

In keeping with the idea that the process of escape and migration is one full of contradictory emotions, Saeed hesitates in the bathroom, looking back at the door as if considering walking back through it and returning to his old life. As he does so, readers are reminded of Hamid's earlier assertion that Saeed has a tendency to indulge "nostalgia." Nonetheless, he knows that returning to his country would mean returning to violence, and so he resolves to forge his way forward into his new life.

Saeed and Nadia go outside, emerging between two small buildings and feeling a cool breeze on their faces while hearing the sound of a shell held to their ears. Before long, they realize they're near a beach, which strikes them as somehow "miraculous" as they take in the scent of briny water. Nearby, they see a beach club and various bars and restaurants marked with signs in English and several European languages. Soon a "pale-skinned man" comes and shoos them down the beach, waving his arms at them as if he's "conversing in an international pidgin dialect of sign language." As they move along the beach, they eventually see a refugee camp with "hundreds of tents and lean-tos and people of many colors and hues—many colors and hues but mostly falling within a band of brown."

When Hamid says that the "pale-skinned" man's gesture is like "an international pidgin dialect of sign language," he suggests that—unfortunately—disdain and resistance to newcomers is something of a universal language. Indeed, the man's frantic gestures communicate to Saeed and Nadia that they aren't welcome on this portion of the beach—they don't need to speak this man's language in order to understand that he doesn't want them here. Upon seeing the refugee camp, they see that he wants them to exist with the other migrants, perhaps so he can more easily cordon them off from his country's citizens and way of life.

"In this group, everyone was foreign," writes Hamid, "and so, in a sense, no one was." Nonetheless, Nadia and Saeed still seek out a group of "fellow countrywomen and –men," who tell them that they've reached the Greek island of Mykonos, a destination that attracts tourists in the summer and migrants in the winter. Like everywhere else, Mykonos has its own doors that can take people to even richer places, but they are "heavily guarded," though the doors to "poorer places" are easy to pass through, since nobody stands watch over them, "perhaps in the hope that people [will] go back to where they came from—although almost no one ever [does]—or perhaps because there [are] simply too many doors from too many poorer places to guard them all."

Even though a natural sense of unity prevails over the refugee camp because of the fact that "everyone" is "foreign," Saeed and Nadia gravitate toward citizens from their own country. This is, of course, understandable—people often feel most comfortable with people from their own cultures. Nonetheless, Hamid demonstrates here that even people like Saeed and Nadia—who have fled their country to avoid the harsh division of society into "sects" and groups—have a tendency to divvy themselves into subsets within a larger group.

The camp itself runs primarily on bartering, like a "trading post in an old-time gold rush." Nadia and Saeed learn from their fellow expatriates that almost anything is attainable in this settlement, "from sweaters to mobile **phones** to antibiotics to, quietly, sex and drugs." The people, they're told, are mostly nice and safe, though there are "gangs of young men with an eye on the vulnerable." Still, the island is considered "pretty safe," "except when it [isn't], which [makes] it like most places." Either way, Saeed and Nadia are told that it's wise to be in the camp after nightfall rather than on the beach or in the hills.

The fact that Saeed and Nadia can't feel completely safe while living in this refugee camp once again shows the uncertainty that comes along with escape and migration. Fear, it seems, is ever-present, following them to new countries even though they escaped their home in the first place in order to avoid the threat of violence.

Nadia and Saeed buy water, food, a blanket, a backpack, a tent, and local service for their **cellphones**. After doing this, they set up the new tent on the fringe of the camp, slightly elevated on the beach's craggy hill, where it isn't "too windy or too rocky." While setting up, Nadia feels like she's "playing house," while Saeed feels like he is "a bad son." Pausing in her preparations, Nadia suddenly stoops below a bush and tells Saeed to the same. When he does, she kisses him "under the open sky." Saeed whips his face away in frustration but then frantically apologies and puts his cheek to Nadia's. And though she tries to relax with their faces pressed together, Nadia is taken aback by Saeed's "bitterness," since she's never seen him act like this and thinks that "a bitter Saeed would not be Saeed at all."

Nadia and Saeed's relationship suffers in this scene because of the stressors related to migration. Constantly having to face the threat of danger and the various uncertainties that come along with having escaped their country, Saeed shows a "bitterness" toward Nadia, clearly misdirecting his anxieties by superimposing them on their relationship. Of course, part of this is due to the fact that Nadia kisses him "under the open sky," something they were never able to do in their home country because intimacy of any kind was prohibited in public by the radical militants. In doing so, she transgresses against the rules that inadvertently shaped her relationship with Saeed. As a result, Saeed feels as if his lover is actually acting against the very terms of their own bond, so he responds bitterly. In turn, readers come to understand how significantly Saeed and Nadia's romantic connection has been influenced not only by the militant radicals in their own country, but by the process of having escaped, too.

Meanwhile, a young woman comes home from work in Vienna. Apparently, militants from Saeed and Nadia's country entered the city the previous week, shooting Austrians to "provoke a reaction against migrants from their own part of the world." Unfortunately, they've succeeded, because angry Austrians are planning to attack a group of migrants living near the zoo. Fortunately, another group is intending to form a "human cordon to protect them." Wanting to help, the young woman boards a train to the zoo while wearing a "migration compassion badge," but she finds herself trapped in a car with the xenophobic mob. These white faces look upon her, shouting and pushing until she feels "a basic, animal fear" and jumps off at the next stop. Despite this harrowing experience, though, she resolves to continue her trek to the zoo, walking there as the sun falls in the sky.

Yet another vignette showing the far-flung influence of global migration, the young woman's story is an example of the ways in which fear motivates xenophobic mobs to advocate for borders and division. The militants from Saeed and Nadia's country seem to understand how potent fear is, knowing they can use it to incite bigotry and, thus, discourage people from their own country from escaping to other places. However, people like the young woman in Vienna are capable of overcoming the threat of violence because they believe—as she does—in what they're fighting for: human "compassion."

Nadia and Saeed wake up in their cramped tent one morning and hear people running out of the camp. Springing to their feet, they follow the crowd to a new door that has opened in town, one rumored to lead to Germany. Just as the crowd reaches it, though, they see soldiers guarding it, and so Nadia and Saeed fall back, watching as several migrants try unsuccessfully to run past the guards, though nobody gets hurt. After a while, the crowd disappointedly files back to the camp and waits for the next opportunity.

The migrants' eagerness to pass through this new door alerts readers to the fact that conditions in Mykonos are less than ideal. In fact, some people are so eager to leave the refugee camp that they're willing to risk their physical safety by running past the guards. As such, it becomes clear that, although Saeed and Nadia have escaped the danger of their own country, they've only traded unfavorable circumstances for other *unfavorable circumstances.*

To fight off the boredom of life in the camp, Nadia and Saeed decide to explore the island. Sometimes they see sinister groups of men, but they otherwise enjoy drifting through town and along the beach. One day, they meet an old friend of Saeed's who tells them he can help them get off the island because he knows "all the ins and outs." He even gives them a discount on his rates because Saeed is a friend. After the couple gives the man their money, though, they never hear from him again and are unable to track him down. For a while, Saeed gives the man the benefit of the doubt, even praying for his safety. Soon enough, though he gives up hope, reconciling himself to the fact that the man stole their money.

When Saeed's friend offers to help Saeed and Nadia but only ends up taking their money, it becomes clear that the refugee camp in Mykonos sorely lacks a meaningful sense of unity. Though fellow migrants could *aid one another by banding together and sharing their resources, they are ultimately divided and self-interested.*

During this time, Saeed asks Nadia why she still wears her black robes even though they are no longer in a city that requires women to dress in this highly conservative religious fashion. She reminds him that she didn't have to wear the robes before the militants came to their country but that she did anyway, since the robes send "a signal." This signal, she tells him, is still something she wants to send. "A signal even to me?" he asks, and she smiles and replies: "Not to you, you have seen me with nothing."

In this scene, Nadia confirms once again that she wears her religious robes for a very specific purpose: to send "a signal" to people who see her in public. This "signal" ultimately acts as a boundary of sorts, keeping people from thinking that she might be open to sexual propositions or flirtation. In this way, readers see yet again that religion—in this case the mere idea of religion—can be used to a person's benefit, even if that person is not religious.


Because money is tight, Saeed obtains a fishing rod to help them supplement their meals. One evening, he and Nadia are fishing after dark when they see a group of men moving toward them. They decide to leave, walking quickly in the other direction, but the men follow even as they speed up, winding up the beach's hill. At one point, Nadia slips and cuts her arm on a rock, but the couple forges on, shedding their belongings to go faster. Tossing the fishing rod, they scurry up the hill, cresting only to find a small house guarded by soldiers, meaning that the house "contain[s] a door to a desirable place." The guards yell at them to halt, and so they stand trapped between soldiers and a group of sinister men. Fortunately, the group of men never reach the hilltop, and the couple pitches their tent where they stand.

Nadia and Saeed's precarious position between authoritative guards and a sinister group of fellow refugees is a perfect representation of their overall struggle to exist in the crossfire of governments and dangerous citizens. In the same way that they had to navigate the dangers of living in a city plagued by violence between the government and a group of radical militants, now they must steel themselves against guards and other refugees. Their placement in the middle of these two groups symbolizes the fact that they now exist in a state of constant uncertainty, teetering on a border while trying to deal with the danger surrounding them on all sides.

As spring arrives in Mykonos, Nadia and Saeed visit a health clinic in town, where a nineteen-year-old volunteer cleans and dresses Nadia's arm wound, though she has no official medical training. As she does so, she and Nadia start talking and ultimately form a connection. The volunteer says she'd like to help the couple, asking what she can do, and Saeed and Nadia tell her they want a way off the island. Not long thereafter, after Nadia visits the clinic to smoke joints with the girl on a daily basis, the volunteer takes them to a house with a door. Wishing them good luck, she hugs Nadia, who squeezes her tightly. To Saeed's surprise, the girl's eyes are teary as she whispers something into Nadia's ear. Their hug lasts longer than expected, and then Nadia and Saeed step through the door.

This volunteer is the first compassionate person Saeed and Nadia meet in their travels. Her commitment to helping the young couple exemplifies the kind of empathy and ability to connect across cultural boundaries that Hamid clearly believes the world should adopt as a whole. And the fact that Nadia and this girl become fast friends who spend time together on such a regular basis suggests that forming cross-cultural relationships is not as hard as people might otherwise think—a notion that ultimately helps readers envision a more unified world.


CHAPTER 7

Saeed and Nadia fight their way into a beautiful bedroom with a dazzling view of the city skyline at night. Outside, they see perfectly maintained white houses and blossomed cherry trees. Certain they're in a lush hotel, they walk into a hallway and then down an impressive staircase, finding their way to a kitchen with almost no food in it. Turning on a TV, they discover they're in London, though they still don't understand what kind of building they're in. Before long, a man comes into the kitchen looking just as lost as they are before wandering away again. By the following evening, more and more migrants come downstairs from the same room through which Nadia and Saeed entered. Most of them are from Nigeria, though there are also people from Somalia and "the borderlands between Myanmar and Thailand."

Once again, Saeed and Nadia are struck by the uncertainty that comes along with migration and escape. Having left Mykonos behind, they're now forced to reacquaint themselves with a foreign environment, though this one is markedly different from the refugee camp they occupied in Greece. Indeed, they are perhaps shocked by the opulence into which they've been thrust, since both their home city and Mykonos provided them only with dismal living conditions. Having crossed yet another border, they must acclimate to a radically unfamiliar scenario.

Responding to this onslaught of new arrivals, Saeed and Nadia claim a bedroom on the first floor with a balcony from which they can jump into the backyard's garden if they ever need to escape. They determine that they're not in hotel, but in a large, empty mansion. Delighting in the luxurious bedroom, Nadia takes a long shower, cleaning herself under the firm water pressure. Bathing like this makes her feel renewed, as if she's returning to herself, but when she goes to put on her clothes again, she can't bear to wear the filthy robes, so she washes them in the bathtub. "What the hell are you doing?" Saeed says after pounding on the door, which Nadia realizes she locked. He angrily reminds her that this isn't their house and complains about how long she's taking. "I need five more minutes," she says. "I have to wash my clothes."

It's worth noting that, although she and Saeed have been flung into a wildly unfamiliar context, Nadia proves that she's capable of quickly adjusting to her current circumstances. Indeed, rather than irresolutely marveling at the strange mansion and all its treasures, she recognizes the opportunity to clean and even enjoy herself for a moment during an otherwise emotionally difficult period of her life. This aligns with Hamid's previous assertion hat Nadia is somebody who always remains open and even excited by change, rendering her fit for the emotionally complex process of migration. Saeed, on the other hand, is clearly perturbed and overwhelmed by having been thrust into the mansion, rendering him unable to go along with Nadia's easygoing acceptance of their new surroundings.

When Nadia shuts the bathroom door again, "the extraordinary satisfactions of the steamy bathroom" have "evaporated." Upon finishing washing her clothes, she goes into the bedroom with a towel around her body and another on her head, "prepared to let the little confrontation" with Saeed go. But then he opens his mouth, saying, "You can't stand here like that." In response, she says, "Don't tell me what I can do," a statement that stuns and frustrates Saeed, who goes into the bathroom and bathes and washes his own clothes before lying down on the single bed with Nadia for the night, who remain "cramped" and unwilling to touch one another like a couple that is "long and unhappily married, a couple that [makes] out of opportunities for joy, misery."

Once again, Saeed and Nadia's relationship seems to suffer as result of their migration. In fact, it's as if each time they step through one of the doors—each time they make migrate—they invite new troubles into their romantic bond. Friction, it seems, arises when they go from one place to the next, perhaps because they have different attitudes when it comes to change; whereas Nadia welcomes new experiences with excitement, Saeed remains skeptical and hesitant. As such, Hamid showcases the difficulties that arise when a couple transplants itself into a new culture.

Two days later, a housekeeper comes to the mansion and is shocked to find migrants camped throughout the house. The police come not long thereafter, vans of officers in riot gear and bullet-proof vests. As the officers shout threats over a bullhorn, imploring the migrants to leave the house, "a sort of camaraderie" forms amongst the refugees, a connection that would perhaps not take place if they were simply in the streets together. And although some migrants decide to leave, most stay inside. What's even more extraordinary is that people arrive in large numbers to stand behind the officers, a diverse crowd that bangs pots and pans and chants in many different languages until the police relent and withdraw. The next morning, Nadia is awoken by a call to prayer and finds herself disoriented and wondering where she is, especially as Saeed gets out of bed to pray.

Although the migrants in the mansion come from many different countries, they unite in response to the adversity of the police officers trying to break them up and take them out of the house. This is an important moment, as it marks the first time in the novel in which a migrant community actually comes together in a meaningful way, connecting with one another rather than breaking themselves into factions according to their respective cultural and national affiliations. On another note, when Saeed gets out of bed to pray, he once again demonstrates his renewed interest in religion, an interest that seems only to have blossomed recently as a response to hardship in his life. And although this might help him cope with what's going on, it also seems to separate him from Nadia, who confusedly watches him pray, clearly wondering about his new commitment to faith.

Abandoned mansions all over the city—in the wealthiest neighborhoods—are taken up by the refugee community. What's more, doors start appearing all over the city, and though migrants flow in, many people also flow out, like a British accountant who decides to walk through a portal when it appears in his bedroom. Just as he is about to commit suicide, the door to his house's guestroom goes dark, opening up onto the unknown. At first, he grabs a hockey stick to defend himself, but he soon realizes there's no point in protecting himself, since he intends to die anyway. As such, he goes about filling up his bathtub, intending to proceed with his plan of slitting his wrists. But the door's blackness reminds him of something about his mother, and this thought throws him into deep memories about his childhood.

This vignette is the first one in Exit West *that highlights a person's decision to walk through a door. All of the others, it's worth noting, showcase what happens on the* other *side of this decision. This one, though, focuses on the British accountant's desire to escape his life. In this case, this desire is quite literal—after all, he originally wants to kill himself, the ultimate escape. The door, however, provides him with an alternative, one he can use to leave everything behind without having to end his life.*

Thinking about his mother's illness and his father's withdrawn personality and his own childhood, the accountant decides to go through the door "just once, to see what [is] on the other side." Sometime later, his daughter and his best friend receive texts from him, pictures of him on a beach somewhere in Namibia. The accompanying message informs them that he won't be returning but that he they shouldn't worry because he has "felt something for a change." "With that he was gone," writes Hamid, "and his London was gone, and how long he remained in Namibia it was hard for anyone who formerly knew him to say."

When the accountant passes through the door, he successfully escapes the things in his life that were making him unhappy. This use of migration is notably different from the way Nadia and Saeed use the doors. Whereas this man actively seeks change, Saeed and Nadia only gravitate toward new horizons because circumstance has made it necessary for them to do so. This is perhaps why the accountant's experience is immediately successful, giving him a sense of happiness rather than a sense of fear and uncertainty. Of course, it's also worth noting how easy it is for this man to enter into a new country. Indeed, he doesn't have to face angry guards or police officers yelling at him to leave. This privilege suggests that the world is unfortunately biased toward white middle-class men, allowing them to do whatever they want even as brown migrants like Saeed and Nadia struggle to do the same thing.

Nadia and Saeed react differently to living in the mansion with the other refugees. For Nadia, the experience is somewhat rewarding, and she takes pleasure in the idea that a community might form amongst the migrants. Saeed, though, finds it more difficult to integrate into the various groups. In Mykonos, he always preferred to stay on the outskirts of the camp, but in the mansion this isn't an option. Plus, he feels guilty about occupying a space he doesn't own. When other refugees begin taking things from the house that are valuable, he objects. In turn, Nadia chastises him, telling him that his position is "absurd" and that it's dangerous for him to take such a stance. She tells him not to be an idiot, and this shocks him. Nonetheless, he abides by her advice, though he wonders if "this new way of speaking to one another" has become normal.

Two things are worth noting in this scene. First, Nadia and Saeed's different ways of acclimating to new contexts are on full display as they each try to accustom themselves to life in the mansion of refugees. Open to change, Nadia is excited by the multicultural spirit of the house and the idea that people from different cultures can connect despite their differences. Saeed, on the other hand, has a harder time seeing himself as part of a group of people from other cultures, perhaps because his ties to his own community are still so strong. Second of all, the stressors of migration once again bring themselves to bear on Saeed and Nadia's relationship, and the couple establishes an unfortunate "new way" of treating one another.

One night, the mansion comes under attack by a nativist mob. Saeed and Nadia are just returning from having eaten out, and they each sustain minor injuries. Apparently, riots like this one ran throughout all of London, and the next day Saeed and Nadia wake up sore and bruised, shuffling against one another uncomfortably in their single bed—Nadia pushes Saeed with her hip to make space, and, in return, Saeed bumps her back. Annoyed, they turn to look at each other and Saeed touches Nadia's swollen eye and they both start laughing, agreeing to not begin the morning with an argument.

Although Saeed and Nadia's current circumstances have created friction between them, their relationship still provides occasional relief from their stressful lives. This is evident when they turn to each other in bed, looking upon one another's injured faces and remembering that they are in this experience together, that in many ways they only have one another to rely upon in these uncertain times.

Rumors run rampant throughout the city that a massive plan is in the works to reclaim London for Englanders. Nadia and Saeed learn that the effort will be executed by both law enforcement officials and angry nativists, that a large-scale attack is on the horizon. These thoughts prompt the couple to consider their options, sitting in their bedroom at night debating whether or not they should stay in London. During these evenings, they feel closer to one another than they've been feeling in the recent weeks, deciding to treat each other more kindly from here on. Even so, the British government patrols the zone from overhead, flying in drones and helicopters over people like Nadia and Saeed, who have "run from war already, and [do] not know where next to run, and so [are] waiting, like so many others."

The painful process of migration certainly exacts its toll on Nadia and Saeed's relationship, but it also brings them closer to one another. Building upon the emotional intimacy they display in bed the morning after the first riot, Hamid shows that the mounting unrest in London also brings Saeed and Nadia together as they sit in their room and commiserate with one another about their current circumstances. At a loss for what to do, they once more experience the vast uncertainty that inevitably comes with forced migration, this time turning to their relationship to provide solace and support.

Despite various volunteer efforts and aid from sympathetic Londoners, Saeed and Nadia can't help but recognize the pre-conflict feeling presiding over London. During this time, they see a fox in the courtyard, and an old woman tells them that this fox isn't truly a fox, but rather Saeed and Nadia's love. Well-intended as this comment is, it makes the couple uncomfortable because they have been struggling to remain romantic. They've even taken to going their separate ways during the day, though they know that if the nativist attack descends while they're apart, they may never be able to find one another. Still, spending time separately somewhat enhances their relationship, and they sit on the balcony in the evenings, sometimes even holding hands or kissing. And every so often, they go into the bedroom and try to "rekindle" an "otherwise diminished fire" by "torment[ing] each other's bodies, never having sex."

It appears that the close emotional contact Saeed and Nadia seemingly regained in the aftermath of the first riot dissipates quite quickly, as they soon delight in spending time apart. However, their decision to instill a sense of independence within the relationship is perhaps a way of counteracting the fact that they otherwise are forced to spend almost all of their time together, a truly overwhelming way of existing in a relationship. By going their separate ways during the day, they make it more likely that they'll be able to muster excitement about spending time together, though this is an optimistic interpretation. Indeed, Hamid himself presents a more pessimistic evaluation of Saeed and Nadia's relationship, plainly equating it to a "diminished fire." Once again, readers see the challenging impact migration has had on this couple's love life.

One night, the fox in the courtyard finds a dirty diaper and drags it around, whipping it left and right and making a mess of feces. On that same night, the electricity is cut off by the authorities, plunging the mansions filled with refugees into utter darkness.

If the fox in the courtyard represents Nadia and Saeed's love, then this grotesque display is certainly a bad omen for their relationship. Indeed, the fox's mysterious appearance may have once seemed beautiful and meaningful, but now the animal presents itself as wild, undesirable, and hard to control—qualities Saeed and Nadia certainly don't want to associate with their failing romantic connection.

CHAPTER 8

With the lights out in Saeed and Nadia's portion of the city, "murders and rapes and assaults" take place. Although some blame the "nativist provocateurs," others blame the migrants. In this shifting climate, a group of elder Nigerians in Saeed and Nadia's mansion form a council that meets in the courtyard. Nadia is the only person in attendance who is visibly non-Nigerian. Some are surprised to see her and don't know whether or not to accept her into the group, but then an older woman—whom Nadia often helps climb the stairs—invites her to stand with her, thereby putting everybody at ease and welcoming Nadia into the council.

Once again, Nadia demonstrates her eagerness to embrace multicultural unity, finding a meaningful connection in this assembly. As London slowly descends into "murders and rapes and assaults" and people from all sides try to blame other groups for such violence, the idea of plurality and cross-cultural unity is especially important, something Nadia seems to grasp when she installs herself in the group of Nigerians.

At first, Nadia has trouble following what takes place during the council meetings, but eventually she's able to track the conversations because most people speak some form of English. She learns that not everybody in the courtyard is actually Nigerian, but rather from "places that border Nigeria," meaning that each person speaks a slightly different kind of English. "Together in this group they conversed in a language that was built in large part from English," Hamid notes, "but not solely from English, and some of them were in any case more familiar with English than were others. Also, they spoke different variations of English, different Englishes, and so when Nadia gave voice to an idea or opinion among them, she did not need to fear that her views could not be comprehended, for her English was like theirs, one among many."

Hamid quickly establishes that the council does indeed signify multicultural unity and connection, as even its linguistic backbone brings together "different Englishes" to make a composite whole, an amalgamation of language and meaning with which people from all over the world can engage. This stands in stark contrast to the divided nature of the Mykonos refugee camp, where groups only formed according to nationality. Here, it seems, Nadia has a chance to branch out and truly become involved in the refugee community.

Nadia begins to look forward to council meetings because they represent "something new in her mind, the birth of something new." These people, she discovers, are both "familiar and unfamiliar," and their acceptance of her feels like an "achievement" of sorts. She even gains respect among the younger Nigerians because of her involvement with the elders. The only person who doesn't spare her is a young Nigerian woman "with a leather jacket and a chipped tooth" who stands like a "gunslinger" and verbally harasses everybody in the house.

The council represents "the birth of something new" in Nadia's life because she has never before experienced a unification of different cultures and nationalities. After all, she comes from a country that was divided between the government and a group of radical militants, a place where everybody had to profess loyalty to whichever faction was in power. But here (or in the mansion, at least), Nadia can exist as an individual in a diverse group, thus allowing her to be whomever she wants.

Unlike Nadia, Saeed is uncomfortable in the mansion, disliking the fact that he's the sole male representative of his country. "Those sizing him up were from another country," Hamid writes, "and there were far more of them, and he was alone. This touched upon something basic, something tribal, and evoked tension and a sort of suppressed fear." Feeling this way, Saeed doesn't know when he can "relax" or if he even *can* relax.

For Saeed, isolation from his culture isn't liberating, like it is for Nadia. Rather, he suffers from the uncertainty that comes along with entering a foreign environment. Not knowing when he can "relax," he is constantly on his guard, a reality exacerbated by the fact that people are always "sizing him up" because he's the only man from his country. In this moment, Saeed ascribes to a stereotypically macho notion of manhood, believing that he must—as a man—represent his culture in some strong or powerful fashion. Nadia, on the other hand, doesn't pay attention to such hang-ups, thereby allowing herself to actually enjoy the refugee community's multicultural unity.

One evening, while Nadia is in the courtyard with the council, Saeed is stopped in the hallway by the woman in the leather jacket, her foot planted on the wall, barring him from passing. "Excuse me," he says, to which she replies, "Why should I excuse you?" She also utters something else, but he can't understand what she says. Behind him, he notices a "tough-looking Nigerian man," a man he's heard has a gun. Just as Saeed starts to truly fret, the woman in the leather jacket takes her foot from the wall and allows him to pass, though in order to do so he must brush against her body—a movement that makes him feel "emasculated." Once in the bedroom, he wants to "shout" and "huddle in a corner," though he doesn't do either of these things.

While Saeed's notions regarding masculinity and the way it affects his integration into the refugee community are perhaps antiquated and partly imagined, in this moment they manifest themselves as true. When the woman in the leather jacket challenges him, it's clear that he actually does *have to face certain adversities within the migrant population, a deeply unfortunate fact, considering that the entire community has plenty of enemies already and thus should refrain from treating one another poorly.*

Saeed discovers that a neighboring mansion is full of people from his country, so he begins visiting the house on a regular basis, finding comfort in hearing "familiar languages and accents and the familiar smell of the cooking." One afternoon he prays with a group of older men in the courtyard of this mansion and feels that prayer is "different here, somehow." It makes him feel like he's "part of something, not just spiritual, but something human, part of this group." For a painful moment, he thinks of his father, but a bearded man next to him distracts him by putting his arm around him and saying, "Brother would you like some tea?" As such, Saeed feels "accepted by this house" and asks the bearded man if he and Nadia can come live with them. The bearded man says yes, though they'll have to stay in separate rooms.

Because Saeed feels so isolated and even endangered in the house of Nigerians, it's rather unsurprising that he's so excited to find this group of fellow countrymen. Not only are these people "familiar" to him, but their religious practices align with his own growing interest in prayer, which seems to connect him to his past life. As such, these people become important figures in his new London life, helping him regain what he feels he has lost in the process of escaping his country.

That night, Saeed tells Nadia what the bearded man said, framing it as "good news." Nadia, though, is perplexed. "Why would we want to move?" she asks. "To be among our own kind," says Saeed. When Nadia asks why these men are their own "kind," Saeed points out that they're all from the same country. "From the country we used to be from," Nadia says, reminding Saeed that they "left that place." "That doesn't mean we have no connection," Saeed protests. "They're not like me," Nadia asserts, and proceeds to convince Saeed that it would be foolish to give up their own bedroom to go live in communal spaces with their countrymen. Later, Saeed realizes it's "odd that he would want to give up their bedroom for a pair of separated spaces, with a barrier between them, as when they lived in his parent's home."

In this moment, Nadia suggests that having the same nationality doesn't necessarily make two people alike. In fact, it doesn't even tie them to one another. Of course, it makes sense that she would believe this, since she herself never seemed to connect very much to her and Saeed's home culture. Instead, she feels at home with people from other countries, as long as they're willing to accept newcomers. For her, then, unity is about the present, not the past. For Saeed, on the other hand, unity is about shared memories, cultural practices, and common backgrounds.

Still awaiting the nativist attack, the council discusses whether or not refugees should fight back when the confrontation takes place. The group decides to handle the situation nonviolently, but Nadia remains unsure if this is the best idea, suspicious about surrendering completely. Saeed feels similarly, though he listens to the bearded man deliver a much different message to his countrymen. Indeed, the bearded man advocates "a banding together of migrants along religious principles, cutting across divisions of race or language or nation, for what [do] those divisions matter now in a world full of doors." He upholds that religious men have a duty to protect the people who seek "passage" through the doors, no matter what. This message resonates with Saeed, but it also vaguely reminds him of the kinds of things the militants in his country used to say, and this makes him feel like he's "rotting from within."

The bearded man's argument that refugees should come together regardless of "divisions of race or language or nation" aligns with Nadia's worldview, which champions diverse communities. However, the bearded man's support of such communities has little to do with actual diversity, as it actually depends upon the "religious principles" that he thinks should guide people. In other words, he believes everybody should connect with one another based on their shared religious beliefs. As such, his outlook essentially advocates for homogeneity, not diversity, which is why Saeed senses in his words the same kind of idealism displayed by the radical militants who forced him and Nadia into fleeing their country in the first place.

The bearded man gives Saeed a pistol from the house, which is full of guns. "In his heart he would not have been able to say if he took the pistol because it would make him safer from the nativists or from the Nigerians, his own neighbors," Hamid notes. Undressing that night, Saeed doesn't conceal the pistol from Nadia, who sees it and says nothing. When he gets into bed, they reach for each other while also moving "slightly away," and in "their coupling" they sense a "mutual violence," a "kind of shocked, almost painful surprise" at one another. Afterward, as he's trying to fall asleep, Saeed realizes he doesn't even know how to use a pistol and resolves to give it back the following day.

The presence of the pistol in Saeed and Nadia's bedroom essentially alters their relationship for a moment, imbuing their physical intimacy with a kind of "mutual violence." This strange dynamic is clearly the result of Nadia's surprise that Saeed has obtained a weapon, and so she momentarily sees him as somebody else. For an instant, she's attracted to him because he doesn't resemble himself—a foreboding notion, since sexual attraction should ideally come from an appreciation of one's partner, not an appreciation of his sudden unrecognizability.

Certain migrants find ways to siphon energy to charge **phones**, enabling Saeed and Nadia to read the news. For Nadia, this is an unsettling experience because there's so much talk in the media about migration and nativism. "The fury of those nativists advocating wholesale slaughter was what struck Nadia most," Hamid writes, "and it struck her because it seemed so familiar, so much like the fury of the militants in her own city." Because of this, she wonders if she and Saeed have even accomplished anything by moving. When she feels like this, though, she looks around and sees the many different kinds of people surrounding her, all the different races and cultures congregating in one place, and she realizes that she was "stifled in the place of her birth for virtually her entire life" and that "a new time" is here, one she welcomes with an open mind.

Once again, Nadia shows her capacity to optimistically usher in change, readily embracing and even celebrating the multicultural diversity surrounding her in the migrant community. Of course, she finds it difficult to have gone through so much trouble to escape just to ultimately feel as if she hasn't even accomplished anything by migrating. However, she takes comfort in the idea that "a new time" is upon her because she recognizes that she can now experience a cultural unity she never would have had access to in her own country. As such, she once more demonstrates her ability to enthusiastically integrate into new communities and cultures.

As Saeed and Nadia wait fretfully for the nativist attack, a woman emerges through a door in a cantina in Tijuana. Once she's completely through the portal, she walks up a hill to a small orphanage called the House of the Children, where she locates her daughter, who is now nearly a grown woman and who only recognizes her because she has "seen her on electronic displays, on the screens of **phones** and computers." The next day, the mother and daughter bid goodbye to the others in the orphanage and hike back down the hill, where together they enter the cantina and pass through the door.

In this vignette, Hamid shows readers once again that the doors aren't only used to escape unfortunate circumstances. Indeed, they also have the ability to reunite loved ones. Although this woman's daughter most likely had to live in this orphanage because of some disaster or danger that separated her family, now the doors have reconnected her and her mother.

When the raid on the "migrant ghetto in which Saeed and Nadia [find] themselves" begins, an officer is immediately shot in the leg, exacerbating tensions so that the authorities begin firing their weapons. Outside when the fighting begins, Saeed rushes to the door, which Nadia quickly opens and pulls him through. They then retreat to their room, push the mattress against the window, and wait. They hear gunshots and helicopters overhead and see, when they peek through the gap between the mattress and the window, "thousands of leaflets dropping from the sky." Later, they smell smoke, but the noises eventually subside. Finally, they hear that at least two hundred migrants have been burned alive in a cinema that the authorities torched. They also hear about other places where large numbers of migrants have been killed, but there is—at least—no more shooting that night.

The police's bloody rampage is clearly made worse by the fact that somebody shoots an officer in the leg at the outset of the conflict. This ultimately confirms Hamid's notion that fear is the primary catalyst for violence and xenophobia. After all, it's possible that the officers wouldn't have carried out the raid so violently if they hadn't been made to fear for their own lives. In this way, Hamid reminds readers that terror and panic lurk behind the hate and vitriol dividing people from one another.

Time passes after the attack, and the nativists don't continue their violence. "Perhaps they had decided they did not have it in them to do what would have needed to be done," Hamid suggests. It's possible, he notes, that the nativists have come to understand that the doors can't be sealed, that their efforts are futile. "And so," he writes, "irrespective of the reason, decency on this occasion won out, and bravery, for courage is demanded not to attack when afraid." Electricity and water is restored to all areas of London, and Saeed and Nadia—along with their housemates and neighbors—celebrate this good fortune.

Though it's unfortunate "decency" only comes after the police have killed so many migrants in such a cruel and grotesque fashion, Saeed and Nadia find themselves finally able to relax in the aftermath of the attack. What's more, Hamid praises the people of London for refraining from instigating further violence, calling them "brave" because it takes "courage" "not to attack when afraid." Once again, then, he emphasizes the fact that fear, violence, and xenophobia are directly related to one another.

CHAPTER 9

By summer, Saeed and Nadia are living in a settlement called London Halo, an area surrounding the city that used to be protected from construction by the government but is now one of many "new cities" getting built to accommodate the massive influx of refugees into England. They live and toil in a "worker camp," sleeping in an encampment and working on constructing permanent structures for migrants. "In exchange for their labor in clearing terrain and building infrastructure and assembling dwellings from prefabricated blocks, migrants were promised forty meters and a pipe: a home on forty square meters of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity," Hamid writes.

When Hamid uses the phrase "forty meters and a pipe," he references the promise made to former slaves in America in 1865, when the Union promised freedmen "forty acres and a mule" as a (largely unfulfilled) gesture of agrarian reform. By comparing Britain's promise to this historical offer, Hamid implies that the government's supposed magnanimity is not as altruistic as it may seem. Although Saeed and Nadia no longer must live under the threat of attack, they essentially have gone from living in a mansion to living in an encampment once again. Still, the implication here is that the government is slowly coming around to the idea of welcoming the refugee population into the country. Rather than trying to kick migrants out or force them to escape, it has begun trying to implement policies that will benefit these people, who desperately need assistance.

There is a waitlist to live in the new buildings, and Saeed and Nadia aren't far from the top, though first they have to help erect the lodgings. Overall, though, "existence" in Britain has become relatively safe, though Saeed and Nadia must share a single cot, where one night Nadia dreams about the volunteer from Mykonos. In the dream, she has gone back to the island, and when she wakes up, she's "almost panting" and her body feels "alive, or alarmed, regardless changed." Henceforth, she periodically catches herself thinking about the volunteer. Saeed, on the other hand, spends his time thinking about his father, whom he learns from a cousin has died of pneumonia. In response to this news, Saeed commits himself to working, signing up for extra shifts to keep himself busy, for he's not sure how he should mourn.

In the same way that Saeed has redoubled his commitment to religion—praying often as a way of reconnecting with his past life—he now seeks to distract himself from the grief of having lost his father. In this period, then, work becomes an escape from having to deal with his emotions. And as he retreats into himself in this way, Nadia also withdraws from their relationship by fantasizing about the volunteer from Mykonos. As such, Hamid showcases the ways these characters find to escape their lives and troubles, illustrating that—unfortunately—this kind of escape no longer can be found in their relationship.

Nadia is also deeply affected by the passing of Saeed's father, but she isn't sure how to express it. Her attempts to talk to Saeed about it fail, since she doesn't know what to say and Saeed himself remains quiet. Because of this dynamic, she finds herself relieved when she's working her shift because it means she isn't with Saeed—a feeling that startles her and makes her feel guilty. When Saeed gathers a group of people to pray for his father, Nadia comes to join the circle, even if only to sit there in solidarity. In response, Saeed tells her she doesn't need to be there, but she insists on staying. As they pray, though, she feels "for the first time unwelcome. Or perhaps unengaged. Or perhaps both."

By praying, Saeed indulges his desire to escape not only the grief he feels in response to his father's death, but also the unfavorable circumstances of his everyday life. Unfortunately, his relationship with Nadia is in large part responsible for the discontent he feels with his life, so when she offers to participate in his prayers, he's naturally hesitant to embrace her presence. This is why she feels "unwelcome" and "unengaged"—yet another sign that she and Saeed have drifted from one another.

Meanwhile, in Amsterdam, a man lounges on his balcony overlooking a courtyard with beautiful plants. Rolling a cigarette, he thinks about his former lover—who has left him—and sees another old man coming out of the courtyard's gardening shed. This second man (dressed in tropical clothing) walks around the courtyard, circles back to the shed, turns, doffs his hat to the smoking man, and disappears again into the shed. This scene repeats the following day, but this time the smoking man raises a glass of wine to him. On the third day, the smoking man invites the traveler up for a drink, and even though the smoking man doesn't speak Portuguese and the traveler doesn't speak Dutch, they have a wonderful time, eventually sharing a kiss that one of the neighbors—a photographer—accidentally captures on camera, though she deletes it for their sake.

Once again, Hamid includes a vignette in which the doors bring people together, this time sparking an unlikely romantic connection. And this isn't the only kind of connection at play in this short set-piece; when the smoking man's neighbor catches the couple's first kiss on her camera, she is momentarily part of their budding relationship, fleetingly bound to them by circumstance and simultaneity.

As Nadia and Saeed both become more and more involved with their respective crews at work, they drift further and further apart. Indeed, they hardly even touch on their single cot. "They put their lack of conversation down to exhaustion," Hamid explains, "for by the end of the day they were usually so tired they could barely speak." Instead of spending time with one another, they pay attention to their **phones**, because "phones themselves have the innate power of distancing one from one's physical surroundings."

Hamid's assertion that phones have the "innate power of distancing one from one's physical surroundings" recalls Saeed's original resistance to his phone's alluring qualities. Although the internet enables these migrants to connect to places and people far, far away, it also gives them an excuse to avoid talking to each other, ultimately driving them apart and building an invisible boundary between them.

Hamid asserts that whenever a couple moves, "they begin, if their attention is still drawn to one another, to see each other differently." This, it seems, has happened to Saeed and Nadia. In the context of the worker camp, Nadia notices that Saeed has grown even more handsome, so handsome that other women gaze at him as he passes. And yet, Nadia herself is "strangely unmoved by his handsomeness." He also prays on a regular basis, sometimes up to three times per day. But when he talks to Nadia, he only references work and politics, never divulging anything about his feelings or about how he misses his parents. Still, he finds himself gravitating toward people from his country, and Nadia begins to think that the farther they get from home, the more Saeed tries to "strengthen his connection to it."

In this section, Nadia and Saeed continue to grow apart, their bond deteriorating as each one gravitates to separate ways of living in the worker camp. Yet again, Saeed's commitment to religion and prayer seemingly isolates Nadia, who apparently doesn't understand his invigorated interest in spirituality or even his desire to surround himself with people from their home country. Once more, then, Hamid shows the toll that migration has exacted upon Saeed and Nadia's relationship, which was apparently not strong enough to endure such seismic change.

Saeed also considers Nadia in this new context, finding that she looks the same, though perhaps more tired. Still, she continues to wear her black robes, a fact that begins to annoy him, since she doesn't even pray, actively avoids speaking their shared language, and even goes out of her way to not spend time with "their people." "Well take it off then!" he wants to shout, but this is a sentiment that makes him feel guilty and angry with himself, since he knows he's supposed to love—and thus respect—her. He wants more than anything to love Nadia the way he used to, but he can't seem to do this, an idea that leaves him feeling "unmoored, adrift in a world where one could go anywhere but still find nothing."

When Saeed feels the urge to yell at Nadia to take off her robes, he displays a certain protectiveness of his home culture, as if Nadia is somehow appropriating customs that no longer belong to her because she hasn't remained loyal to their country's way of life. Of course, he feels this way because he himself has become so much more invested in living like he's still in the city of his birth. Furthermore, he feels "unmoored" when he thinks about his waning love for Nadia because she has essentially become his only extant family member, the only person who can connect him to his past. As such, thinking of life without her means considering an existence outside the framework of everything he's ever known.

Given the nature of their shifting relationship, Nadia suggests one day "under the drone-crossed sky" that she and Saeed leave behind the worker camp. She tells him she's heard of a door that takes people to Marin, California, a place settled in the hills outside San Francisco. To her surprise, he instantly agrees, hoping that in this new place they'll be able to "rekindle their relationship, to reconnect with their relationship, [...] and to elude, through a distance spanning a third of the globe, what it seem[s] in danger of becoming."

Saeed's immediate agreement to travel to Marin reveals his belief that migration will help him salvage his relationship to Nadia. This is a strange belief, considering that their relationship only started faltering once they left home (though it's worth noting that migration only brought out and highlighted opposing qualities in each of them that already existed). Still, both he and Nadia clearly hope that by going to Marin they'll be able to escape the deterioration of their love—an obviously unlikely scenario.

CHAPTER 10

Saeed and Nadia settle high in the hills of Marin, above the encampments of other refugees who came to California before them. With a view of the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco, they fashion a shanty out of corrugated metal and packing crates. Nadia finds work by hiking down the hills—through the ever-present fog—to a food cooperative nearby. And although there are many poor refugees living in Marin, the settlement is markedly less violent than the places most of these refugees fled in the first place. Still, Saeed becomes even "more melancholic" than he was before, a temperament that leads him into an even more intense state of quiet devotion and prayer.

Once again, readers see that Saeed seeks to soothe his migration-related troubles by throwing himself into the practice of religion and prayer. Already, then, it becomes clear that this move to Marin will not save his and Nadia's relationship, which suffers partly due to their inability to connect over Saeed's spiritual practice and devotion.

One night, Nadia obtains weed from a coworker. Hiking home, she realizes she doesn't know how Saeed will react—of course, they've smoked joints before, but so much has changed since then, and Saeed has become incredibly devout. "She sometimes felt that his praying was not neutral towards her," Hamid writes, "in fact she suspected it carried a hint of reproach, though why she felt this she could not say." When she's about to show Saeed the marijuana, then, she recognizes that how he responds is "a matter of portentous significance to her." Sitting on a car seat they use as a couch, she touches his leg; he offers her a small, fatigued smile. This, she thinks, is "encouraging." She then opens her hand to reveal the weed and waits for his reaction. After a brief pause, he begins laughing "almost soundlessly," saying, "Fantastic."

Nadia's suspicion that Saeed's prayer is "not neutral towards her" once more illustrates the extent to which his religious devotion has come between them. Of course, this is possibly a projection of Nadia's, who perhaps feels guilty for having so willingly left behind her native culture—but this is exactly her point, for she feels that Saeed's praying is a "reproach." Whether or not this is actually the case, it's overwhelmingly clear that the couple now operates on separate wavelengths and is ultimately incapable of connecting with one another without either offending or getting hurt.

Saeed rolls a joint as Nadia inwardly rejoices, giddy at his positive reaction. Smoking the joint, she realizes that American weed is much more potent than what she's used to. In accordance with this, she finds herself almost unable to speak. "And then, not looking at each other, they started to laugh, and Nadia laughed until she cried," Hamid writes.

Although she ostensibly "laugh[s] until she crie[s]" because of the intense effects of the potent marijuana she has just smoked, Nadia's descent into tears signals her underlying emotional state. While she's happy that she and Saeed are finally sharing something and spending time together like the old days, this is only a fleeting joy because she knows that they have drifted apart in more significant and possibly irreparable ways.

Hamid notes that most of the natives in Marin have died out or were "exterminated long ago." At the same time, though, he suggests that it's not "quite true to say there [are] almost no natives, nativeness being a relative matter." Indeed, many people consider themselves natives of Marin, meaning that "they or their parents or their grandparents or the grandparents of their grandparents [were] born" here. Still, the concept of "nativeness" in America is further complicated by the fact that there exists a "third layer [...] composed of" people who descend from those "brought from Africa to this continent centuries ago as slaves." Saeed gets to know one such person who leads a communal prayer at a local place of worship. Apparently, this priest's deceased wife originally came from Saeed's country, meaning that the preacher can somewhat speak Saeed's language and knows "his approach to religion."

Hamid's consideration of America's complicated history is important because it engages the idea of migration and nativity, reminding readers—especially American readers—that many of the people who claim to come from the United States aren't actually native to the land. Rather, their ancestors migrated to the country or were captured and brought here by the white people who claimed the land for themselves. This ultimately puts the entire novel into perspective, encouraging readers to keep in mind that migration was central to the founding of many modern-day countries—even those (like America) that now rail against the idea of accepting newcomers.

The preacher runs a shelter staffed by volunteers that feeds people and teaches English. Before long, Saeed joins the organization and works with the preacher's daughter, to whom he avoids speaking because his breath seizes when he looks upon her beauty, a reaction that makes him feel guilty. "Nadia perceived the presence of this woman not in the form of a distancing by Saeed, as might have been expected, but rather as a warming up and reaching out," Hamid writes. Together, they happily smoke joints in the evenings, and Nadia feels "bits of the old Saeed returning." However, she can't summon the "old Nadia," finding her physical attraction to him lacking. This is not because her erotic sensibilities have died away—in fact, they're quite alive, as evidenced by the fact that sometimes, when Saeed's asleep, she masturbates while thinking about the volunteer from Mykonos.

During this period, Nadia and Saeed's relationship apparently has a slight resurgence of fellow-feeling, an increase of kindness and mutual happiness. Unfortunately, this happens because both of them have seemingly accepted—on some level, at least—that their love lies elsewhere and that the relationship itself is doomed. Although they haven't yet articulated this to themselves, each one has admitted internally to being attracted to other people, meaning that it's only a matter of time before they recognize that their fidelity to one another is lacking.

Saeed prays often throughout the day. For him, prayer is a way to "touch" his parents, "who [cannot] otherwise be touched." When he was a child, he used to watch his parents pray and wonder what it was like. When he asked his mother, she taught him how to pray, and so "until the end of his days, prayer sometimes remind[s him] of [her]." It also reminds him of his father and his father's friends, since when he was a teenager he started accompanying his father to communal prayers. As such, "prayer for him became about being a man, being one of the men, a ritual that connected him to adulthood and to the notion of being a particular sort of man, a gentleman, a gentle man, a man who stood for community and faith and kindness and decency, a man, in other words, like his father."

Hamid takes a moment at this point to clarify Saeed's relationship to prayer, solidifying the idea that practicing religion enables him to connect with parts of his personal history that are otherwise long gone. It's no wonder, then, that his interest in prayer has steadily increased throughout the novel, for as he has moved farther and farther from his home country, the more and more he has prayed. What's more, religious practice also factors into his very concept of what it means to be a "man," meaning that he has essentially structured his entire identity on a model of piety.

Part of why Saeed prays is because it feels like a way of restoring to humanity a sense of unity. As such, he prays as "a lament, as a consolation, and as a hope." However, he feels incapable of expressing this to Nadia, despite how important it is to communicate "this mystery that prayer link[s] him to," which he finds himself able to articulate to the preacher's daughter when she asks him—during a "remembrance for her [dead] mother"—to describe her mother's country to her. This question leads to a long, meaningful conversation that lasts late into the night.

Since prayer is something that Saeed turns to as he slowly grows apart from Nadia, it makes perfect sense that his initial conversations with his new love interest would revolve around spiritual practice. Indeed, the preacher's daughter represents the path Saeed has already embarked upon, and the only thing keeping him from fully following this path is his relationship with Nadia.

Neither Saeed nor Nadia talk about the fact that they're "drifting apart," since they don't want to "inflict a fear of abandonment," though they both feel "the fear of the severing of their tie, the end of the world they [have] built together, a world of shared experiences in which no one else [can] share." At the same time, what keeps them together is also a desire to make sure that the other first establishes him- or herself as an individual in Marin. And although they continue to argue and become jealous now and again, they mostly give each other space.

Nadia and Saeed's relationship no longer provides them with emotional nourishment, but they do still care about each other. This is obvious by the way they worry about leaving the other behind, each one wanting to make sure the other will be able to survive without him or her. What's more, they are cognizant of the fact that together they have "built" their own "world." Of course, this is the case for any couple who has been together for a long period of time, but Saeed and Nadia's connection has no doubt led to more "shared experiences" than the average coupling because of their many journeys together as refugees.

As Saeed and Nadia grow apart, Hamid describes an old woman living in Palo Alto in the same house she grew up in. This house has witnessed her two marriages and the formative years of her children's lives. "She had known the names of almost everyone on her street," Hamid writes, "and most had been there a long time, they were old California, from families that were California families, but over the years they had changed more and more rapidly, and now she knew none of them." When she steps into the yard, she feels as if she herself has migrated, thinking that "everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives." After all, Hamid suggests, "we are all migrants through time."

This vignette gives Hamid the opportunity to set forth the important idea that "we are all migrants through time." This notion is worth keeping in mind when considering Exit West *because it gives readers a firsthand understanding of the connection that runs throughout the book. While not everybody can claim to have traveled the world—crossing borders and divisions and facing the fears that come along with migration—everybody* can *claim to be a "migrant through time." In this way, Hamid brings a sense of unity and connection not only to the characters in his novel, but to his readers, too.*

CHAPTER 11

While smoking a joint one night, Nadia nonchalantly suggests that she move out. Saeed doesn't say anything as he watches her hold in a cloud of smoke. When she awakes the next morning, she finds him looking at her. He touches her face tenderly and says he should be the one to leave, though as he says this he feels strange, realizing that his gentle caress of Nadia's face is false—a mere pantomime of affection. Still, he knows this might be the last time he's able to touch her like this. Likewise, Nadia feels both comforted and discomforted by his hand as she tells him that she should be the one to leave if anybody is going to do so, though she knows that the matter is "one of if, not of when, and that when [will] be soon."

Finally, Nadia and Saeed face the fact that their relationship is no longer full of love and that their connection has become nothing but a formality. Of course, the connection is still important, since they'll forever be meaningful to one another, having gone through everything they experienced together. However, this doesn't mean they should keep play-acting and pretending to be in love, which is why Saeed's gesture feels so false and empty: they both know it only contains a friendly kind of love, not a romantic one.

Fortunately, Saeed and Nadia both agree that it's better to part ways now, before their union turns ugly. As Nadia leaves the shanty, they don't "embrace or kiss," but rather face one another for "a long, long time, any gesture seeming inadequate." Then, with inevitable finality, Nadia turns and walks "into the misty drizzle," which plays across her face and makes her feel "alive" as she leaves Saeed standing in the shanty's doorway.

The fact that Nadia feels "alive" as she walks away from Saeed is yet another indication that their decision to part ways is the right choice. In keeping with Hamid's assertion earlier in the novel that Nadia gets excited by the prospect of change, in this moment she feels invigorated by the new horizons opening up before her—horizons that weren't apparent when she was still living with Saeed.

Nadia secures a room above the food cooperative where she works, which is open to migrants when they need it. In general, she feels somewhat isolated amongst the other cooperative workers, since they give her too much personal space because of her black robes. This changes, however, when a "pale-skinned tattooed man" comes in while she's working the register one day. Placing a pistol on the counter, he says, "So what the fuck do you think of that?" Not knowing what to do, Nadia remains still and says nothing, simply training her eyes on his chin. "So what the fuck do you think of that?" he says again, this time with less confidence. Finally, after an seemingly interminable moment of silence, he scoops the gun up from the counter and leaves without shooting anybody or taking anything.

Nadia's bravery when the tattooed man tries to rob the cooperative perhaps grows out of the difficult and frightening experiences she's had to endure. After all, violence became an everyday reality while she was living in her home country, and so she has learned how to manage her fear. Nonetheless, it's no doubt disappointing to see that even in America—after all of her travels—she still has to contend with hate. Fortunately, she defeats the tattooed man by refusing to engage, a fact that suggests nonviolence is the most effective way of responding to malice.

In the aftermath of the tattooed man's presence, Nadia's coworkers begin to embrace her, either because they're "impressed by her mettle in the face of danger or because they [have] recalibrated their sense of who [is] a threat and who [is] threatened." In this way, Nadia begins to feel like she belongs. In tandem with this feeling, the Marin community begins to blossom into a vibrant culture, which some people take to calling a "new jazz age," since a person can "walk around Marin and see all kinds of ensembles, humans with humans, humans with electronics, dark skin with light skin with gleaming metal and matte plastic, computerized music and unamplified music and even people who [wear] masks or hid[e] themselves from view."

Marin's transformation into a place populated by a thoroughly diverse set of people recalls the multicultural community Nadia relished in London when she and Saeed were living in a mansion with refugees from other countries. This, it seems, is what Nadia has been searching for: a place into which she can integrate without the threat of violence or hate. And although she does have to face the antagonism of the tattooed man, doing so only helps her peers "recalibrate their sense of who is a threat and who is threatened," ultimately helping them see past the negative stereotypes surrounding people like Nadia who wear black robes and cover their heads.

Nadia sees the head cook from her food cooperative at a musical event and, after their initial conversations that night, they start dating. Meanwhile, Saeed grows closer to the preacher's daughter, who finds in him "an attitude to faith that intrigue[s] her." As for Nadia and Saeed's own contact, they reach out to each other periodically, going on long walks together and calling or texting one another almost daily. They see one another every weekend until their meetings start to get interrupted by their "connections" to their other love interests. And although at first this distance between them upsets them, they gradually become comfortable not speaking for extended periods of time. "They [each] grew less worried for the other," Hamid explains, "and eventually a month went by without any contact, and then a year, and then a lifetime."

Hamid has spent the entirety of Exit West *building the romantic connection between Saeed and Nadia, but in this moment he allows that connection to simply fade away. Indeed, as Nadia and Saeed embark upon their new lives, they lose track of one another, letting their bond stretch until they no longer stay in contact at all. And though readers may feel a tinge of sadness about this separation, there's no arguing that Hamid's portrayal of a dying romance has been inaccurate, for this is how love fades: gradually, gradually, and then all at once.*

In the hills of Marrakesh, a maid whose husband and daughter have both left the country works in a large house owned by "a man who might once have been called a prince and a woman who might once have been called a foreigner." Perhaps because she can't speak, the maid refuses to leave her home country. Although she doesn't know her age, she's certain that she's younger than the woman she serves, who—unlike her—still attracts the attention of men. When the maid's daughter comes to visit during the same summer of Nadia and Saeed's breakup, the young woman tries to convince her mother to leave Marrakesh, but the maid simply puts her hand on her daughter's, smiles, and shakes her head. "One day she might go, she think[s]. But not today."

The final vignette of Exit West, *this short description of an elderly woman in Marrakesh provides one last look at how people around the world respond to the existence of doors that can transport a person far away. Indeed, the maid's response isn't to step through one of these portals, nor is it to wait for others to come to her through them. Rather, she ignores their powers, content with staying exactly where she is, perhaps knowing that, regardless of whether or not she leaves her home, she is a "migrant through time."*


CHAPTER 12

Nadia goes back to her home city for the first time in the "half a century" after she last saw Saeed. "The fires she had witnessed in her youth" have now "burned themselves out," and she finds herself able to explore the city, which is simultaneously "familiar but also unfamiliar." As she wends her way through the streets, she's "informed of the proximity of Saeed, and after standing motionless for a considerable moment she communicate[s] with him, and they [agree] to meet" at a nearby café. As they sit together and talk about their lives, they carefully "highlight and exclude" portions of their respective stories. Fortunately, they're able to reestablish a "rhythm" with one another, in part because they parted all those years ago on good terms, all things considered.

Hamid doesn't explain what he means by the fact that Nadia is "informed of the proximity of Saeed," but the implication is that her phone is somehow capable of signaling to her when he's nearby. As such, Hamid provides one final form of connection, building upon the idea that technology—with its vast networks and infinite capacity for surveillance—unites humanity. After all these years, Nadia and Saeed once again find themselves communicating in their home city using phones, bringing their story full-circle and harkening back to their initial text-message flirtations.

"Imagine how different life would be if I had agreed to marry you," Nadia says. "Imagine how different it would be if I had agreed to have sex with you," responds Saeed, to which Nadia says, "We were having sex." After a moment, Saeed smiles and concedes, saying, "Yes I suppose we were." As they finish their coffees, Nadia asks Saeed if he ever wound up visiting the Chilean deserts to see the dazzling stars. Nodding, he tells her that if she ever has a free evening, he would love to take her because the sight is astoundingly beautiful. Closing her eyes, Nadia says she'd love to do this, and they both stand, hug, and go their separate ways, not knowing whether or not "that evening [will] ever come."

The novel's ending ingeniously ties up many of its themes. Nadia's comment about how different things might have been if they got married captures the way that, while the novel focused on Nadia and Saeed's time together, they didn't end up together or the center of each other's lives. The connection they shared was in many ways just like the connections they share with others. The novel's focus on their particular connection showed how important that connection was, but the fact that the novel also shows the connection ends implies that all of their connections were also important, or could have been similarly important, had they made different choices. Meanwhile, the odd moment when Saeed comments that they weren't having sex, and then admits rather easily that they were, is important. Saeed seems to have built for himself a narrative in which he and Nadia followed strict religious rules, and avoided sex before marriage. This narrative fits with Saeed's growing religiousness through the story: it is the narrative he needed in order to be the person he needed himself to be. But now back in his home country where the religious strife has backed down, he can suddenly admit to himself and to Nadia that in fact they were having sex. Now, in this different context, no longer a refugee, Saeed can be a slightly different, less rigid and even less religious version of himself. Finally, when Saeed offers to take Nadia to the Chilean deserts if she ever has a "free evening," it becomes clear that travel has become so ubiquitous throughout the world that people are able to take casual trips to far-flung destinations, essentially obliterating the idea that migration across borders is something that must be controlled. And when Hamid asserts that neither Saeed nor Nadia know if their trip to the desert together will ever transpire, he once more relates uncertainty and migration, though this time the combination is imbued with a sense of possibility, not fear. At the same time, that these two people, who have had to travel under duress as refugees throughout the novel, can now talk about traveling for leisure, it makes clear that the state of being a refugee is something that comes to an end. While the rest of the world often treats refugees as nothing other than refugees, the novel insists that refugees are, in fact, humans who just happen to have been forced to flee their home.

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