What the Eyes Don't See

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MONA HANNA-ATTISHA

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha was born Mona Hanna in Sheffield to a pair of scientists who fled Iraq during Saddam Hussein's regime. When Mona was still young, her family moved from England to Detroit, Michigan, where there was a thriving immigrant community of Iraqis and Chaldeans—the Christian sect to which the Hannas belonged. A careful student and a passionate environmental activist from a young age, Mona attended the University of Michigan, where she earned a BS in environmental health and a Master of Public Health degree. She then attended medical school at Michigan State University and completed her last two clinical years of school in Flint, where she would later become the director of the pediatric residency program at Hurley Medical Center, a public teaching hospital located in Flint and affiliated with MSU. In 2015, "Dr. Mona," as her patients call her, leapt to national attention when she became a whistleblower in the Flint water crisis. Mona had conducted research proving that Flint children's blood-lead levels had spiked after city officials, seeking to cut corners, switched the city's water source from the Detroit River to the Flint River. Though the state of Michigan initially dismissed and derided Mona's claims, they soon reversed their position and confirmed Mona's extraordinary findings. As a public health advocate, Mona has testified before congress about the Flint water crisis and played a major role in securing federal and state funding and social support for Flint residents.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

What the Eyes Don't See is a chronicle of the Flint water crisis, which began unfolding in Flint, Michigan in 2014. That year, state-imposed austerity measures stripped power from the mayor of Flint (a poor, majority-Black city) and placed that power in the hands of an emergency manager who decided to cut costs by switching the source of the city's water from the Detroit River to the Flint River. The switch occurred in April of 2014. But the new water source wasn't treated with corrosion-control materials—and so water, which is naturally corrosive, began leaching large amounts of lead (a harmful neurotoxin) into the drinking supply of Flint's 100,000 residents. Throughout the book, Mona Hanna-Attisha explores Flint's long, complicated history as an industrial boomtown that collapsed under the pressures of racism and greed. Flint's vulnerability has come into the national spotlight since the water crisis, and local Flint activists have since demanded state and federal resources to fund public health and environmental justice initiatives.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many books have been written about the infamous Flint water crisis, which first shook the city in 2015 and lasted through 2019. Anna Clark's *The Poisoned City* offers a view of the crisis alongside an examination of why places like Flint are neglected and "set up to fail," characterizing the crisis as an entirely preventable and uniquely American tragedy. But Flint wasn't the first water crisis that was pushed aside and overlooked—Robert Bilott's *Exposure: Poisoned Water, Corporate Greed, and One Lawyer's Twenty-Year Battle Against DuPont* tells the story of his decades-long struggle to hold the conglomerate DuPont accountable for its hazardous dumping of toxic chemicals. Also of note is the story of renowned activist Erin Brockovich, a paralegal who helped build a case in 1993 against the Pacific Gas & Electric Company of California. The facility's runoff contaminated the groundwater in a large area near the plant, raising cancer rates by a remarkable percentage over a 10-year period. Brockovich has published two books, *Take it From Me: Life's a Struggle But You Can Win* and *Superman's Not Coming*. The story of her case against PGEC was also documented in the 2000 film *Erin Brockovich*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** What the Eyes Don't See: A Story of Crisis, Resistance, and Hope in an American City
- **When Written:** 2016–2018
- **Where Written:** Michigan
- **When Published:** June 19, 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir; Exposé
- **Setting:** Flint, Michigan
- **Climax:** Unable to secure support from the mayor of Flint, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha takes her findings about the escalating blood-lead levels among Flint's vulnerable children public at a press conference of her own.
- **Antagonist:** Government corruption; environmental injustice
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Poetic Justice. Mona Hanna-Attisha looked to a favorite line from the English writer and poet D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* for the title of her book. "What the eye doesn't see and the mind doesn't know doesn't exist," wrote Lawrence in 1928. One of Mona's medical mentors distilled the quote as "The eyes don't see what the mind doesn't know," and

the quotation struck Mona as a profound directive to learn everything possible about her specialty so that she could better "see" her patients' problems.

PLOT SUMMARY

In August of 2015, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha hosted a barbecue. One of her friends since childhood, Elin Betanzo, attended; Elin had just moved back to Michigan after working for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for many years. She confided in Mona about a former colleague of hers, Miguel Del Toral, who'd discovered that there was lead in the water in Flint. The city, which was under the control of an emergency manager who'd been appointed to cut costs in the city's budget, had recently switched its water source from the Detroit River to the Flint River, which was once a toxic waste dumping site. The water that was being piped in from the Flint River wasn't being treated with corrosion control chemicals—and so the water, which was naturally corrosive, was leaching lead from old pipes into the homes of thousands of Flint residents. Mona was shocked and appalled—especially because so many of her patients were newborns who got their nutrition from formula made with warm tap water. Elin warned Mona that the EPA and state authorities like the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) were working to cover up Miguel's research.

Mona sent emails and made calls to county health officials, desperate to talk to someone about the crisis. But no matter how many people connected to state and city infrastructure she got in touch with, she couldn't get any answers. Knowing that Flint's long history of environmental injustice, anti-Black racism, and precarious economy since the shuttering of the General Motors plants in the area, Mona realized that no one was going to take a stand for Flint. She would have to collect her own data and fight for Flint herself with a small team of trusted colleagues.

Mona began examining blood-lead data collected from patients at her own clinic and teamed up with one of the hospital's research coordinators, Jenny LaChance, to refine the study. As soon as Jenny ran the numbers, it became clear that there were more children with elevated lead levels since the city switched its water supply. Jenny got to work putting in a request for institutional review board approval so that they could access more patient records throughout the county—but when Mona heard that Marc Edwards, an environmental activist and whistleblower, was meeting resistance from the MDEQ in his own study on Flint's water, she began to realize that there would be a long battle ahead.

Mona continued reaching out to colleagues at her own hospital and other medical facilities throughout Flint, alerting people to the situation and asking for their help in securing blood-lead data from the county and the state. One of the people she reached out to was Marc Edwards himself, and when she hinted at the results of her and Jenny's research, Marc told her the data she had could be a "game changer." But almost every interaction Mona had with city, county, state, and federal officials was a dead end. Nevertheless, Mona and Jenny secured IRB approval and added a sample size to their study. They continued gathering incriminating data about how the residents of Flint—most of them Black and low-income, already victims of "environmental injustice"—were being poisoned by the very people who were supposed to be looking out for them.

Mona eventually secured a meeting with the mayor, Dayne Walling, and began working on a presentation that would outline her and Jenny's findings. Marc helped Mona prepare for the meeting, but Mona was afraid of bringing aeb ("shame") to her family. But then she remembered the stories she'd heard growing up of her maternal great-uncle Nuri Rufail Koutani, a leftist organizer who fought for Iraqi independence in the 1920s and 1930s. Bolstered by her family's history of challenging injustice, Mona went into the meeting with confidence and high expectations. She was devastated when the mayor, the Flint city manager Natasha Henderson, and the head of the public works department Howard Croft reacted to her presentation with skepticism and inaction. Mona and her team told the mayor that if they didn't receive a guarantee that he'd release a public health advisory within 48 hours, they would take their research public at an independent press conference. She waited anxiously for word from the mayor's office—but when none came, she knew that she was on her own. Just days later, with help from Flint state senator Jim Ananich and a number of reporters, Mona delivered a televised press conference that revealed to the country what was truly happening in Flint.

The backlash began almost immediately—the city announced its own press conference and began working right away to discredit Mona's research. But rather than surrender to despair, Mona decided to further refine her research with the help of geographic information systems software that would prove an indisputable link between the blood-lead levels in Flint residents and the untreated water flowing through their pipes. She began planning ways to get bottled water and filters to Flint's families, and she spoke to the press in frequent interviews as she underscored the government's negligence.

On October 1st, in a surprising reversal, the Genesee County Health Department declared a public health emergency and hosted a news conference in which they admitted that the state's research did show a spike in Flint residents' blood-lead levels. But the state still didn't admit their fault in the crisis, and they put forward an action plan that was hollow and empty. Later, Mona would learn that Flint officials knew about the risks of failing to add corrosion control to the water all along—but they continued cutting corners and ignoring red flags all the same.

On October 8th, the city announced that the water source would be switched back to the Detroit River. With this aspect of the problem solved, Mona and her team turned their focus to securing more attention, social support, and federal funding for Flint. They legitimized their data by publishing it in a prestigious medical journal and cheered as organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Resources Defense Council pressured city, county, and state officials to answer for their neglect. Mona submitted a list of demands to the federal government's Emergency Operations Center, urging them to create initiatives that would invest in the futures of Flint's most vulnerable children. She also testified before Congress and received an in-person apology from Rick Snyder, the governor of Michigan.

Mona then watched as a Flint water task force released a detailed report about what happened in Flint—and who should be held accountable. Flint received $200 million in federal aid; corrupt officials at the MDEQ and other city officials lost their jobs; and some faced charges of involuntary manslaughter. Mona urged her patients' parents to hang onto high hopes for their children's futures—the badness they'd all been subjected to, she assured them, could still be overcome with goodness.

One night later that year, Mona listened from her home office as her mother (whom her daughters Nina and Layla called Bebe) told the girls a bedtime story. The story was about Mona's grandfather Haji and the loyal flock of **birds** that he tended in Baghdad. According to the tale, the birds banded together to lift Haji into the air and carry him to safety after an accident in his garden. The story reminded Mona of the need to treat everyone with respect, to look out for one's community, and to help one another through solidarity and collective action.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha – Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha is the author and narrator of *What the Eyes Don't See*. The only member of her Iraqi immigrant family to be born in the U.S., Mona grew up in the Royal Oak suburb of Detroit, where her father worked for General Motors as a metallurgic engineer. Mona's mother and father raised her and her brother Mark with a strong sense of social justice, and they also came from a long line of activists. Mona felt called to fight for the same progressive values that her family members did, and she was passionate about environmental justice and public health all her life. So, after graduating from medical school, she decided to work as a pediatrician at Hurley, a public hospital in Flint, Michigan, where she felt she could help underserved children. Flint was a city that had long been neglected and afflicted by poverty and racism, but Mona was determined to do all she could to give her young patients the brightest futures possible. In 2015, when Mona got word that there was a potential problem with Flint's water, she immediately went to work to investigate and expose the problem. She soon realized that Flint's water supply was dangerously high in toxic lead, and that government officials were actively covering up this public health emergency. With the help of a team of research coordinators, politicians, public health officials, civil engineers, and fellow doctors, became a whistleblower for Flint's water crisis. All the while, she stayed committed to her family's legacy of public service and to her responsibility as a community member to pursue the truth and seek justice. Mona's data (and her refusal to back down) led to some major changes in Flint: a switch back to the city's original water source, a massive influx of funding, and many public health and education initiatives to better the lives of Flint's children. Humble, passionate, and relentless in her pursuit of justice, Mona tells the story of the Flint water crisis with passion and determination.

Elin Betanzo – Elin Betanzo is one of Mona's oldest and closest friends. Elin and Mona served together in their high school's Students for Environmental Awareness club, working tirelessly to bring awareness of environmental justice issues to their small Detroit-area hometown of Royal Oak. The quiet, careful Elin was the valedictorian of her and Mona's class, and she went on to work for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Washington, D.C. after graduating from college. But while working at the EPA, Elin became aware of the federal agency's role in covering up serious public health crises. Elin was the person who first told Mona that there were rumors flying about a water crisis in Flint—and because of Elin's encouragement, Mona immediately educated herself about what was happening and how it affected Flint's residents. Elin encouraged Mona to fight for her community, and, with Elin's unwavering support, Mona was able to gather the courage to collect data about the crisis and speak out—even as local, state, and federal agencies tried to silence her and her team. Quiet but staunch and a true, dedicated friend, Elin was in many ways the catalyst behind Mona's decision to throw herself into an investigation of what was really happening in Flint.

Mona's Mother/Bebe – Bebe is Mona and Mark's mother, Jidu's wife, and Layla and Nina's grandmother. She's a warm, gregarious woman who is completely dedicated to her family. Bebe often comes over to Mona's house before dawn to cook breakfast for Mona, Elliott, Nina, and Layla—and she's constantly vying for information about her work. During the Flint water crisis, Mona worked hard to keep the truth of her research about dangerous levels of lead in the water supply from her mother, knowing she'd only worry. But when Mona was afraid that she'd bring aeb ("shame") onto her family by blowing the whistle on the crisis, Bebe supported her daughter wholeheartedly and congratulated her on being fearless in the face of so much doubt and injustice.

Mona's Father/Jidu – Jidu is Mona and Mark's father, Bebe's husband, and Layla and Nina's grandfather. He's portrayed as a loving, hard-working, yet often mournful man who worked hard to make sure his family could achieve in the "American Dream." An engineer and metallurgy expert who found success at General Motors after moving to the U.S. to escape the violence and tumult of Ba'athist Iraq, Jidu never stopped longing for his homeland. He was always passionate about history and genealogy, and over the years he worked hard to uncover many surprising connections within his family (including ties to the famed public health pioneer Paul Shekwana). Growing up, Mona watched Jidu despair over the human rights horrors taking place in Iraq—and she learned through his example that fighting to protect the integrity of human life was of the utmost importance.

Haji – Haji was Mona and Mark's grandfather and Bebe's mother. A Baghdadi businessman who rose to prominence the director of Pepsi-Cola in Iraq, Haji never let his success cause him to lose sight of his duty to his community and his neighbors. Mona's mother Bebe used to tell Mona's daughters Nina and Layla an inspiring bedtime story about how Haji, who dedicatedly tended a flock of **birds** back in Baghdad, fell in his garden one day. He called for help, and the birds all came together to lift Haji with their beaks and carry him to a doctor. The birds in Bebe's story represent the power of collective, communal action. In another story, the workers of a perfume factory Haji owned banded together to rebuild the factory after it burned down. To Mona, these tales always remind her of how important it is for community members to take care of one another.

Muaked "Mark" Hanna – Mona's brother Mark is a public interest litigator based in Washington, D.C. Their mother and father raised them with a strong sense of community and a directive to always fight for what was right, no matter how hard the struggle. When Mark heard that Mona was researching the Flint water crisis and planning to speak out about it, he warned her she'd face a hard road—but he urged her to stick to her principles and stand strong no matter what backlash came her way.

Marc Edwards – Marc Edwards is a civil and environmental engineer who was instrumental in bringing to light both the Washington, D.C. and Flint, Michigan water crises. One of the world's leading experts in water corrosion in home plumbing, the eccentric Marc Edwards caught Mona's attention when Elin told her about Marc's role in exposing a lead-leaching problem in D.C.—and the "radioactive" reputation he earned in the process. When Marc, who'd gotten wind of a potential crisis in Flint, traveled to Michigan to conduct some research and hold a press conference, Mona requested to meet with him—and she was grateful to find a friend and ally in Marc. Over the months that followed, Marc supported Mona's research and joined her as one of the primary whistleblowers in the Flint crisis.

Jenny LaChance – Jenny was one of the research coordinators at Hurley around the start of the Flint water crisis. In 2015, Mona and Jenny began collaborating on data spreads that would show how blood-lead levels had spiked throughout Flint since the water source was switched in 2014. The two women found that they were an unstoppable team, as Jenny's dedication, attention, and passion mirrored Mona's. An inquisitive, sensitive person, Jenny helped Mona come up with ways to refine and strengthen their research so that it would tell the story of what was happening in Flint on behalf of its vulnerable residents.

Grace, Reeva, and Nakala – Reeva and Nakala were two of Mona's young patients, and Grace was their mother. Before Mona knew that there was anything wrong with the Flint tap water, she advised Grace not to worry about rumors she'd heard that there was something amiss with the water supply and to continue drinking and cooking with the tap water normally. Later, after Mona found out that the rumors were true, she deeply regretted giving Grace bad advice—but she still believed that Reeva and Nakala could have bright, happy, healthy futures despite their rough in life as victims of the water crisis.

Rick Snyder – Rick Snyder was the Governor of Michigan from 2011 to 2019. A former Gateway businessman, Snyder was pushed further right politically by the Tea Party faction of the Republican Party. He passed legislation that would allow him to appoint emergency managers to take control of financially insecure municipalities like Flint and implement severe—and damaging—austerity measures in these already vulnerable places. Following Mona and her team's exposure of the Flint water crisis, Snyder personally apologized to Mona for his office's neglect—and though she was appalled by Snyder's administration's negligence, Mona believed his apology was genuine.

Dayne Walling – Dayne Walling was the mayor of Flint from 2009 to 2015. Though Walling was an elected official, he had been stripped of most of his power by the time the city of Flint chose to switch its water source from the Detroit River to the Flint River. A state-appointed emergency manager, Natasha Henderson, was the one with the power to make decisions for Flint—decisions that were always aimed at cutting costs to the city's budget. Walling and his office refused to accept any culpability in the water crisis or to stand by Mona and her team's research at a critical juncture. He lost his bid for reelection in 2015 and was replaced by Karen Weaver.

Miguel Del Toral – Miguel Del Toral is a former regional groundwater regulations manager for the Environmental Protection Agency. He was one of the first people to warn the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality that there was a problem with the water in Flint, and that they needed to use corrosion control chemicals to rectify it. The MDEQ assured

Miguel that the water in Flint was fine—but Miguel teamed up with a local Flint mother to leak an EPA memo reporting the truth about the crisis. Miguel was one of the first whistleblowers in the Flint water crisis, and he paved the way for Mona and her team.

John Snow – John Snow was a 19th-century physician and scientist who became "the founding father of public health" in 1854, when he used revolutionary mapping techniques to locate, track, and contain a cholera outbreak in his London neighborhood of Soho. Snow's research was controversial at the time because many people thought that cholera was spread by breathing in stagnant air. But Snow's determination allowed him to track the source of the outbreak to a contaminated water pump, and his research saved many lives. Centuries later, his legacy inspired Mona to use geographic information systems software to pinpoint the locations of homes most severely affected by leaded water during the Flint water crisis.

Paul Shekwana – Paul Shewkana was a distant cousin of Mona's, an Iraqi immigrant to the U.S. who became the first bacteriologist to work in the country. After completing groundbreaking work on an outbreak of typhoid fever in Iowa and its connection to the consumption of unpasteurized milk, he passed away in an untimely and mysterious manner after his body was found below a railway trestle in Cedar Rapids. Mona considers Shekwana as a hero and an idol—not just because of her familial connection to him, but because of his work as a public health pioneer.

Dean Sienko – Dean Sienko, is a friend of Mona's and a physician who'd worked for the Center for Disease Control before becoming the associate dean of public health at Michigan State University (this is why Mona refers to him as Dean Dean). Dean Dean became an important member of Mona's team during her campaign to raise awareness about the Flint water crisis.

Dan Kildee – Dan Kildee is a politician who has served as the U.S. Representative for Michigan's 5th congressional district—where Flint is located—since 2013. Kildee was one of the few government officials who recognized Mona's research as legitimate and pledged to help her with her campaign to bring attention to the Flint water crisis.

Charles "Boss" Kettering – Charles "Boss" Kettering was an American inventor and businessman who headed the research department of General Motors from 1920 to 1947. Mona calls Kettering the greatest "public health villain" of all time because of his insistence that leaded gasoline was safe to use. Kettering's insistence that lead was a benign substance—when, in reality, it is one of the most dangerous neurotoxins in existence—resulted in thousands of deaths.

Alice Hamilton – Alice Hamilton was a social justice pioneer, medical doctor, and professor who was one of the earliest and most vocal critics of the production of leaded gasoline in the early 1900s. Mona looked to Alice Hamilton's legacy of public health advocacy and commitment to the truth as she embarked on her own journey as a whistleblower in the Flint water crisis.

Melany Gavulic – Melany Gavulic was the CEO of Hurley and Mona's boss during the Flint water crisis. A Flint native and former nurse, Melany was one of the few people who took Mona's early research into the Flint water crisis seriously. From the beginning, Melany wanted to help be "part of the solution" rather than another bureaucrat standing between the children of Flint and environmental justice. Melany, like Mona, always prioritized advocacy and honesty in her personal and professional dealings.

Kirk Smith – Kirk Smith is an old friend of Mona's and the CEO of the Greater Flint Health Coalition (GFHC) during the Flint water crisis. As Mona went public with the blood-lead data sourced from her patients at Hurley, Kirk became a valuable member of Mona's team and a staunch defender of her research.

Jim Ananich – Jim Ananich was the Flint state senator during the Flint water crisis. Ananich, a Democrat, took an interest in Mona's research early on and helped her to assemble a team that would back her as she came forward with her data about the blood-lead levels of Flint's children. Ananich became an important member of Mona's team. An advocate for the truth, Ananich helped defend Mona when city and state officials tried to discredit her research.

Saddam Hussein – Saddam Hussein was an Iraqi politician who played a key role in the Ba'ath Revolution before ascending to power as the fifth President of Iraq in 1979. Hussein was a violent dictator who was responsible for the deaths, through purges or genocides, of at least 250,000 of his own people. Hussein was tried and executed for his crimes against humanity in 2006.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Elliott – Elliott is Mona's husband. A Flint-area pediatrician like his wife, Elliott is portrayed throughout the book as gentle, thoughtful, supportive, and funny. Throughout the water crisis, Elliott repeatedly encouraged Mona to press on with her research and to speak out no matter the consequences.

Nina and Layla – Nina and Layla are Mona and Elliott's young daughters.

Mark Valacak – Mark Valacak was the county health director during the Flint water crisis.

Jordan Dickinson – Jordan Dickinson was Representative Dan Kildee's legislative director during the Flint water crisis.

Brad Wurfel – Brad Wurfel was the spokesperson for the MDEQ during the Flint water crisis.

Lawrence Reynolds – Lawrence Reynolds was the CEO of the Mott Children's Health Center in Flint during the Flint water

crisis. A decorated doctor and public health advocate, Reynolds served as a mentor and ally to Mona as she waged her battle against city, county, and state officials.

Allison Schnepp – Allison Schnepp was a pediatric resident on Mona's service at Hurley during the Flint water crisis. A kind and empathetic young mother, Allison helped Mona throughout her battle to bring awareness to what was happening in Flint.

Andy Leavitt – Andy Leavitt was Senator Jim Ananich's chief of staff during the Flint water crisis. Andy became a dedicated member of Mona's team after they met during Mona's presentation to a number of city and state officials in September of 2015.

Howard Croft – Howard Croft was the head of the Flint public works department during the Flint water crisis. In the wake of the crisis, Croft was charged with a felony and removed from his post.

Natasha Henderson – Natasha Henderson was the Flint city manager during the Flint water crisis. In the wake of the crisis, Henderson was charged with a felony and removed from her post.

Nuri Rufail Koutani/Anwar – Nuri Rufail Koutani was a revolutionary and leftist organizer who used the pseudonym Anwar during the 1930s and beyond. He was Mona's maternal great-uncle and a legendary figure in her upbringing.

Dawood Hanna – Dawood Hanna was Mona's paternal grandfather.

Ron Fonger – Ron Fonger is a Flint-based journalist at *The Flint Journal* who helped Mona break her findings to the media.

Rick Sadler – Rick Sadler is a nutrition geographer at Michigan State University who helped Mona and Jenny harness geographic information systems (GIS) software to sharpen their study of which parts of Flint were most affected by the water crisis.

Eden Wells – Eden Wells was the chief medical officer for the state of Michigan during the Flint water crisis. In the wake of the crisis, Wells was charged with involuntary manslaughter for her failure to act in the crisis.

Nick Lyon – Nick Lyon was a higher-up with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, or the MDHHS, during the Flint water crisis. In the wake of the crisis, Lyon was charged with involuntary manslaughter.

Dan Wyant – Dan Wyant was the head of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, or the MDEQ, during the Flint water crisis.

Debbie Stabenow – Debbie Stabenow is a senior United States senator from Michigan. A former social worker, Stabenow's policies have long focused on advocating for children. When Mona met with Senator Stabenow in 2015, Stabenow vowed to help her advocate for the children of Flint.

Karen Weaver – Karen Weaver served as the mayor of Flint from 2015–2019.

Bunyan Bryant – Bunyan Bryant is a renowned environmental justice pioneer and a hero of Mona's.

Mama Evelyn Mona's paternal grandmother, who helps Mona to feel connected to her family's Iraqi roots.

TERMS

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)/Toxic Stresses – ACEs and toxic stresses are any stressful or traumatic events that occur during childhood. Toxic stresses can be singular events, such as an accident or an instance of abuse or violence, or they can be more long-lasting, permanent conditions, such as growing up in a city with a high crime rate or a neighborhood with a lot of pollution. ACEs and toxic stresses aren't just emotionally or psychologically debilitating—they can actually change children's neural connections and brain function. The more ACEs and toxic stresses a child is exposed to, the more likely they are to have lower IQs and learning disabilities, violent tendencies, and even significantly shorter lifespans.

Aeb – *Aeb* is an Arab word that loosely translates to "shame." The concept of *aeb* revolves around the idea that one's actions always reflect back on those closest to them, meaning that acting shamefully brings shame upon a person's entire family and community.

Ba'ath Regime – The Ba'ath Party ousted the Iraqi President and Prime Minister from office in July of 1968. Led by Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr and **Saddam Hussein**, the repressive Ba'ath regime oversaw a period of great economic prosperity due to foreign oil sales, but all the while engaged in human rights violations and genocide. Many families—like **Mona**'s—fled Iraq during this period, as the country they'd once known became dangerous and unrecognizable. The Ba'athist Iraqi regime was dismantled in 2001, following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq after the September 11th terrorist attacks.

Chaldeans – Chaldean Catholics are part of a branch of Eastern Christianity and the denomination of about 80 percent of Iraqi Christians. **Mona Hanna-Attisha**, her parents, and her husband **Elliott** are all Chaldeans, and there is a vibrant Chaldean community in the Detroit metro area.

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – The EPA is an independent executive agency of the U.S. federal government that is in charge of environmental protection matters. While the EPA is responsible for protecting human health and the environment, *What the Eyes Don't See* shows that the organization has repeatedly been involved in coverups of environmental crises related to pollution.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) – The FOIA is a 1967 law that gives the American public the right to request access to

records from any federal agency.

Geographic Information Systems Software (GIS) – GIS is a type of software used to capture and analyze geographic data. Mona used GIS software to help prove a correlation between lead levels in Flint's water supply and increases in blood-lead levels of Flint children.

Greater Flint Health Coalition (GFHC) – GFHC is a Flint-based nonprofit working to improve the health of Flint residents and ensure a healthy Genesee County community.

Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) – MDEQ is the state agency in charge of overseeing the quality of Michigan's land, air, and water. Throughout the Flint water crisis, the MDEQ knowingly manipulated lead-level results in order to make Flint's water seem safer than it truly was.

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) – MDHHS is Michigan's state health agency.

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.

RACISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

What the Eyes Don't See chronicles the water crisis that seized Flint, Michigan from 2014–2019 after the city switched its water source from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the Flint River. When the switch occurred, officials neglected to add anti-corrosive chemicals to the water, and 100,000 citizens of Flint to were exposed to high levels of lead as a result. Local and federal public health institutions, however, denied that the water supply was to blame for the health issues that Flint residents began to experience. In the memoir, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha explores how Flint's long history of anti-Black racism makes what happened in Flint a matter of environmental justice (a movement concerned with how environmental and public health issues disproportionately affect poor people and racial minorities). By comparing state and federal officials' neglect of the crisis to an act of "genocide" against Flint's predominantly Black residents, the book suggests that environmental injustice is rooted in racism. Therefore, to secure environmental justice for all, the U.S. must take steps to provide funding, education, and other resources that will begin to repair the country's history of racism against its Black citizens.

The book gives an account of Flint's long history of racism and corporate greed, illustrating why Flint is a prime example of environmental injustice at work. In the first half of the 20th century, Flint was the epicenter of the automotive industry, home to companies like General Motors and Chevrolet. Between 1915 and 1960—at the height of Flint's prosperity—more than six million Black Americans fled the violence of the Jim Crow (racially segregated) South and landed in Flint, where they hoped to secure well-paying jobs and bright futures. But these Black workers were slotted into the lowest-paying, lowest-skilled positions. Between the racist hiring practices at the big auto plants and discriminatory housing policies in the Flint area, Black Americans were essentially shut out of the same opportunities their white coworkers and neighbors were able to enjoy. After World War II, the Supreme Court began to desegregate schools and housing. As Black families found themselves free at last to move into whichever neighborhoods they chose to, the phenomenon of "white flight"—white families moving out as Black families moved in, fearing that the presence of Black neighbors would drive housing prices down—took over Flint. As the home bases of the automotive industry shifted away from Flint, some city entities backed a 1869 referendum to tie Flint to a regional government. But the residents in Flint's new, overwhelmingly white suburbs voted against the referendum. Flint was left "isolated and abandoned."

Because Flint's history left its Black residents vulnerable and unprotected by the end of the 20th century, the book suggests that Flint was uniquely vulnerable to environmental racism and the water crisis that ensued in 2014. Flint was already vulnerable to environmental injustice at this time, having fewer resources than the affluent suburbs surrounding it and a population that had been disadvantaged by decades of racial discrimination. Flint residents also didn't have anyone looking out for their well-being or investing in changes to renew the city's prosperity: by 2014, the mayor of Flint had been essentially replaced by a state-appointed emergency manager, whose sole directive was to cut costs in the city's budget. "Racial minorities and low-income communities," the book states, "face a disproportionate share of environmental and public health burdens." In other words, poor and predominately non-white areas are subject to neglect, poor funding, and racist housing and employment policies that make them more vulnerable to environmental injustice. This was certainly the case for Flint, and their already-crumbling infrastructure was decimated even further by the 2014 water supply switch. But in spite of residents' complaints after the switch, no one paid attention to them or investigated the quality of the water. In fact, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality actively tried to cover up the results of routine tests showing that the water had dangerous levels of lead in it. Once the water crisis was underway, the "disproportionate" disadvantages that Flint's citizens had long faced made their local and state government less willing to help them rather than more so. Indeed, every level of government turned a blind eye

to Flint's problems. With this, the book suggests that Flint residents suffered specifically because they were largely poor and non-white. Their vulnerability made those in charge of overseeing the city's well-being see it as a lost cause.

To ensure that tragedies like the Flint water crisis don't happen again, the book suggests that the U.S. needs to enact policies that will help repair the damages done by years of racial discrimination, neglect, and environmental injustice. The Flint water crisis was proof of how environmental injustice goes all the way to the top. In other words, populations that have been discriminated against and neglected by their governments cannot rebuild without significant help and attention to the root of their problems. Toward the end of the book, author Mona Hanna-Attisha outlines some of the demands she and her colleagues made on behalf of Flint. She advocated for public health initiatives, enhanced school lunches, expanded access to pediatric behavioral services, and more—programs that would be costly but would help to start leveling the playing field for a new generation of Flint children. In a city that was abandoned by industry and forgotten by its government, the only solution was structural change that would begin to remedy the city's decades-long lack of attention, advocacy, and reform.

TRUTH VS. CORRUPTION

"Our science spoke truth to power," writes author and physician Mona Hanna-Attisha of her fight to force local, state, and federal officials to acknowledge their roles in burying the truth about the Flint water crisis. During this crisis, a hasty switch of Flint's water source (meant to cut costs for the city's budget) resulted in a water supply that was untreated with corrosion-control chemicals, allowing lead from old pipes to leach into the water supply of Flint residents. Mona and her colleagues were committed to exposing the truth of the crisis and helping Flints' residents. Though self-doubt and fear of being attacked professionally threatened to derail their fight, they never wavered in their commitment to the truth. Mona and a number of dedicated activists refused to back down as government organizations tried to discredit their research, and so they were able to bring the truth about Flint to light for the whole country to see. With this, the book suggests that a "passion for the truth" is necessary to combat the kind of corruption that took place in Flint.

When Mona discovered that Michigan was engaged in a cover-up about the quality of Flint's water, she was appalled—and she knew she had to do something. Even though "the urgency and scope of the problem" in Flint overwhelmed Mona, she felt so guilty about missing the early warning signs of the water crisis that she knew she had to help repair what was broken. As an advocate for her patients' health, Mona knew that the kids she treated couldn't afford to wait for help to arrive. Mona had to be the face of environmental and public health activism on behalf of her community. Years before the water crisis, Mona's friend Elin was working at the Environmental Protection Agency during the D.C. water crisis (and the ensuing government coverup). Elin warned Mona that there would be a long road ahead, but Mona was ready to face it—all she cared about was finding a way to bring the truth to light using data from her patients' blood-lead level tests. Mona knew that data was the surest way to prove the reality of what was happening in Flint. Mona's collaboration with her research coordinator Jenny LaChance produced results that showed a spike in blood-lead levels in the children of Flint since the city's water source was switched in 2014. Mona had proof of the city's negligence and corruption. Mona wasn't responsible for the water crisis, nor was it her job to fix it—the government was responsible, and so they should have taken the initiative to remedy it. But when city, state, and federal officials ignored and tried to cover up what was going on in Flint, Mona made the decision to take responsibility for the problem herself. Even though Mona had a busy home life and a lot of responsibilities already as a pediatrician at a bustling public hospital, she made her community her first priority.

As Mona started out on her journey as a whistleblower, she contended with people who were actively trying to undermine her research and allow state officials to get away with corruption. Once Mona did the painstaking work of gathering data on blood-lead levels from her own hospital, Hurley, as well as several other healthcare facilities in Flint, she revealed her findings in a groundbreaking independent press conference. The mayor's office had failed to offer Mona their support, and, later, they would work to actively discredit her findings—but Mona was committed to telling the truth. Mona knew the institutions that had let the water crisis spiral out of control (by fudging test results, ignoring warning signs, and cutting corners) wouldn't be quick to admit their wrongdoing. They were concerned with cutting costs and covering up their mistakes, not with protecting citizens' health. But because Mona knew about the power and might of these institutions, she also knew that the only thing she could use against them was the cold, hard truth of her data.

As the backlash intensified, Mona and her team refused to compromise and in fact doubled down on their commitment to spreading the truth. When Michigan state officials tried to discredit Mona's data, she didn't let their deception get the best of her. Knowing that the state wasn't taking a second look at their own data, Mona decided to take another look at her own—and she determined that if she used geographical information systems software, she'd be able to further tie the tainted water to specific areas of the city. Rather than questioning her research, Mona trusted in her work and remained committed to the truth. The government's scare tactics and brutal dismissal of her didn't rattle Mona because she knew that she was on "the right side of history." She was

facing down an egregious conspiracy of neglect and corruption—and committing to the truth, she knew, was the only way to expose it.

It was only through their refusal to back down that Mona and her team were able to pressure local, state, and federal authorities to end their coverup and admit the truth. After weeks of backlash, Eden Wells—the chief medical officer for the Michigan health department, which had been trying to attack Mona's research—at last circulated an email to her colleagues stating that Mona's research had a "strong foundation." Within a few days, the state "surrendered," and the county health department declared a public health emergency. Mona and her fellow activists' commitment to truth was what forced the state of Michigan to admit that there was a serious crisis in Flint—and that state-run departments had played a large role in covering up the urgency of that crisis for a long time. Mona's faith in her work's integrity—and the activism she undertook as a result of that faith—toppled a web of lies that threatened the future of an entire generation of Flint residents.

COMMUNITY VALUES AND COLLECTIVE DUTY

At the start of her pediatric medicine career, Mona Hanna-Attisha, like all doctors, took the Hippocratic Oath, the main tenet of which is to "do no harm." When Mona became aware of the fact that Flint's water supply was tainted with massive amounts of toxic lead, she realized that Flint's local and state governments had failed to uphold community values—despite being the representatives of Flint's community. In response, Mona and her colleagues stepped up and showed care, unity, and advocacy. With this, *What the Eyes Don't See* suggests that a commitment to upholding values of solidarity, support, and justice is the duty of all members of any given community.

Flint is home to many residents who are low-income and/or Black—which means they're often stripped of the resources they need to make their voices heard by those in power. At the start of the water crisis, Flint—a city with a long history of anti-Black racism—was under the control of a local government that wasn't serving it. An emergency manager had been called in to cut costs, resulting in the switch from a Detroit water source to the Flint River. But the new water source wasn't treated properly, and so it began leaching lead from old pipes into people's drinking water. Officials knew there was lead in the water, but they did nothing to rectify the damage that was being done to Flint's residents with every sip of water they were taking. Flint wasn't a community that its government felt was "worth going out on a limb for."

Collective, community-focused action from relatively privileged people like Mona was especially necessary after the government failed to provide the support Flint needed. Mona saw that, in spite of local residents' complaints about water that was brown, cloudy, or smelly, the government wasn't doing anything to address their concerns. So, Mona realized that if she wanted there to be change in her community, it would have to start with her and a group of like-minded colleagues, friends, and supporters. As a doctor, she felt she had an even larger duty to protect the health of Flint's residents—after all, she'd taken an oath early on in her career to "do no harm." No one else was going to stand up or speak out on behalf of Flint, so Mona took matters into her own hands.

When Mona realized what was happening in her city, she realized that she and her colleagues had an opportunity to show up for their community by pressuring the government to uphold its duty to Flint. "Being a pediatrician—perhaps more than any other kind of doctor—means being an advocate for your patient. It means using your voice to speak up for kids. […] Where had we been? Where had I been?" Mona asks herself early on in *What the Eyes Don't See*. When she realized that there was a water crisis in Flint—meaning that toxic levels of lead were leaching into the water that her young, vulnerable patients were drinking each day—she looked inward and realized that she and her colleagues had not been the advocates their patients needed. Rather than despair or blame herself, Mona got right to work investigating the water-source switch that caused the crisis and how her patients' blood-lead levels had been affected since. She was determined to become the advocate her patients needed—a doctor who would work tirelessly to ensure that they were safe, healthy, and protected. Mona's team made a show of collective resistance and solidarity with their community. They knew that the low-income, Black residents of Flint who were suffering most under the water crisis would face more backlash and discrimination than a group of medical professionals. So Mona and her team presented a united front, illustrating their dedication to protecting their patients no matter the cost.

In the end, Mona and her colleagues were able to help their community make its message heard around the world, illustrating the impact that community values and support can have. Mona and her team worked together to produce data that would prove the danger of what was happening in Flint—and when their local government officials wouldn't support them, they struck out on their own and brought their data to the public. Because Mona and her team stood tall in the face of state and city officials' attempts to discredit their research and continue covering up the crisis, they were eventually able to force local officials to admit that there was lead in Flint's water. Shortly after Mona and her team came forward, Flint's water source was switched back to the Detroit river. In the months and years that followed, many officials who played a part in covering up the crisis were removed from their posts and charged with involuntary manslaughter and other crimes against Flints' residents. Mona's story shows that it's

possible for anyone to make a difference in their community through solidarity and a commitment to uplifting those who've been held back from advocating for themselves.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The American Dream is the idea that anyone living in America, regardless of where they come from, can attain success and happiness. But according to Mona Hanna-Attisha, this ideal was "never meant" to work for people like the citizens of Flint, Michigan, a majority-Black city that's plagued by poverty, racism, and harmful governmental policies. For Mona and her family of Iraqi immigrants, who arrived in America after fleeing Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1970s, the American Dream was real—but Mona's parents were already educated, successful, and somewhat integrated into Western culture by the time they arrived in the U.S. Thus, they never experienced the same kinds of injustices and disadvantages faced by Black Americans living in Flint, a city with a long history of anti-Black racism and segregation. Indeed, Mona suggests that people who are disadvantaged by outside factors such as poverty, racism, and government corruption have a much more difficult time attaining the American Dream. By contrasting Hanna-Attisha and her family's experiences with those of Flint's residents, *What the Eyes Don't See* suggests that although the American Dream is attainable for some, it doesn't apply to everyone.

Mona shows how the American Dream worked for her family in order to illustrate its promises—as well as its conditional nature. When Mona describes her parents' successful transition to life in America, she's careful to allude to the many advantages they had before they even arrived in their new community of Royal Oak, Michigan. Mona's parents were well-educated—they were both scientists, and her father had an advanced degree from a university in Europe. Thus, her father was able to secure a good job at General Motors when they immigrated. And Mona's paternal grandparents lived in another nearby suburb of Detroit—so not only did Mona's belong to a large Middle Eastern diaspora community in Michigan, but they had also family members nearby to help them with childcare and offer support. The advantages that Mona's parents had upon arriving in America were not afforded to their very own neighbors in the Detroit metro area. For countless Black families in Flint and the surrounding areas, years of segregationist housing policies and racist hiring policies at the local automotive plants meant that well-paying jobs, good educations, and safe, fair housing were not attainable. While Mona's family was able to participate in the American Dream almost immediately upon their arrival, for generations of Black Americans in the Flint area, the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were still long overdue.

As Mona describes how American industry and greed failed Flint and its people, she illustrates how people stymied by disadvantages beyond their control are often unable to achieve the American Dream. In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, Flint was the epicenter of American industry, as all the major automotive plants had factories in and around Flint. For many Americans who arrived in Flint hoping to seize on its prosperity, there were lucrative jobs to be found, affordable homes to be bought, and the rapid emergence of a thriving middle class. But for millions of Black Americans who came to Flint seeking refuge from racially motivated violence and restrictive Jim Crow (segregation) laws in the South, Flint was not all it seemed to be. Racist hiring policies, segregated schools and housing, and the phenomenon of "white flight" (white families fleeing any neighborhood where Black neighbors moved in) made it clear that Flint's—and, by extension, the U.S.'s—opportunities were not equally available to everyone. As the automotive plants moved out of Flint for cheaper locales, so too did many of the plant's employees. Black Americans who'd fought tooth and nail for homes and jobs were left in a city whose industry had abandoned it. For decades to come, local and state officials neglected Flint and left the city to fall into disrepair as public health declined and violent crime rose. So, the people who lived in Flint when the city government switched Flint's water source—many of them low-income and Black—had already experienced the failures of the American Dream. A debilitating blow like the water crisis just showed Flint residents even more clearly that they'd been lied to about the attainability of the American dream.

"Where is the American Dream?" Mona asks toward the end of the book. "It's not there," she concludes. While the U.S. touts itself as a place where freedom and equality are universal and where anyone can chase their dreams, the reality is that the U.S. still suffers from racism and other forms of injustice. For people like the residents of Flint, there are many barriers—both old and new—to attaining the American Dream. Flint's complicated past means it's a place that's often overlooked or seen as unworthy of investment in programs geared at education, affordable housing, and public health. But for the American Dream to be real, it must be something anyone can pursue. It shouldn't be only attainable "by way of a miracle." Until there is real, lasting change in Flint—and communities like it all over the country—there is arguably no such thing as the American Dream.

FAMILY, TRADITION, AND STRENGTH

What the Eyes Don't See is a story of one woman boldly speaking out against corruption, racism, and environmental injustice. But throughout her book, Mona Hanna-Attisha also shares stories of her family's longstanding commitment to social justice, progressive values, and upholding the righteous truth no matter the risks. Throughout the book, Mona invokes these stories about her closest relatives and her most distant ancestors—from freedom

fighters to radical organizers to public health advocates—in her greatest moments of self-doubt. By wielding these stories as reminders of her family's legacy, she banishes uncertainty and sadness time and time again, finding the motivation to soldier on in her own battle against environmental injustice and the government's neglect. In this way, the book suggests the importance of family values and traditions.

Mona describes the solid foundation her parents gave her in life by constantly telling her stories about their family's roots, its values, and their hopes for its legacy. "I am Iraqi" are the first words of the first line of *What the Eyes Don't See*—and as the book unfolds, it becomes clear that Mona's Iraqi heritage and her connection to her family in Iraq is a central part of her life. Mona's family history is full of exciting stories of pioneering public health advocates, dedicated left-wing resistance fighters, and brave community leaders who earned their neighbors' love and support in times of crisis. Because Mona and her brother Mark were brought up by parents who were proud of their family's long history of fighting for justice, equality, and community, Mona learned early on that these values were important and admirable. Mona was passionately involved in local environmental activism as a teenager, and she went on to become a pediatrician working in Flint, Michigan, an underserved community that was deeply in need of passionate doctors. Her life choices—which centered around fighting for others and standing up for the right thing—were rooted in the values that had been passed down through her family for generations.

In her moments of deepest fear and self-doubt as a whistleblower in the Flint water crisis, Mona found herself turning to her family for confirmation that she was on the right path. Shortly after Mona held a press conference in which she presented data showing that the residents of Flint were being poisoned by their water supply, several state agencies—including the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services—tried to tear down Mona's research. They held press conferences of their own to claim that Mona's research had been "spliced and diced" and that she'd exaggerated her findings in order to make the state look bad. This, of course, deeply upset Mona. But when her mother (whom she calls Bebe) called her on the phone the evening after the state agencies' retaliatory press conference, Bebe told Mona how brave she'd been and what a good job she'd done speaking out on behalf of her patients. Bebe's words of encouragement "kept [Mona] going"—feeling supported by her family was a crucial aspect of Mona's perseverance. Mona also made sure to go by "Dr. Mona" in all of the many interviews she did with news media outlets all around the country as she stood up for her research before the entire country. Her grandfather, Haji, chose the name Mona for her precisely because he felt it would be easier for Americans to pronounce than the Arabic version, Muna. But Mona and Muna both mean "hope, wish, or desire." Represented by the traditional, hopeful name her grandfather gave her, Mona felt protected and capable as she doubled down on her commitment to telling the truth about what was happening in Flint.

Mona's ability to draw strength and confidence from her ancestors' legacies and traditions shows how helpful it can be to have a moral foundation rooted in one's family. When Mona and her colleagues began using code names for one another in their emails about the water crisis, she thought it was "kind of exciting" to go by the pseudonym "Fire Ant" because it reminded her of how her great-uncle Nuri had used a pseudonym, Anwar, while working as a radical organizer in 1930s Iraq. Mona and her colleagues were in a frightening situation: the state was potentially monitoring their communications, searching for information that could be used against them as retaliation for blowing the whistle on the Flint water crisis. But Mona found comfort and strength in comparing herself to the dedicated fighters and organizers who came before her in her family line. Mona's family's revolutionary roots inspired her to fight for the right thing, to never back down in the face of danger, and to focus on what matters in life: family and honor. Mona was frightened by the backlash against her and worn down by the environmental injustice and racism that came to light during the Flint water crisis. But she had a network of support in her family: her mother, her public interest lawyer brother Mark, and her treasured stories of her revolutionary relatives. Because Mona had such a strong foundation in a family whose values had always been centered around social justice and communal care, she was able to hold fast to those values in a time of crisis and create real change in her community.

SYMBOLS

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

HAJI'S BIRDS

Mona Hanna-Attisha's grandfather Haji's mythical birds symbolize the importance of solidarity, collective action, and community support. Mona was raised by parents who fled Iraq after the Ba'athist Revolution transformed their homeland into a frightening place they no longer recognized. Both of her parents' families had rich histories of activism and resistance—and when it came time for Mona to speak up about the violence, neglect, and environmental justice taking place in Flint, she drew on those core progressive values to fight for her community.

These values are symbolized by a bedtime story that Mona's mother, whom she and her children call Bebe, tell Mona's

daughters Layla and Nina. The story centers on a flock of small birds, which Haji tended and fed every day, carrying him to safety after an accident—and in this way, Haji's birds symbolize the rewards of community action. Alone, one bird cannot lift a man or make a difference—but the flock of birds works together to lift him up and fly him to safety, which speaks to the power of community, solidarity, and the hard but necessary task of looking out for one another. This represents Mona's own situation as she fights for justice in Flint: alone, she could never have made a difference—but with the help of dedicated friends, colleagues, and supporters, she was able to help metaphorically lift the community of Flint to safety.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *What the Eyes Don't See* published in 2018.

Prologue Quotes

"The road behind my family disappeared too. The Iraq they knew was lost, replaced by war and ruins. In my mind, this lost Iraq is a land of enchantment and despair. But its lessons endure.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker), Muaked "Mark" Hanna , Saddam Hussein , Mona's Father/Jidu, Mona's Mother/Bebe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona explains how her family ended up living in America. Mona and her family are Iraqi immigrants who fled Saddam Hussein's violent Ba'ath regime. The country in which her parents had come of age had all but "disappeared" by the time they started a family of their own. Their country was erased before their eyes as a corrupt but powerful regime took over. But even though Mona's parents could not return to Iraq, they brought its "lessons"—and their family's legacy—to their new home.

Mona's family's resolve in the face of government corruption and the dissolution of the place they loved is significant. Her family's strength in a time of crisis parallels the strength Mona would later need to adopt as she navigated the Flint water crisis, which rocked Flint, Michigan from 2014-2019. While Flint and Iraq are very different places in many ways, they both were facing escalating despair due to government cruelty. But Mona and her family were able to draw strength from the stories and lessons of their homeland's past—and Mona would need to find inspiration in Flint's complicated history and resilient people in order to see her new community through a terrible crisis.

This passage lays the groundwork for important themes about corruption and truth, as well as family and tradition, that will resonate throughout the book. By immediately drawing parallels between her family's past and her own experiences, Mona sets up her involvement in the Flint water crisis as an arduous but necessary journey.

"This is the story of the most important and emblematic environmental and public health disaster of this young century. More bluntly, it is the story of a government poisoning its own citizens, and then lying about it. It is a story about what happens when the very people responsible for keeping us safe care more about money and power than they care about us, or our children.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona sets the stage for the book's primary narrative: the Flint water crisis, during which lead and other toxins leached into the water supply of thousands of Flint residents between 2014 and 2019.

By establishing the Flint water crisis as "the most important and emblematic environmental and public health disaster" of the 21st century, Mona suggests, in no uncertain terms, that the Flint water crisis says a great deal about America's flaws and failed promises. What happened in Flint affected Flint's residents most acutely—but it also exposed entrenched and insidious patterns of environmental racism, corruption, and abdication of duty throughout the entire U.S. government.

Mona's involvement in the water crisis stemmed from her sense of responsibility to the people of Flint. When she realized that the government—the very institution actually responsible for the people of Flint—had completely abandoned their duty, she knew that she and her colleagues had to step up and fight for their community. Only through solidarity and communal action, Mona knew, would she be able to help keep the people of Flint safe. By setting up her

fury about the scale of the crisis—and the government's role—Mona reminds her readers that exposing and working to end corruption in America's communities is crucial work, and the responsibility of every American.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ There's an expression I have always liked, a D. H. Lawrence distillation: *The eyes don't see what the mind doesn't know.*

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona shares with her readers the quotation that gave her memoir its title. The D.H. Lawrence quote above suggests that if the mind isn't yet aware of something, the eyes won't see it because they won't know what to look for.

This quotation is especially important in the context of Mona's career as a community pediatrician. Her work is to widen the scope of what the pediatricians who work alongside her in Flint can know, so that they can better see the reality of their patients' problems. The children of Flint face many struggles—huge poverty rates and lowered life expectancy, coupled with racism, violence, and governmental neglect make Flint a difficult place to grow up. Mona's colleagues need to filter what they know about their patients through this lens. By expanding their minds, they can better see who their patients are and what they need to thrive.

But this quotation doesn't just apply to pediatricians in vulnerable populations: it's a useful directive for anyone looking to better their community. To truly fight for a place or a group, one must understand the full history of the thing for which they're fighting. Just as Mona's understanding of Flint's complicated history helped her to better locate the corruption in Flint's government and the vulnerabilities in its citizens, expanding one's mind allows one to maintain a clearer focus on the issues that matter.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ "If Miguel's right that Flint is not using corrosion control, that means there's lead in Flint's water."

"Lead in the water?"

[…] "And based on Miguel's memo," she went on, "the lead levels in the Flint water are really, really high. He suspects that MDEQ isn't testing correctly. That's why he leaked the memo."

"Are you kidding me?" I shook my head. "Why would anybody at the EPA need to leak their own memo?"

Elin cocked her head and just stared at me, deadpan. She was waiting for me to catch up.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, Elin Betanzo (speaker), Miguel Del Toral

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona recalls the moment her friend Elin told her that, according to one of her colleagues' research, there was lead in the water in Flint—and the government was trying to cover it up.

This passage is significant because it is the first moment that Mona realized what was truly happening in Flint and why no one was talking about it. Mona had heard rumblings about the quality of the Flint water since the city switched the source of its water supply from the Detroit River to the Flint River. But hearing that there was quantifiable proof of a dangerous lead-water issue rattled Mona. She hadn't realized that things were so bad—as a pediatrician, she knew that lead was one of the most harmful substances that anyone, let alone a young and vulnerable child, could come into contact with. Hearing that lead was leaching its way into the drinking water of Flint's citizens shocked and appalled Mona and shook her from her complacency.

What's also significant about this moment is that Mona didn't just realize that there was a lead-water problem—she also learned that there was already a carefully orchestrated attempt to cover up the problem. Michigan state authorities and even federal ones were ignoring and actively trying to obscure a very real—and very lethal—public health crisis. While Mona was shocked and in disbelief, Elin "just stared" at her, "waiting for [Mona] to catch up." This illustrates that Elin was already disillusioned with the government—but Mona had been clinging to the belief that Flint's government, and the federal government more largely, were doing all they could for Flint. To realize that no one was in the driver's seat after all made Mona understand that if she

wanted Flint residents to secure the help and protections they needed, she'd have to go to work on their behalf to expose the coverup and find a solution to the water crisis.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ "He taught me to treat everybody well, because we are all equal, no matter what we look like, what we believe in, or how much money we have. To always do the right thing, even if it's hard. Even if people tell you it's impossible."

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker), Haji, Nina and Layla

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona, who has just finished telling her daughters a bedtime story about her maternal grandfather Haji, underscores the story's lesson for her girls.

This passage is significant because it illustrates Mona's worldview—a worldview that was passed down to her throughout generations of her family. Her grandfather, a successful Iraqi businessman, never forgot that he had a duty to his employees and his community, and he worked hard to make sure that his community was taken care of. When his perfume factory burned down, his employees pooled their wages and invested time in rebuilding the factory from the ground up. Because Haji did the "right thing," his community repaid him by working hard to do the right thing for him in turn.

Mona, like her grandfather, is a successful professional who has never forgotten her duty to her community. And with the onset of the Flint water crisis, Haji's legacy of reciprocity and generosity became even more meaningful. In re-telling this story to her children on the very night she first learned of the full extent of the crisis, Mona was, in a way, reminding herself of the "right" but "hard" and seemingly even "impossible" thing she needed to do: she had to find a way to call attention to—or even resolve—the crisis concerning Flint's water.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ Being a pediatrician—perhaps more than any other kind of doctor—means being an advocate for your patient. It means using your voice to speak up for kids. We are charged with the duty of keeping these kids healthy.

We took an oath.

Where had we been?

Where had I been?

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Mona recalls reading up on the Flint water crisis for the first time, she communicates the feelings of inadequacy and shame she felt when she realized that she and her colleagues hadn't been doing all they could for their vulnerable patients.

Mona chose to work as a pediatrician in Flint because she knew that the community there needed her. In addition to taking the Hippocratic Oath—"do no harm"—upon becoming a doctor, she also took a more personal, informal oath: to look out for her patients, many of whom were financially disadvantaged or vulnerable to racism and environmental inequality. But when Mona learned about the water crisis, she realized she hadn't been paying close enough attention to what was really happening in her community. She realized that it was time to refocus her attention firmly on her patients' needs and show up for them in a time of crisis.

This passage is significant because it draws out one of the book's central themes: the idea that all members of a community are responsible for the health and success of that community. Solidarity and collective action are the things that keep people safe—especially in places like Flint, where governmental neglect (and widespread corruption) can become life-threatening to vulnerable citizens. If the government wasn't going to look out for the people of Flint, Mona realized, she needed to step up and reinvest her time and attention in her patients—and she needed to inspire that same sense of collective duty in her colleagues, as well.

Chapter 7 Quotes

If it weren't for Snow's science, stubbornness, persistence, and passion for the truth, cholera might have raged on for another decade or more, taking thousands or even millions of lives.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker), John Snow

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona connects the story of 19th-century public health pioneer John Snow to the contemporary crisis in Flint.

In this chapter, Mona has been focusing her narrative on some of the public health heroes who shaped her desire to spend her life working in medicine and focusing on environmental injustice. John Snow was a Londoner and physician who quelled a massive cholera outbreak in 1854 by mapping cases of the disease and connecting them to a single source: a contaminated water pump at the center of his neighborhood. Most people at the time thought that cholera was spread through the air—but John Snow's rogue science proved the theory of disease spreading through stagnant air wrong and saved the lives of many Londoners.

John Snow's story is important to Mona—and especially so within the context of her involvement in the Flint water crisis—because it mirrors her own path to beginning to remedy the crisis. Like John Snow, Mona had a hunch that something about what she was hearing wasn't right, and she decided to do the research to determine what was actually happening in her community. Like Snow, Mona eventually used mapping technology to tie her patients' condition—in this case, elevated blood-lead levels—to a contaminated water source. By looking to Snow's story of community activism and the pursuit of the truth, Mona was able to find the strength to become a public health hero in her own right.

Urban poverty is less lethal now, but in some respects, nothing has really changed. The environments of the cities we live in—their dirt and air, their violence and hopelessness and stress, their water—can still predict how long a life we will have.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker), Paul Shekwana, John Snow

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona considers how much has changed—and how much has remained the same—when it comes to urban poverty over the course of time.

In the times of John Snow and Paul Shekwana, little was known about disease transmission and public health best practices. The field was still young. So even everyday infections or illnesses could become "lethal" based on the majority of the population's lack of understanding about how disease spread and how it could be contained. In Mona's time, there is a wealth of information about these topics—but at the same time, community health remains dogged by some consistent problems.

Urban poverty still disproportionately decreases the life expectancies of people living in unhealthy environments. In a place like Flint, urban poverty still dictates how people live. Dilapidated due to years of bankruptcy and government neglect and marred by violence, Flint's socioeconomic factors already make it a difficult place for people to have healthy, long lives. When a water crisis began to unfold in 2014, Flint's residents experienced an even more immediate threat to their well-being. The water crisis was yet another consequence of urban poverty: Flint wasn't a place that the state or federal government felt was worth an investment of time and resources. So Flint suffered, and so did its people. By pointing out the lethality of urban poverty, Mona highlights how, even in the wealthiest country in the world in one of the most prosperous times in human history, environmental injustice still has the power to dictate the course of a life.

Politics is about how we treat one another, how we sustain and share our common spaces and our environment. When people are excluded from politics, they have no say in the common space, no sharing of common resources. People may think of this as benign neglect, but it isn't benign. It is malignant—and intentional.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona considers how the Flint crisis got so out of control—and, in tying it to a similar previous crisis in Washington D.C., she begins to interrogate how crises like these are always inherently political.

This passage is significant because it offers up Mona's own personal definition of what politics should be about. In Mona's estimation, politics should be about how to create networks of support that help enable everyone—no matter their background or their place of birth—to lead healthy, successful lives. But in the United States, Mona suggests, politics is an exclusionary concept. Often, ordinary citizens "have no say" in how their own communities are run. The politicians who are supposed to care for them and represent their interests are distant, shadowy figures—and often, they're corrupt.

The failure of U.S. politics to protect its most vulnerable communities—communities like Flint—isn't a mistake, in Mona's estimation. She feels that communities like Flint are neglected intentionally. Places where poverty, violence, and environmental injustice have become painful facts of daily life are seen as not being worthy of an investment of time and resources. When new problems plague that community, there's often not a budget to remedy them—and so concealments and coverups begin. This "malignant" pattern of governance needs to be called out and brought to an end.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ No single bad decision or unfortunate event created modern Flint. The greatest forces working against the city were racism and the corporate greed of GM, which pulled out of Flint, the city that birthed and nurtured it, to satisfy financial problems caused by a lack of imagination.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona reflects on the long, complex history of Flint in order to explain to her readers how "modern Flint" came to be.

Throughout this chapter, Mona has delved into the history of Flint first as a booming center of industry—and later as an emblem of how racism greed, and governmental neglect can topple a promising city and plunge an entire community into need. In the early 1900s, Flint was the center of the automobile industry. But as Black Americans fled the racism of the south for better opportunities up north, Flint's white middle class abandoned the city for a series of outlying suburbs. The automotive plants, looking for a tax break, moved to the suburbs, too—and Flint's Black residents, swindled into awful real estate deals by racist housing policy, were left in a city that had effectively disappeared out from under them.

By explaining that Flint's current reputation as an emblem of urban poverty isn't due to one "bad decision" or "unfortunate event," Mona pulls the Flint water crisis into even sharper relief. She shows how environmental injustice is fueled by racism—and how when governments see places like Flint only as an unsolvable "financial problem," these patterns of neglect can never be remedied.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ It was real, something that was happening all around us, the blood of our own patients, and water that flowed in the pipes of our own city where we sat. The residents were engaged in a way I'd rarely seen before, vibrating with a weird new energy, tense but invigorated by the feeling that we were finally *doing something*. And our results weren't going to be stuffed away in a digital archive and forgotten. Our results could change our world.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker), Jenny LaChance

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 138-139

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona looks back on how she, research coordinator Jenny LaChance, and a team of colleagues at the Hurley hospital in Flint began to "change the world" from one small room of their clinic.

When Mona realized that a water crisis had taken hold of her city—and was poisoning "the blood of [her] own patients" with dangerous levels of lead—she knew that she had to do something. Mona got the idea that if she could analyze the blood-lead levels of her pediatric patients before and after the switch in Flint's water source, she could prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Flint's citizens were being poisoned. Mona was excited about this mission—but after facing silence and red tape when she reached out to other public health authorities, she briefly

worried she'd never be able to bring the truth to light. Nonetheless, when Mona teamed up with Jenny and a group of researchers, she felt invigorated by their immediate "energy" and rare level of engagement.

This passage is significant because it illustrates the importance of collective community action. Alone, Mona couldn't have made a difference—she could barely get county health officials to answer her emails. But with the weight of an invigorated team behind her—a team that was both furious about the neglect happening in Flint and hopeful about the potential for change—she knew that she could make a difference. In a book about the need for everyday citizens to step up on behalf of their communities, this passage solidifies the transformative power of a community united by purpose and passion.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ I thought about everything he'd been through, largely preventable, all the toxic stresses: violence, fear, bullet wounds, hospital visits, surgeries, and PTSD, and then the effects of lead poisoning. For many people, life isn't long enough to recover from a childhood like that.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona reflects on the difficult experiences of one of her patients, a young boy who suffered a bullet wound at a young age.

This passage is significant because it illustrates how racism and environmental justice, government corruption, and community inaction can conspire to detrimentally affect a person's entire life. For Mona—a pediatrician focused on community pediatrics, someone who's been trained to investigate how environmental and emotional factors impact her young patients' lives—a story like this one is tragic and painful. The patient she describes in this passage had to contend with life in a city maligned by a dearth of resources and structural racism—and once his life was touched by gun violence, the lead from the bullet he took continued to poison him from the inside out.

By pointing out that oftentimes "life isn't long enough" to recover from such adverse early experiences, Mona is underscoring the importance of early-childhood intervention programs, public health initiatives, and government efforts to remedy the effects of racism and injustice. Lives are at stake in places like Flint every day—and until massive structural change occurs, children like Mona's patient will remain vulnerable to detrimental factors beyond their control. Community action, solidarity, and a reckoning with America's history of racially-motivated government corruption is needed to prevent stories like this from unfolding again and again.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ A sea of red tape lay between me and an official health advisory which would hopefully free up resources and qualify the city for bottled water, filters, and other aid.

For the hundredth time, I wondered: *Is the official indifference because these are Flint kids? Poor kids? Black kids? Kids who already have every adversity in the world piled up against them?*

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona recalls reckoning with the daunting task before her at a pivotal point in the Flint water crisis: she needed to force the people in charge of governing Flint to abandon their "indifference" to Flint and make real policy change that would bring the crisis to a halt.

This passage is significant because it illustrates Mona's sadness and frustration about the unique set of circumstances that created the Flint water crisis in the first place. Mona knew that Flint was only in trouble because its government had already adopted a policy of indifference and neglect. That unofficial policy was in place because the people in charge of Flint knew the community was already rife with poverty and adversity—and so they didn't see the point in investing resources into bettering the dilapidated city in the first place. But in Mona's estimation—and in the estimation of countless colleagues—these factors made Flint all the more worthy of its government's time, money, and energy.

Places like Flint, Mona argues, are especially in need of structural assistance: public health programs, anti-violence initiatives, and other community-strengthening plans can end deeply entrenched cycles of poverty and injustice. But convincing people whose perspectives have been informed by racism, indifference, and greed can be a long and difficult

road. Mona knew that she'd have to make Flint's government see what was special and worthy about the city, an undue burden that never should have been placed upon her. Through this passage, the book suggests that it's the responsibility of governing bodies to take care of their communities—but when that responsibility is abandoned, it becomes up to everyday citizens to speak up for and support one another until change comes.

❝ A central tenet of [environmental justice] is that local communities must have control over their environments—and decide whether a pipeline gets a permit, or a wind turbine gets built instead of a natural gas plant. When people have a say, smarter decisions are made—both for the environment and for public health.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker), Lawrence Reynolds , Bunyan Bryant

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona looks back on a conversation she had with one of her colleagues and mentors, Dr. Lawrence Reynolds, about the unfairness of environmental injustice.

This passage is significant because within it, Mona expresses what environmental justice actually looks like—or what it should look like in an ideal society. Local communities, she posits, should have a say over how their environments function, so that everyone in that community is safe, supported, and protected. Unfortunately, in places like Flint, the people in charge of making decisions about the environment don't have best interests of the communities they represent at heart. Especially when elected officials are replaced with appointed officials who have ulterior motives (such as committing a community to severe austerity measures or maximizing the profit a place's central industry is able to produce), there are wide openings for environmental injustices to take root. Mona learned important lessons about the significance of communal environmental justice work from mentors like Dr. Reynolds and her former professor Bunyan Bryant. But in this passage, she suggests that unless people have a bigger say in how their communities are governed, opportunists in government will make their decisions based on the pursuit of money and power rather than what's best for a community and the people within it.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ "Just so you know what's ahead," Mark went on, "it could get rough. Many whistle-blowers, even if they're successful in exposing fraud, have their lives destroyed. […] Many are retaliated against. I have clients who have lost their homes and friends, their marriages destroyed. One even killed himself. That's why I always counsel new clients—even though they're doing the right thing—that they need to seriously consider the costs. You have to be prepared for the worst."

Related Characters: Muaked "Mark" Hanna (speaker), Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona's brother Mark—a public interest attorney—offers her some important but grave advice about the consequences of going up against the government.

This passage is significant because within it, the book illustrates the strong family foundation to which Mona always turned in times of need. Mona's parents raised her and Mark to have a strong sense of social justice and a deep commitment to activism. Lives committed to such tenets aren't always easy ones—but because Mona, her brother, and her parents all held the same values, they could comfort one another in times of uncertainty or fear.

This passage is also important because it illustrates the necessity of a relentless pursuit of the truth and the world-shifting potential of collective action. Mark was warning Mona in this moment about how difficult things could get for her—but he was never trying to discourage her from fighting to bring the truth to light. Only by exposing the truth and engaging her colleagues and community members in action could Mona defeat the forces conspiring to keep Flint and its people down. Mona's family members knew how difficult such a path could be—but Mark's speech in this passage illustrates his devotion to her and his willingness to support her, as loved ones and allies, through any contingency.

❝ This is what it means to be a member of a family, to have people in your life who trust you and support you and who know you sometimes better than you know yourself. […] What we had was more than love. We understood each other. We were grounded in the same core ideals and morals—and were always moving toward the same goal: to make the world more just, more equitable, and a more human place. To do the right thing, even if it was hard.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker), Muaked "Mark" Hanna , Elliott, Mona's Mother/Bebe

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 207-208

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona continues to underscore the deep importance of having a network of support in the form of like-minded people with similar values and goals. In the days leading up to the press conference in which she planned to expose the truth about the Flint water crisis—and the government's concerted coverup of that crisis—Mona found herself turning to her family for support and solidarity. Mona was afraid of bungling her chance to bring change to Flint or bringing shame upon her family and her colleagues. But when Mona's fear threatened to overwhelm her, she was able to turn to her family for guidance and reassurance.

This passage solidifies the idea that Mona didn't just find comfort in her family's support because they were her family. She found comfort in them because they'd raised her to hold a certain set of values—values they themselves had inherited from generations of workers, activists, and proponents of the truth. Mona's family wasn't offering her empty platitudes—they were reaffirming her deepest-held beliefs and morals and reminding her that her goals, though difficult, were eminently worthy. Mona was able to remind herself that she needed to stay the course and do what was right for her community because of the strong moral foundation her family gave her from a young age. Through this passage, the book shows the importance of Mona being able to find support and purpose by turning to her family's moral and ideological foundations.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ What I love most about his story is Nuri's bravery, persistence, and unfailing loyalty to a borderless progressive cause. He fought for something bigger than a country or a religion, a tribe or an ethnic group. He fought for all people, for humanity, with a hope that there was another way to live.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker), Nuri Rufail Koutani/Anwar

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona reflects on the story of her great-uncle, Nuri Rufail Koutani (who used the *nom de guerre* Anwar throughout his revolutionary days in Iraq).

Nuri's story was important to Mona—and especially reassuring in the midst of the Flint water crisis—because it taught the lesson that true solidarity and collective action would be rewarded with change. Nuri was a leftist freedom fighter who opposed fascism. He fought to restore justice, uproot government corruption, and protect his community. What's most important about Nuri's story, though, is that he didn't discriminate against anyone—he found ways to be in community with all people and to value the common humanity of those around him.

This passage is significant because it illustrates Mona's ability to find strength and confidence in her family's legacy of social justice activism and passion for morality. As Mona reckoned with the corruption, racism, and neglect that had allowed the Flint water crisis to happen, she found herself disheartened by the idea that those in charge of Flint could abandon their duty to their people. But when Mona looked to her family's history and remembered stories like Nuri's, she found herself feeling empowered by their long legacy of activism and refusal to accept the status quo. Mona, too, wanted to fight on behalf of her entire community. Nuri's legacy gave her the confidence to stand up for the hope that "there was another way to live" for the people of Flint, and the idea that she could help her community to find a path to that brighter future.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ Down deep, something else was eating away at me. *Aeb*. It was difficult to describe without using the imprecise word shame. It was not just an Iraqi thing; it was an Arabic thing. It was the idea that you were never acting independently of your family or larger community. You always had a connection to a larger group, and there were always repercussions. If you behaved badly, or strayed even a little bit from the accepted norm, you would bring shame not only upon yourself but on your people. There was nothing worse.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona looks back on the feelings of fear, shame, and self-doubt she experienced the night before her landmark press conference exposing the water crisis in Flint.

This passage is significant because it illustrates a difficulty of her cultural heritage. While Mona always drew great strength from her family's legacies and traditions, there were certain aspects of those customs that overwhelmed her. The fear of bringing shame unto her family was a very real one for Mona.

But what's also important about this passage is that, in highlighting the inextricability of an individual from their family or their community, the book also illustrates the poignancy of Mona's fight for Flint. Mona didn't live in Flint, but she worked at one of its hospitals and she interacted with its citizens every day. She wasn't in a position of government, but she was deeply invested in the health and prosperity of the city in which she worked. Mona wasn't duty-bound to help Flint in any way—it was not necessarily her responsibility to put her reputation on the line in order to shine a light on the truth about the water crisis. But because of concepts like *aeb*, Mona understood how important it was to move through life in a selfless, community-minded way. *Aeb* may have frightened Mona in this moment—but ultimately, this passage shows, it taught her the importance of community action, collective duty, and remaining close to one's family, peers, and fellow citizens.

❝ Now, as the press conference loomed, I was beginning to see that my family's saga of loss and dislocation had given me my fight—my passion and urgency. […] I grew up with dismay and knew how wrong leaders could be, how cruel and negligent. They have to be held accountable, have to be challenged, because power corrupts, and our moral sensibility can be so dulled that we let atrocities happen right around us, unless we manage to stay constantly vigilant, sensitive, aroused, and ready to take a stand.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker), Mona's Mother/Bebe, Mona's Father/Jidu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona looks deep within herself as she ties her family's painful past to the values she has come to possess as an adult.

The night before she was due to deliver a press conference revealing her data about the increasing blood-lead levels of Flint's children, Mona was full of fear and self-doubt. She was afraid to bring shame to her family by speaking out and facing ridicule or retaliation. But as Mona ruminated, she was able to realize that her family's story of exile from their homeland was what had given her the drive and passion to fight for Flint in the first place. Seeing how her parents had suffered after being displaced from their home country in the wake of an increasingly violent government, Mona grew up knowing that corruption, wherever it is found, must be rooted out. Everyday citizens must be ever-ready to "take a stand" against their leaders—because otherwise, those in charge might engage in abuses of power.

In the case of the Flint water crisis, corruption and racist policy were at the heart of Flint's suffering. Mona knew that if no one called out the government's attempts to conceal the truth, the crisis would only get worse. By turning to her family's struggles as a source of motivation, Mona was able to see a clear path toward the unveiling of the deep-seated environmental injustices and failures of leadership that had come to define life in Flint.

❝ I was drawing on something deep inside me. Maybe it was the letters my mom received from Haji in Baghdad, or the pictures I'd seen of the gassing of the Kurdish babies. Maybe it was the tenacity and optimism of Mama Evelyn or the strength and integrity of my dissident parents. Maybe it was the inspiration of my heroes, fighters like Alice Hamilton. […] Or maybe there was even something in my DNA, an ancestral inheritance of persistence and rebellion and activism, handed down to me from the generations of prolific scribes who had hoped to keep Nestorian traditions alive, or from Nuri […] with his brave rebellion, or from Paul Shekwana with his passion for public health.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker), Paul Shekwana, Nuri Rufail Koutani/Anwar , Alice Hamilton, Mama Evelyn, Haji, Mona's Mother/Bebe, Mona's Father/Jidu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona rallies herself toward action after the Michigan state government orchestrated a dangerous, factually incorrect assault on her careful research about the blood-lead levels of Flint residents.

This passage is significant because it illustrates the importance of family. Mona comes from a long line of resistance fighters and community activists—and so when it was her turn to stand up for her community, she didn't hesitate. But the vitriolic, unfounded attempts to discredit her cut Mona deep. It was only after she looked "deep inside" and considered her family's rich history of the pursuit of truth, logic, and community action that she found the strength to carry on. In a moment in which she felt like her hard work and her reputation were being taken away from her, Mona focused on what she did have instead: a sense of history, legacy, and tradition rooted in the search for righteousness and solidarity. Mona's revolutionary ancestors and truth-focused distant relatives gave her the courage to fight another day—even if the fight ahead of her would test her in new, sometimes painful ways.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ Again and again, the state and federal officials' disdain for Flint was shocking.

At the EPA, when asked about using federal money to buy water filters for city residents, the Region 5 Water Division chief […] wrote to the regional administrator and others, "I'm not so sure Flint is the community we want to go out on a limb for."

The pointed cruelty. The arrogance and inhumanity.

Sometimes it is called racism. Sometimes it is called callousness. And sometimes […] it can be called manslaughter.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, taken from a chapter in which Mona draws on information garnered from Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) releases to piece together what was going on behind the scenes throughout the water crisis, shows how widespread the corruption and racism in the local and federal governing bodies in charge of helping Flint truly were.

This passage is significant because it underscores the rampant "arrogance and inhumanity" of many of the people in charge of taking care of Flint's already-vulnerable residents. Rather than experiencing empathy and motivation to help the people of Flint, officials at the highest levels of government chose not to "go out on a limb" for them at all. Mona correctly points to the anti-Black racism that motivates sentiments like this one, using this passage to tie the severity of the Flint water crisis to America's long history of cheapening and discounting Black lives. But toward the end of the passage, Mona offers a glimmer of hope—she reveals that the officials who made comments like this one and decisions that negatively impacted the lives of Flint residents were charged with crimes as serious as manslaughter. In order to end corruption, this passage suggests, the truth must be brought to light. Only then will corrupt, racist governing bodies face the consequences they deserve.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ Flint falls right into the American narrative of cheapening black life. White America may not have seen the common thread between Flint history and these tragedies, but black America saw it immediately. That the blood of African-American children was unnecessarily and callously laced with lead speaks in the same rhythm as Black Lives Matter, a movement also born from the blood of innocent African Americans.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona explores how anti-Black racism, for a long time, defined life in Flint—and, on another level, life in America.

The phenomenon of the "cheapening [of] black life" is especially obvious in places like Flint. Flint is a majority-Black community that was supposed to be a haven for Black Americans escaping the racism of the south—but instead, these residents found other, equally insidious kinds of

racism waiting for them. Over the course of the last several decades, Flint has been especially vulnerable to the ravages of poverty and environmental injustice because the fundamental racism within America cast places like Flint as unworthy of investments of time and money. Movements like Black Lives Matter seek to center the experiences of Black Americans who have been told—both quietly and loudly, by policy and by people—that their lives aren't important.

Black Americans, this passage posits, weren't surprised by the Flint water crisis, because they already know how sidelined and underfunded their communities often are. When the government realized that there was a problem with the water in Flint, their reticence to fix it—let alone admit the problem in the first place—speaks volumes about the inequality that defines the allocation of resources in contemporary America. Black communities simply aren't seen as being as worthy of investments in their education infrastructures, public health initiatives, and community resources due to America's long history of cheapening Black life. By calling attention to this fact, Mona seeks to use her book to denounce racism and environmental justice, and to pressure readers, lawmakers, and public health professionals to join causes that invest in Black lives and Black communities.

❝ I was just the last piece. The state wouldn't stop lying until somebody came along to prove that real harm was being done to kids. Then the house of cards fell.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 318

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona humbly suggests that while she was one of the primary whistleblowers in the Flint water crisis, she was merely a single "piece" in a much larger puzzle.

The Flint water crisis began because the Michigan state government appointed an emergency city manager to usurp the mayor's power. The emergency manager had one directive: cut the city's budget. So the city switched the source of their water and neglected to treat the new source with necessary chemicals. When their tests revealed that lead was leaching into the water supply, they didn't stop to think about the "real harm" happening on the ground in Flint—Flint was already a place with too many problems to fix. So the state manipulated their test results and created a mass coverup in which more and more people were made to lie and pretend that everything was fine.

Mona wasn't the first person to pick up on the crisis—local activists, Environmental Protection Agency officials, and social justice experts all called foul and told the public that the government was up to no good. But the government's campaign of concealment and corruption was too big to be stopped—only hard evidence of "real harm" would bring their "house of cards" tumbling down. So in this passage, Mona isn't claiming to have been the one who blew the lid off the crisis, or the one who worked hardest for the people of Flint. She's simply stating that her pursuit of the cold, hard data—and her refusal to budge when the state tried to malign her data—was the only thing that could end the government's corrupt coverup of the crisis and bring the facts to light. This underscores the power of truth in the fight against more widespread corruption—not just in America, but everywhere.

Chapter 26 Quotes

❝ My family came to the United States basically as refugees fleeing oppression, in search of a peaceful and prosperous place for my brother and me to grow up. The American Dream worked for us. [...]

Yes, people are still running to America, or at least trying to. It remains the epitome of prosperity for the entire world, the richest country that ever was. But there really are two Americas, aren't there? The America I was lucky to grow up in, and the other America—the one I see in my clinic every dry.

Related Characters: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha (speaker), Grace, Reeva, and Nakala

Related Themes:

Page Number: 323

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mona interrogates the nature of the American Dream.

The American Dream is the idea that anyone—no matter where they come from, how much they have, or what injustices restrict them—can find freedom and prosperity in America. Over the course of the book, though, Mona has shown through the example of the Flint water crisis that this ideal isn't actually real. While Mona's parents were able to carve out an "American Dream" for themselves, they were already well-educated and supported by a vast

network of friends and family in their new community in Detroit when they arrived. Mona knows that she was "lucky" to grow up in the America she did—but she's also aware that there are "two Americas."

When Mona speaks of the idea of "two Americas," she's stating that for countless people in the U.S. and abroad, the American Dream is an unachievable, impossible fantasy. For people who live in communities like Flint—communities where racism, injustice, violence, and poverty cause governments to neglect the citizens they're charged with protecting—there is no American Dream. The American Dream, Mona posits, was only really meant to work for a small subset of people. For the rest of the population—people like the ones Mona sees each day at her hospital—the American dream isn't real at all. Mona's larger suggestion is that because the American Dream is nowhere to be found for a large subset of Americans, it doesn't actually exist. Until there are real, enforceable policies that combat environmental racism, government corruption, and institutionalized poverty, the American Dream is nothing but a myth this country tells itself.

Epilogue Quotes

"A small bird few down and tugged at the hem of his white *dishdasha*. The bird told Haji that he would take him to the doctor. But Haji laughed at the small bird, wondering how such a tiny bird could carry him. Soon another bird came and took the edge of his sleeve. Another bird came, and another, until hundreds of birds surrounded him. They each held a small piece of his *dishdasha*, and even his hair and his toes, and together the birds were able to lift him and fly him through the air."

Related Characters: Mona's Mother/Bebe (speaker), Nina and Layla, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, Haji

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 328

Explanation and Analysis

In the book's epilogue, Mona recalls listening to her mother tell her daughters a fanciful but poignant bedtime story about her grandfather Haji.

As Bebe tells the story of how Haji, injured one afternoon after falling from a ladder, received help from a flock of birds he'd long tended to, Mona pulls many of the book's themes into sharp relief. The story encapsulates Mona's entire ethos as a pediatrician and a community leader: alone, one person can't make a difference; but together, communities can find renewed strength and purpose in collective action. Mona tells her readers that she, too, frequently heard this story when she was growing up—and so it becomes clear that the story's message of generosity and solidarity was a part of Mona from a young age.

This passage is significant because it shows that Mona's politics and sense of right and wrong were formed at a young age, in large part by the lessons her family's stories and traditions taught her. Displaced by a human rights crisis and forced to carve out a place for themselves in a new country, Mona's parents clung tightly to the stories of their parents and even more distant ancestors in order to bring the values and traditions of their past into their new lives. Mona internalized these values and, as an adult, found herself guided onto a path of public health advocacy and anti-racist action as a result of the stories she heard as a young girl. This illustrates the idea that anyone can find strength and purpose in their family's values and traditions—and that one can use that sense of resolve to make real-world changes in one's community.

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.

PROLOGUE: HOW I GOT MY NAME

"I am Iraqi," begins Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha. While the rest of her family, including her brother, was born in Iraq, Mona herself was born in Sheffield, England. Mona's brother Muaked was renamed Mark, while Mona's grandfather Haji, a Baghdadi businessman, selected Mona's name because he thought it would be simple for both English and Arabic speakers to pronounce. The name means "hope, wish, or desire."

In the opening lines of her book, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha centers her family's cultural heritage. The foundation Mona's family gave her as a child will prove to be essential later on in life, and, here, she highlights the power of her family's love and hope for her. For Mona, family and tradition are the foundations of everything.

When Mona was born, her family was living in England so that her father could complete his doctorate in metallurgy at the University of Sheffield, but they were planning to move back to Iraq as soon as his studies were finished. Soon, however, "the road behind [her] family disappeared"—the Iraq they knew was gone. Yet for Mona and her family, the lessons of their homeland endured.

Mona and her family were displaced from their homeland after violence and tumult made Iraq a place to which they could not return. But Mona is careful to note that while the road behind her family disappeared, their strong sense of tradition gave them strength to pave a new one ahead.

Mona looks back on a road trip she and her family once took. After spending Christmas with Mama Evelyn (her paternal grandmother) outside of Detroit, Mona, her brother, and her parents were on their way back to their home in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Her "perpetually busy" mother, a trained chemist, was knitting a sweater. Mona's mother always missed her home in Baghdad immensely, and she told Mona and her brother nightly stories and fables with roots in the Middle East. She also told the children plenty of stories about her father, Haji, and her mother, Mama Latifa, who still lived in Iraq.

Even though Mona and her family found themselves living in a strange new place, they stuck together and held fast to their old traditions. Mona's mother's crafts and stories helped her children stay connected to their heritage and to remember family members they couldn't see all the time. Mona also had extended family living in the region, which meant that she and her parents had a strong support system nearby to further tie them to their roots.

Though Mona and her brother longed to visit their grandparents, their parents always told them that it wasn't safe to go back to Iraq—even for a visit. Hearing about the fraught, dangerous situation in Iraq taught Mona about evil and injustice at an early age. The more she learned about the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime, which became more extreme by the year, the more she understood why Iraq had come to be called a "Republic of Fear." Even from 6,000 miles away, Mona and her family—her justice-minded father especially—felt the pain of what was happening in their home country.

Even though Mona was a young child, she had an acute sense of her parents' sadness and longing. The country her parents loved no longer really existed, at least not in the form they'd once known. So Mona and her family had to find a way to keep old traditions alive while making new ones and forging ahead in their pursuit of the American Dream. Because Mona's parents didn't keep her in the dark about what was really happening in Iraq, Mona was raised with a strong sense of right and wrong and a passion for social justice.

Still, Mona and her brother were able to feel connected to their family and their roots through Mama Evelyn, who taught them to play Iraqi card games and told them vivid stories about their father's childhood in Iraq. Though there was a "tight-knit international graduate student" community in Michigan, where her father was completing a postdoc at Michigan Tech University, Mona and her brother found themselves increasingly replying in English when their parents spoke to them in Arabic. After just a year in school, the five-year-old Mona was changing.

Even though Mona's family did everything they could to keep Mona and her brother tied to their roots, the two children were growing up in America. The idea that Mona and her brother might grow up unmoored from their heritage perhaps spurred Mona's parents to cling more tightly to the international community they did have access to and to make sure that Mona and her brother spent lots of time around their Iraqi relatives.

Fifty miles south of their destination on the way back from Mama Evelyn's, Mona's family's car hit a patch of black ice, spun out of control, and fell into a ravine. The next morning, Mona woke up in the hospital in immense pain. She felt better, though, when a doctor with dark hair and skin like hers told her she'd be all right. In spite of a spinal injury and a broken jaw, Mona was ultimately okay—and now, she says, she is the one in the white coat looking out for kids mixed up in accidents that weren't their faults.

Mona grounds her decision to become a pediatrician in an episode of childhood trauma. After her accident, Mona was vulnerable and in pain. But as an adult, she made a concerted effort to find a profession that would allow her to make similarly vulnerable, suffering children feel less afraid and less alone. This underscores how Mona remained grounded in the lessons from her early childhood and her experiences with her family even as an adult.

In this book, Mona writes, she is endeavoring to tell the story of "the most important [...] environmental and public health disaster" of the 21st century: the Flint water crisis, which affected the bodies of the city's most vulnerable children. The U.S., Mona posits, is at a point of threatened democracy, disintegrated infrastructure, and deep environmental injustice. But the crisis in Flint has proven that people and their communities can help one another see their problems more clearly, work together, and fix what's broken.

In telling the story of her role as a whistleblower in the Flint water crisis, which rocked Michigan from 2014-2019, Mona is seeking to highlight what's wrong in the U.S.—and how the country's problems can be fixed through solidarity, action, and community support. Mona's story is a dark one—but it's also full of hope for a brighter future.

Flint was "poisoned [....] with policy." The unseen effects of racism, capitalist greed, and hunger for power meant that Flint—and its children—suffered disproportionately compared to people living in neighboring cities. But just as there are unseen villains in this story, there are unsung heroes: the people of Flint and their resilient children. It is time for American communities, cities, and the country as a whole to learn from the resilience that Flint's residents have had to embody. Only through listening to its most vulnerable citizens and addressing their needs can America's "healing" begin.

This passage informs readers that the book will take a look at the deeply entrenched political problems that cause communities like Flint to suffer much more intensely than other places. The U.S., Mona posits, shouldn't be built around the pursuit of wealth and individual glory, but rather around an attempt to protect the vulnerable, heal the unwell, and work together toward a brighter future.

CHAPTER 1: WHAT THE EYES DON'T SEE

On August 26th, 2015, Mona dropped her two daughters off at day camp and headed into work at Hurley Medical Center, a public hospital in Flint. As she arrived in her office on the pediatrics floor, she put on her white coat—her "armor." Reading the news at her desk, she noticed a story about the tap water in Flint—one of many she'd seen lately, but the unsubstantiated stories felt like "white noise" to Mona. Instead, she turned her attention to the busy day ahead and the barbecue she was hosting for some friends that evening.

This passage shows what a typical day looked like for Mona before she found out about the Flint water crisis. Like many other people who lived and worked around Flint, Mona wasn't fully attuned to the real problems the community was facing. A lot of the news coming out of Flint was "white noise" that she "armor[ed]" herself against. Flint was a community in need, a city that had been left behind—and though Mona was involved with helping its children, she would later realize that she wasn't putting in the level of investment her patients deserved.

As Mona reached for a pen in her coat pocket, she pulled out a colorful scrap of paper—a gift that a young patient, Reeva, had given her the week before while Mona examined Reeva's infant sister, Nakala, during a checkup. Nakala's mother, Grace, was a young Black woman who told Mona, during the visit, that she needed to stop breastfeeding so that she could go back to work. Grace was planning on switching to powdered formula mixed with water, and she asked Mona if the tap water in Flint was safe to give to Nakala. Mona assured her that the water was fine.

This passage foreshadows the devastating crisis that was, unknown to Mona, already unfolding throughout Flint. Mona was advising her patients to ignore the "white noise" they'd heard about the quality of their water without taking the time to look into what was really happening on the ground in her community. Later, Mona would throw herself into attaining justice for her patients and neighbors—but at this moment, she had no idea what was truly going on in Flint.

Mona knew she wanted to be a doctor from a young age. After earning a degree in environmental health from the University of Michigan, Mona studied medicine at Michigan State University and, during her residency, gravitated toward a pediatrics specialty, charmed by her young patients' unbelievable resilience. Mona always felt that pediatrics was a chance to set her young patients on a path toward the best possible future. By shaping lives early on, pediatricians play a huge role in defining their patients' health for the rest of their lives.

Mona might have been ignorant about exactly what was happening with Flint's water supply—but she was an impassioned, dedicated physician who'd built her practice around making careful, conscious investments in her patients' futures. Mona believed in the power of preventative care and attention, and she was committed to giving her patients the best head-start in life that she could.

Mona decided to become a medical educator rather than a private practitioner so that she could reach her community through Hurley, a public hospital in Flint that serves a largely poor, minority population. At first, Mona was daunted by the prospect of how to attract new medical residents to Flint, when many young residents want to live in big metropolitan areas—but as residency director, Mona quickly built a bustling, diverse program full of doctors committed to the city of Flint and its residents.

Mona worked hard to bring talented, dedicated professionals to Flint. She wanted to make sure that the Flint community was full of people who were really invested in its success and prosperity, and she committed herself to doing everything she could to bring resources and help to her community.

As the director of the Community Pediatrics rotation at the hospital, Mona has long taught her students a quotation attributed to D.H. Lawrence: "The eyes don't see what the mind doesn't know." Mona encourages her residents to look at the whole portrait of their patients' lives. Especially in a place like Flint, where racism, disinvestment, and violence have greatly impacted the community, it's important to take a holistic approach to treating patients. The life expectancy of children born in Flint is still a full 15 years less than the life expectancies of their peers in neighboring suburbs—and Flint physicians have a responsibility to watch for symptoms of the larger structural problems their patients must contend with.

In this passage, Mona introduces a quotation that encapsulates the book's central idea. One can't see what one isn't looking for, is essentially what the quotation cited here suggests. So Mona and her team of pediatricians at Hurley didn't only need to know their stuff as medical professionals—they also needed to know what life in Flint was really like, and how the many social, economic, and environmental problems in Flint stood to affect their young and vulnerable patients. By opening up their minds first, their eyes would help them to see even the most obscure problems and roadblocks.

The negative environmental factors that affect children in Flint are today known as "adverse childhood experiences" (often abbreviated as ACEs) or "toxic stresses." During the most formative years of one's life—the childhood years—these toxic stresses or adverse events can actually alter a child's brain function and physical development. Many studies have shown that ACEs directly increase children's chances of developing asthma and directly *decrease* children's life expectancies. So, Mona and her fellow physicians must look for the factors in their young patients' environments that might diminish their health and put them at risk down the line.

This passage gives some context about just how much is at stake in Mona's particular line of work—especially for pediatricians in a community like Flint. Flint is a city that has been forgotten and disadvantaged for decades. High crime rates, poverty, and environmental triggers threaten to seriously diminish the futures of all of Flint's children. By understanding how fragile children are at this stage of life, pediatricians are uniquely primed to help their patients and their parents avoid toxic stresses in a child's essential formative years.

In order to make sure that the residents she trains are sensitive to their patients' struggles, Mona makes sure they take a crash course in the history of Flint and the history of racism in medicine. She also ensures that they meet with community leaders and activists who are working to make Flint a better, safer place. In spite of the hardships the city has faced, Mona's residents quickly learn that the spirit of Flint's community has never buckled.

Even though Flint is a complicated place, it's a resilient one. Mona says here that she wants to make sure that even as her residents educate themselves about Flint's complex history and the issues that it faces, they're also putting their focus on faith, resilience, and long-term plans to help Flint's children prosper.

In 2011, Michigan governor Rick Snyder declared Flint to be in a state of "local government financial emergency," as it was near bankruptcy, and he appointed an unelected emergency manager to run the city. This took power away from Dayne Walling, the passionate mayor of Flint. The emergency manager, reporting to the governor, decided to cut Flint's budget by changing the source of its tap water from safe, pretreated drinking water piped in from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department—which got its water from clean Lake Huron. Instead, Flint would now source its tap water from the Flint River, formerly a toxic industrial dumping site.

Here, Mona provides some context as to what was happening in Flint at the start of the book's narrative. Flint was a place no one wanted to invest in—not only that, but state-appointed officials were actually trying to cut Flint's meager budget even further. By switching the water source to a local one, the government would be saving Flint money. Even though that budget cut stood to put Flint's citizens in danger, state officials turned a blind eye to the consequences of what a new water source could mean. No one with significant power was looking out for Flint—not even those elected and appointed to do so.

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) and the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) declared the water safe to drink—and people like Mona took them at their word. On April 25th, 2014, Mayor Walling shut off the valve to the Detroit water supply and opened the pipes to the Flint River. Complaints about the quality of the water began rolling in almost immediately. The heavily chlorinated water was irritating people's mouths and skin. A boil-water order was issued, and the city of Flint soon released an all-clear announcement. But Mona's high school friend, Elin Betanzo—an environmental scientist who'd previously worked in the EPA's Office of Ground Water and Drinking Water—was less certain about the safety of Flint's water.

Even though the officials in charge of determining the quality of Flint's water insisted it was fine to drink, actual Flint residents knew that something was wrong. But their protests were largely ignored as the government turned to short-term solutions rather than examining the underlying issue with the water. This passage suggests that there has, for a long time, been a pattern of outcry and abandonment in Flint in which residents demand better resources and fairer treatment while those responsible for ensuring their well-being ignore them outright in an abandonment of their duty to the community.

CHAPTER 2: THE BARBECUE

On August 26th, 2015, Mona arrived home from work and joined her husband, Elliott, in preparing the menu for their barbecue that evening. Elliott had just undergone shoulder surgery, and grilling was difficult for him, but he insisted on doing so anyway. Nina and Layla, Mona and Elliott's daughters, were complaining about wanting to go on a vacation. But as soon as Mona's old friends Annie and Elin showed up with their own husbands and children, the fun began. Elin, Annie, and Mona had all been part of their high school's Students for Environmental Awareness club, and they stayed friends throughout the years.

This passage is another slice-of-life scene from Mona's life before her knowledge of the water crisis. She was looking forward to a fun—if chaotic—evening with some friends and family, but she had no idea that a new piece of information was about to change the trajectory of her life forever.

The three friends hadn't been together since Mona and Elliott's nontraditional Chaldean wedding over 10 years ago. While catching up, drinking wine, and watching their children play, the three women exchanged stories and updates. When Elin asked Mona what she'd heard about the Flint water, Mona said she was aware of complaints but believed the water was fine. Elin gravely told her it was not fine at all.

This passage makes it clear that while Mona had heard rumors about a water problem in Flint, there were other people—people like Elin—who were much more tuned in to what was actually happening. The vast gulf between Mona and Elin's responses to the rumors shows that there was a coverup at work—some people were getting one strain of information, while others were getting a different set of facts entirely.

CHAPTER 3: THE VALEDICTORIAN

Later in the evening, Elin told Mona that she'd seen a memo written by one of her former colleagues, Miguel Del Toral, who worked in the Chicago office of the EPA. He'd done an independent test of the Flint water supply months ago and found that the city was not using corrosion control. Because water is naturally corrosive, water systems are supposed to treat the water to reduce its corrosivity.

This passage illustrates the fact that people all across the country were beginning to see that there was a problem in Flint—and that Flint's local government wasn't going to do anything to solve the issue. Experts were realizing that Flint's government had skipped over essential, basic steps when switching the water source. This was tantamount to neglect.

Elin cited the D.C. water crisis as an example, but Mona was confused—she'd never heard of a water crisis in D.C. Before she could ask about it, though, Elin explained that the water in Flint was corroding the city's pipes—and most of the plumbing in Flint was made of lead. Based on Miguel's memo, Elin said sadly, the lead levels in the Flint water supply were extremely high.

This passage shows that there was indeed precedent for what was happening in Flint—because it had happened before, and it had been covered up before. Mona realized in this moment that there was a reason a lot of people didn't really know what was happening with Flint's water: the government didn't want them to.

The MDEQ—the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality—was, in Elin's estimation, "testing for the results they want[ed]" and underestimating the lead in the water. Mona couldn't believe something like this could be happening in Michigan. Flint's water was not safe—not by a long shot. Lead, after all, is one of the most powerful neurotoxins in existence. And to make matters worse, just months before, Flint's emergency manager had rejected the city council's plea to return to Detroit water, claiming that to do so would be too costly.

This passage confirms that the state's government was actively trying to cover up the truth while local entities worked to squash any dissent in the Flint community. All of this information underscores the fact that no level of government felt Flint was worth investing in.

Mona's brain went into overdrive. She could not stop thinking about all the mothers she'd told to use tap water to mix up their babies' formula—let alone the water Mona herself made her coffee with at the hospital each day. Lead poisoning is quiet—there are no immediate signs of it. But slowly and surely, lead settles in the body and attacks the central nervous system, causing terrible health problems and developmental delays, as well as memory issues, mood disorders, and a lowered IQ.

As a physician, Mona was well aware of the effects lead poisoning has on a body over time. All of this information made her realization about what was happening in Flint all the more horrifying. Mona knew that her patients who seemed healthy right now could actually be suffering from a silent deterioration of their minds and bodies—and that the people with the power to stop this crisis were actively working to ignore it and cover it up.

Elin warned Mona that there would be a long road ahead for those who wanted to expose and fix the water crisis. Elin confessed she'd had a bad feeling about the water switch since she'd heard about it. Even back in high school, Elin and Mona had been tireless crusaders for environmental justice, getting involved in local politics at a young age in order to pressure their leaders to clean up the air in their neighborhood.

Even though Elin brought Mona some sad, distressing news, this passage suggests that the two old friends had a lot of confidence in one another after years of fighting for social and environmental justice initiatives in their hometown many years ago. Mona was getting some dispiriting information—but she knew already that she had a fellow fighter in Elin.

Elin told Mona that when she was working for the EPA, experts found that there was lead in the water in D.C.—and there had been for years. Officials manipulated lead measurements in the water to make the crisis seem less serious than it truly was. Worse, the D.C. water department never provided any studies showing how the lead levels had impacted local children. Elin then asked Mona if she had access to her patients' blood-lead tests, and Mona said that she did. Elin told Mona that Mona had the power to do something about the crisis in Flint.

In this passage, Elin tells Mona about a water crisis that was already covered up in the past—so successfully, in fact, that most people were never even aware that it happened. Clearly rattled by the effects of the covered-up crisis, Elin wanted to make sure that Mona was going to be able to secure the proof needed to combat this new one. Even though the truth had lost out before, it didn't have to in Flint.

CHAPTER 4: HAJI

After the barbecue, Mona tucked Nina and Layla into bed, but her head was spinning with what Elin had told her. The girls begged for a story about their great-grandfather Haji, so Mona told them about Haji's generosity and idealism. Before Haji achieved professional success as the director of Pepsi-Cola in Iraq, Mona told her daughters, he and his brothers owned a perfume factory. When the factory burned down during World War II, the factory's employees donated their wages to help rebuild it. Their generosity moved Haji, who "believe[d] in people more than anything else."

In this passage, the bedtime story Mona tells her children illustrates her ongoing commitment to keeping herself and her daughters rooted in their family's values and traditional stories. Looking to Haji's example in this moment is especially poignant. Having just received terrible and frightening news, Mona reminds herself of the power of community by telling her girls this particular story on this particular night.

Mona concluded the story by telling her girls that Haji taught her how important it was to always do the right thing, no matter how hard it would be. Mona also mentioned that she and her parents still received notes and messages from the children and grandchildren of Haji's employees that spoke of his enduring generosity. Haji's actions, Mona said, had left a mark on them all—even if they couldn't see it.

This passage foreshadows the impact Mona will go on to have on her very own community. By looking to Haji's example in this moment and reminding herself of her family's long-held values of generosity, community, and solidarity, Mona may have subconsciously primed herself to take on the establishment and fight for the people of Flint.

CHAPTER 5: RED FLAGS

After putting the girls to sleep, Mona herself got into bed—but she spent hours awake on her iPad, reading a series of links, Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports, and EPA memos that Elin had forwarded to her. Elin also sent her a note promising to do whatever she could to help out in Flint. Mona dove into articles about Miguel, Elin's former colleague, and his leaked EPA memo. Mona was shocked—she knew that even the suspicion of lead should have been enough to get local officials to do something.

Even though Mona was horrified by the information she'd just learned, she knew she had a good friend and ally in Elin. And by reading about the work of Elin's colleague, Miguel, Mona was showing herself that there were passionate fighters out there—people who were standing up for the citizens of Flint already.

But despite evidence of nearly 400 parts per billion, or ppb, of lead in a local woman's drinking water, neither local nor federal officials had done anything at all. Instead, residents who complained of lead in their water were told it was their own outdated plumbing at fault—even when they had PVC or plastic pipes.

The government tried to pin the lead-water crisis in Flint on its own residents rather than taking any action to remedy the problem at all. By placing blame on an already-vulnerable constituency, the government knew it could cut off—or at the very least stall—any real resistance.

After conversations with a local Flint mother, Miguel realized that the MDEQ wasn't using corrosion control in the water supply—a violation of federal law. In April 2015, Miguel traveled to Flint to meet with LeeAnne Walters, a Flint mother he'd been in communication with, and to take samples of the pipes leading to Walters's house, which were made of lead.

Miguel worked tirelessly to get to the bottom of what was happening in Flint, and, along the way, he exposed some seriously corrupt and unconscionable practices. Miguel took up a duty to the community of Flint when he realized that the organizations that were supposed to protect Flint weren't going to do their own duties.

In response to the concerns he raised, the MDEQ simply told Miguel that Flint was under a pre-flushing order—but Miguel knew that even letting the pipes run for several minutes before drinking from them wouldn't keep people safe from lead. Miguel struggled to get anyone at the EPA or the MDEQ to verify his findings—and so he and Walters leaked them to a local reporter who broke the story in July of 2015.

This passage shows that in spite of early whistleblowers like Miguel and his contacts in Flint, the government organizations charged with overseeing the quality of Flint's water were not going to budge easily. Mona could look to Miguel's example of hard work and advocacy for inspiration—but she could see that many more people would need to speak up if real change was going to happen.

The more Mona read, the angrier she became at Flint's officials, at the federal government, and at herself for ignoring her community activists' warnings. She'd been caught up in her own busy life—and she, like so many others, had ignored the cries of Flint's poor, predominantly Black, inadequately represented community leaders. Mona had fallen down on her duty of being an advocate for her patients. She'd taken an oath to do no harm, but she hadn't been there for her patients when they needed her most.

In this passage, Mona takes readers through the emotional journey she went through when she realized what was happening in Flint. By showing that she felt a personal responsibility to the people of Flint, Mona is suggesting that every member of a community is duty-bound to help their neighbors and fellow community members. Even though Mona was doing her job well and with passion, here, she realized that there was always an opportunity to make real, meaningful change rather than just scratching the surface of what was possible for her community.

Mona began reading articles and talking to Elin about the D.C. water crisis. Elin had gone to work for the EPA in 2002—just as the city found itself in a crisis after a new decontaminant, chloramine, made the city's water pathogen-free (but highly corrosive) and began leaching toxic levels of lead into the water supply. Even the city's sturdy copper pipes were degrading rapidly. Tests conducted by Marc Edwards, a civil engineer contracted by the D.C. Water and Sewer Authority (WASA), found over 1,000 ppb of lead in the water—a level that classified the supply as "hazardous waste."

Mona wanted to educate herself as completely as possible about what was happening in Flint, so she turned to the examples of other water crises that had unfolded in the past. Mona was horrified to find that local and federal authorities regularly neglected doing the right thing in favor of covering up their mistakes. Mona began to realize that she would need to be the change she wanted to see in her community.

But as soon as Marc's findings made their way back to WASA, a cover-up began. The EPA discontinued his subcontract, and many other engineers were fired. Elin herself was removed from the project after she asked questions her superiors didn't like. Lead continued to leach its way into the water supply of the entire area. When a news story broke about the crisis in 2004, the EPA and WASA doubled down on their self-preservation tactics.

Mona could see from the articles she was reading that those who spoke out against corruption and concealment were hastily dispatched from any real positions of power—but this didn't deter her from her mission. In fact, it made her even angrier and more committed to speaking out no matter the cost.

Marc continued his own independent research, eventually concluding that more that 42,000 children in D.C. under two years old had been exposed to lead between 2000 and 2004. But without proof, there could be no blame—and everyone involved in the crisis got off scot-free. Even the CDC claimed that lead levels in water didn't negatively affect children's development for years. The actual effects of the leaded water on D.C.'s children were never investigated.

Because lead poisoning is such a slow-burning phenomenon, it was difficult even for the experts involved in exposing the D.C. crisis to prove which children had suffered which effects as a result of drinking contaminated water. This, too, was a warning sign to Mona—she realized that if she was going to make change in Flint, she'd need to come up with an innovative way to definitively prove that children in Flint were suffering.

Mona had a meeting scheduled for the morning with a Genesee County Health Department employee who was in charge of lead in the county to discuss the distribution of cleaning supplies for families whose children's lead levels were elevated. Lead exposure in children usually occurs when they ingest paint chips around old windows—but Mona told herself that whether the lead levels were high because of paint or water, she and the official would be able to figure things out the next day.

This passage shows that even after all the reading she'd just done, Mona still believed that institutions had the power—and the drive—to do what was right for their communities. Mona was counting on receiving help from a government official, but she'd soon learn that to make real progress, she'd need to strike out on her own.

As Mona tried to drift off to sleep, she couldn't stop thinking of how to get bottled water to her patients, how to inform their parents of what was going on, and how to get her residents on the same page. But she knew she had to keep a cool head—she could have a long fight ahead of her.

Mona knew already that she needed to take things slowly and conserve her energy—the children of Flint needed her, and she had to pace herself in order to show up for them with her full support.

CHAPTER 6: FIRST ENCOUNTER

In the morning, when she woke up, Mona smelled breakfast and knew that her mother was downstairs making crepes. Mona rushed through her morning routine, thinking all the while of her upbringing in Royal Oak, a nearby suburb, and her parents' struggle to raise two Iraqi children in a place that had once been a hotbed of white supremacy and anti-Semitism. Mona learned as a child that the truth about a place and its people lies below the surface, and that one must dig deep without fear of what one might find.

This passage is yet another example of how the lessons Mona learned from her family in childhood shaped the person she became—and the adult decisions she ultimately made. Mona grew up knowing from an early age that things weren't always what they seemed to be—and, as a grown woman, she endeavored to never let herself be lulled into a false sense of security by appearances alone. From a young age, Mona had a hunger for the truth.

As Mona's father climbed the ladder as a technical engineer with General Motors, her mother went back to school to earn a master's degree in chemistry and a teaching certificate to become an ESL instructor. Through their parents' hard work, Mona and her brother Mark were able to find hope in the American Dream. But now, as an adult, Mona was realizing that the American Dream didn't work for everyone—and was probably never meant to.

In this passage, Mona reckons with the meaning of the American Dream. The idea that anyone—no matter where they come from or what their position in life is—can find success and happiness in America is, in truth, nothing more than a national myth. Mona knew that for people like her family—people who already had certain advantages like education and a tight-knit community—the American dream was much more attainable than it was for people like the citizens of Flint who'd been sidelined for years by racism and austerity politics.

At the meeting with the county health official, the official spoke of Flint's insufficient funding and sparse resources for lead remediation. Public health budgets were often the first things to be reduced throughout Michigan—especially in places like Flint, where most funding went to the police department. No one in the Michigan legislature seemed to care about these funding discrepancies, even though communities like Flint were the ones most in need of an influx of cash. Flint families needed inspections and renovations for lead abatement, but all Mona and her team could offer them were mops, cleaning supplies, and pamphlets.

This passage shows how deep, pervasive structural issues affect people. When there's no money for public health initiatives or programs to help families solve the day-to-day issues before them, communities suffer. In places like Flint, where officials would rather pour money into the police budget in order to further restrain people and criminalize poverty, real and holistic change sadly becomes nearly impossible to create.

When Mona spoke up to ask the health official about the high lead levels in the Flint drinking water, the man responded that water wasn't under the jurisdiction of the health department—water was the responsibility of public works. Mona, outraged, asked if his agency had noticed any changes in blood levels in the last year. He responded that he wasn't even sure if anyone had looked. Mona resolved to email the man's higher-ups at the health department—she was sure someone would be able to help.

Mona's interaction with the Genesee County Health official described in this passage showed her that getting information out of any local, state, or federal organization was going to be difficult. Not only was an orchestrated cover-up going on at the top—but there was also a staggering degree of negligence taking place in many lower levels of local governance.

CHAPTER 7: MIASMA

Many people who work in the field of public health—whether they're statisticians, health providers, or humanitarians—are drawn in by the desire to put together puzzles and solve mysteries. She looks back on the story of John Snow, a 19th-century physician and scientist. He became the founding father of public health in 1854, when he did groundbreaking work to locate and contain a cholera outbreak in his London neighborhood of Soho.

Public health is a relatively new field—and since it began, it's been a misunderstood and embattled one. By invoking the story of a public health figure of a bygone era, Mona is showing her readers just how difficult public health struggles can be to identify and resolve—largely because of people's doubt in the science behind public health initiatives.

Snow was one of the rare individuals who doubted the "miasma" theory—the idea that cholera was spread by breathing stagnant air. Instead, he believed that unsanitary drinking water was how the disease spread so quickly. As thousands of his neighbors became sick and died, Snow suggested to local officials that a water pump on Broad Street was the source of the outbreak. He created a map of London's cholera cases and successfully tied many of them to the Broad Street pump. Snow wasn't trained in this kind of work, but the problem in his own neighborhood galvanized him to get involved and find a solution.

Just like Mona was galvanized to come up with an innovative way to help her community after realizing that no one else was going to step up and do what needed to be done, John Snow took initiative within his own neighborhood to identify the source of his neighbors' strife and suffering and remedy it.

Another person who changed their community through persistence and dedication was Paul Shekwana, who was the first bacteriologist to work in the U.S. He was from what is now present-day Iraq and was actually a distant cousin of Mona's. Shekwana did groundbreaking investigative work surrounding an outbreak of typhoid fever in Iowa and its connection to unpasteurized milk. He also published an important article in the early 1900s advocating for physicians to wash their hands in order to slow the spread of disease and infection. Shekwana died an untimely and mysterious death in 1906 when he either leapt or fell from a railway trestle near Cedar Rapids.

Paul Shekwana is another of Mona's public health heroes—but because the two of them are distantly related, he's also an important part of her family's long legacy of dedication to pursuing the truth and doing what's right. Shekwana's innovative public health discoveries probably saved many lives—and Mona, who grew up hearing his story, learned that there was value in bringing to light uncomfortable truths.

Though urban poverty is less lethal today than it was when Shekwana or Snow were alive, the environments of the cities in which people live still dictate what kind of lives they will lead. Environmental injustice is real, and it impacts communities around the world in visible and invisible ways every day.

While science and public health have come a long a way since the eras in which Snow and Shekwana lived, countless communities are still made more vulnerable by environmental injustice. These communities need people who will fight, both in government and in the private sphere, to make their struggles visible and to secure justice on their behalf.

After the meeting concluded, Mona and Elin texted about the health official's lukewarm response—Mona hoped she wouldn't face the same indifference from his higher-ups. Mona forwarded the email she wrote to Mark Valacak, the county health director, to Elin. Elin replied with a link to a report that Marc Edwards, the corrosion expert from the D.C. crisis, had posted to his Flint Water Study website. The data revealed that there were extremely high levels of lead in the water—one sample had 1,000 ppb, 65 times the federal action level of 15 ppb. But the MDEQ dismissed Marc's findings.

Even though Mona was struggling to get the attention of government officials, there were others who were beginning to speak out about what they were discovering in Flint. Mona might have been discouraged by the meeting with the county health official, but learning that others were invested in this fight showed her that she wasn't going to be alone in rattling cages and pursuing the truth.

Looking at the similarities between the D.C. crisis and the burgeoning crisis in Flint, Mona realized that both communities were plagued by inadequate representation: D.C. wasn't recognized as a state, and Flint was under the direction of an unelected emergency manager. When people are excluded from their local politics, it often results in catastrophic neglect.

This passage directly ties the lack of elected government representation in places like Flint and D.C. to the proliferation of shady, unjust decisions that run counter to the people's interests. When the agencies and institutions in charge of protecting and looking out for their communities fall down on that duty, it is up to everyday people to uphold community values and fight for their neighbors.

As Mona prepared to see patients that afternoon, she shook off her fear and stress about the water crisis—but as each young patient she saw reported that they were drinking lots of tap water, Mona grew upset. She urged her patients' parents to switch to bottled water and to try to take their showers and baths at relatives' homes outside of Flint. She passed out premixed formula to the parents of her newborn patients, urging them to mix powdered formula with bottled water when they ran out.

At this point, Mona had only heard swirling rumors about what was happening with Flint's water supply—she didn't know anything for certain, and she didn't want to scare her patients. But she continued to look out for their best interests even if she couldn't tell them what was going on just yet.

After seeing patients all afternoon, Mona asked other physicians in clinic if they were seeing blood-lead screenings, required by certain health insurance companies, coming back elevated—and they were. Mona advised the other physicians and residents to ask every patient about their tap water consumption habits. Mona knew it would be hard to prove that the lead levels were causing problems such as ADHD and rashes in her patients—and the more she thought about the struggle ahead of her, the more furious she became.

Mona's stress and fury in this passage underscores the unfairness of the situation in Flint. Flint's government completely abandoned its duty to Flint's people—and people like Mona were beginning to realize that if they didn't start taking care of their neighbors and asking crucial questions about their health, nobody would.

At home, Mona continued researching the fallout of the switch to Flint River water and texting Elin about GM's (General Motors's) role in covering up the crisis even after they noticed that the water was corroding metal engine parts in their factory. Even more egregiously, a representative from MDEQ had issued a statement just a month ago urging Flint residents to "relax" about the water situation. Mona began wondering if she should do a study.

The more Mona heard about the crisis, the clearer it became that lots of people in positions of authority in Flint knew that something was wrong—they just weren't doing anything to address or fix it. This passage is one of the first moments in which Mona comes to the realization that Flint residents were truly going to be on their own—unless people like her started stepping up and speaking out on behalf of their neighbors.

CHAPTER 8: NO RESPONSE

The end of August—generally a sleepy, slow time— was chaotic time for Mona. Elliott got news that he might need more surgery, and her parents were traveling: her father was in China and her mother was in D.C., staying with Mark and his family. Not only was Mona busy with her children, but she was constantly anxious as she waited to hear back from the Genesee County health authorities. But as the work week started back up, Mona heard nothing. Mona confided in Elliott, warning him that the water situation in Flint was bad and had been for over 18 months. Elliott encouraged Mona not to give up.

This passage shows that even in the midst of a chaotic time, Mona was able to draw strength and solidarity from her family. Her husband didn't know the full extent of what she was dealing with, and yet he encouraged her wholeheartedly to pursue what was right.

By the beginning of September, Mona still hadn't heard from any county health officials. Frustrated, she emailed Elin to ask about the exact date the water switch happened—she wanted to start a report on patients' lead levels before and after. Children on Medicaid, those who lived in older homes, and those whose parents did anything that brought them in contact with lead were supposed to have regular lead-level tests done. The screening rates were low, but Mona knew that she could get her hands on some of the clinic data for kids in Flint.

As it became abundantly clear to Mona that local officials weren't planning on volunteering any information, she realized that getting the facts out was even more important that she'd initially thought. Anything that might prove there was a problem in Flint could possibly get the attention of the people with the power to do something.

Mona emailed the county again, but still she received no response. She then emailed Dean Sienko, an old friend and physician who'd worked for the CDC, the state, and the county. Because he was the associate dean of public health at Michigan State University, Mona called him "Dean Dean." She looped Dean Dean into her research so far and forwarded him the emails she'd sent to the county.

In this passage, Mona begins building a team in earnest. Unable to get any help or attention for her patients through traditional routes, she sets her sights on finding people who are just as passionate about public health—and the people of Flint—as she is.

After a lukewarm, minimally informative response from the county came in, Mona emailed the chief medical information officer at Hurley to try to get some of the blood-lead surveillance data from the county. The medical information officer didn't write her back by the end of the day, and Mona left the hospital dreading the long Labor Day weekend ahead of her. She couldn't stop thinking about the children of Flint who'd be running through sprinklers and drinking from park water fountains over the next several days.

In this passage, Mona uses dramatic irony to increase her readers' anxiety about the water crisis. Because most people in Flint didn't yet fully understand what the problem was—or, in some cases, that there was a problem at all—they were doing seemingly innocuous activities that, given the presence of lead, became downright dangerous.

On Tuesday morning, though, the medical information officer wrote Mona back, promising to help her collect some of the data she needed. Next, Mona wrote to the director of the hospital's research department asking for her assistance with a data set on lead levels. Then, Mona decided to call an old contact from the state's Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, Karen Lishinski. She called Karen directly, and Karen admitted that there had been a spike in lead levels over the summer. She offered to email Mona the results of the test, but the email didn't come through.

In this passage, Mona illustrates the staggered, piecemeal progress she was able to make as she started alerting more people to the potential water crisis. While her colleagues were eager to help, local and state officials were still being evasive or dragging their heels. This tipped Mona off to the fact that there was a concerted coverup under way—the government didn't want certain information to reach certain people.

Frustrated, Mona emailed the Genesee County Health Department once again, referencing what Karen had told her. She also copied Dean Dean on the email, hoping that the county officials wouldn't discount an email he was copied on. But Dean Dean replied to the recipients of the email suggesting that the spike could have come from lead paint. Mona was growing more and more discontent—she knew she wouldn't have to take on just the health department, but also a group of decorated officials' preconceived notions about lead.

This passage shows that there are many layers to a crisis like the one in Flint. Government neglect is one part of the problem—but lack of education is another. Even professionals like Mona's colleague Dean Dean couldn't conceive of the reality of a lead-water crisis, and so they scrambled to come up with other potential sources of lead. This passage underscores the importance of community action—and community education.

CHAPTER 9: SIT DOWN

Mona looks back on her first visit to Flint when she was a child. She and her family took a trip to the now-defunct amusement park AutoWorld. By the 1980s, when Mona and her family visited the park, Flint had already fallen on hard times—the city was no longer the shining beacon of industry and progress it had been a few decades before. Though AutoWorld was designed to focus its patrons' attentions on the bright future of Flint, its historical exhibits obscured the city's dark past.

In this chapter, the narration begins to explore the history of Flint, a complex city that went from industrial boomtown to neglected in the span of just a few decades. Environmental injustice, corporate corruption, racism, and governmental neglect all had significant roles to play in Flint's decline.

In the early-to-mid 1900s, Flint and GM were synonymous. As auto factories opened throughout the region, immigrants and women who were entering the workforce around the time of World War II flocked to Flint to seek work. And between 1915 and 1960, a huge influx of more than 6 million Black Americans, seeking refuge from racist Jim Crow laws in the South, came north for employment. But Black workers were shunted into the lowest-paying, lowest-skilled jobs. Housing in Flint was segregated, and real estate agents enforced the cruelly restrictive racial covenants that dictated who could live where in Flint.

This passage lays the groundwork of how racism and social injustice have always been at the heart of Flint's many troubles. Jim Crow laws—local and state laws that enforced racial segregation in order to limit the social and economic mobility of Black people—kept Black Americans from finding comfort or success in the South. But in the north, even though there weren't necessarily laws enforcing segregation and racism, there were still unspoken and unwritten housing policies and hiring practices engineered to keep Black people from really participating in the American Dream.

In 1936, Flint made history as the site of the Flint Sit-Down Strike, during which auto workers demanded better conditions and higher wages. The strike stretched on into 1937—and despite violent attempts to disband the strikes, they actually grew. Soon, workers and the auto companies reached an agreement called the Grand Bargain. Now compensated fairly and able to enjoy benefits, a thriving new middle class emerged, and the things that happened in Flint rippled throughout workplaces all over America.

Even though Flint was for a moment the epicenter of the labor movement in America and the birthplace of the modern middle class, the positive changes that started in Flint didn't apply to everyone equally. Flint's residents fought hard for their community—but many people, in particular Black Americans, were unable to reap the benefits of the fight for workers' rights.

The late 1930s were a progressive time for Flint as workers' rights expanded—but racist violence swept the city, and tensions remained. As the century sped onward and schools and neighborhoods were desegregated, Flint became an emblem of "white flight": as Black Americans moved into new neighborhoods from which they'd previously been barred, white families moved out *en masse*. Real estate agents scammed Black residents into terrible mortgage structures. As Flint's Black population rose, a referendum to bind the suburbs of Detroit together failed to pass. Flint was on its own.

The government of Flint never created adequate protections for its Black citizens—and so racism brought Flint to its knees. Flint's Black residents found a dearth of support in their government, their industry, and their neighbors. The tragedy of Flint's decline is rooted in racism and injustice. Without attention and resources, the city was left to languish.

Plants closed, AutoWorld failed, and many people left seeking better jobs and climates, so Flint fell increasingly into disrepair. While the national poverty rate was, at the time Mona was writing the book, about 16 percent, almost 60 percent of children in Flint lived below the poverty line. Fewer than 100,000 people live in Flint. It's a complicated city whose challenges are nonetheless underscored by a history of tenacity, a desire for justice, and plenty of "grit and resilience."

Flint is a city that has been left behind—but those who make up its community are determined to stay strong and fight for one another. The "grit and resilience" Mona writes about take the form of communal action, political resistance, and grassroots activism. The residents of Flint have learned over the course of decades of struggle that if they don't stand up for themselves, no one will.

When former Gateway businessman Rick Snyder was elected governor in 2010, he campaigned as a moderate who would run the state like a well-oiled machine. But the reactionary Tea Party faction of the Republican party pushed Snyder farther right, and Snyder passed laws that would allow him to appoint emergency managers and essentially take over financially insecure municipalities with ease. The austerity that the EMs were directed to put in place led to measures like the water switch in Flint. The rotating EMs in Flint cared little for how to make the city actually function and thrive—their only directive was to cut costs no matter what.

This passage underscores the intensity of the struggle Flint has faced for decades. Flint's residents have been underrepresented in their government, because the people who are supposed to advocate for their needs have decided that Flint isn't a place worth investing time or money into. Racism and corruption threaten to shape Flint's future, just as they have in large part defined its past—so its citizens are often forced to look out for their own communities rather than rely on those in charge to protect their best interest.

CHAPTER 10: JENNY + THE DATA

As Mona despaired about her inability to get in touch with county officials, Elin got to work behind the scenes, rallying support among her contacts in Washington and getting in touch with Flint's representative in Congress, Dan Kildee. Soon, Kildee's legislative director, Jordan Dickinson, called Mona and asked her what it was that she needed. She asked for help from Kildee's office collecting county and state blood-lead levels for all of Flint. Jordan agreed to help.

Finally, with the positive response from Kildee's office, Mona had someone interested, enthusiastic, and powerful on her side. Mona began to realize that there were people, after all, who cared about Flint and who were committed to securing justice for its people.

Marc Edwards and his team continued their research in the meantime, releasing results online that indicated just how serious the problem in Flint really was. Almost half of the water samples they collected from homes in and around Flint showed dangerous levels of lead. Mona and Elin, horrified, texted about how egregious Flint officials' decision to ignore these reports was. When Marc announced online that he was coming to a town meeting in Flint on September 15th, Mona and Elin decided that they needed to meet him. Elin warned Mona that Marc had a "radioactive" reputation in Washington, but Mona was determined.

Mona had been, up to this point, going through the right channels—and largely getting nowhere, with the exception of the support she received from Dean Dean and Dan Kildee's office. But Marc Edwards—a "radioactive" yet effective rogue researcher—was making waves with his independent work. Even though Elin was worried that Mona's potential association with Marc would make it even harder for Mona to get through to the officials with the power to make change in Flint, it was clear to Mona that action—not propriety—was what the citizens of Flint really needed.

Meanwhile, Mona turned her attention to the blood-lead data she could get from her own clinic. The head of research at the hospital put her in touch with one of the hospital's research coordinators, Jenny LaChance, and Mona found that the two of them were a good team. With Jenny's support and data behind her, Mona decided to call a meeting on the morning of September 9th to speak with her Community Pediatrics residents and tell them that she believed the lead in the Flint tap water had made its way into their patients' bodies.

Mona continued to surround herself with people who were dedicated and unafraid. Mona knew that assembling a committed team and gathering a slew of unimpeachable facts was going to be the only way to get the government's attention, and she committed herself to doing whatever it took to help the citizens of Flint.

Mona cautioned her team that she needed to analyze the data before making a firm statement—but she asked them for their help in coming up with how they should best aggregate and examine the data. There was a lot of fine-tuning to do and a ton of data to gather from multiple zip codes. But what mattered was that Mona's residents were clearly passionate and engaged, determined to help her complete the essential studies. Mona knew then that her team's results could change the world. Ultimately, they decided to look at only children five and under, and to include all potential sources of lead in the study, like lead paint and bullet wounds.

Even though Mona was impassioned and motivated, she knew that she needed to warn her team to be cautious and rigorous. Their research was precious, and it had to be perfect—Mona knew that the government would look for any reason to discount their findings and continue on with business as usual, and she had to tread carefully.

After the meeting was over, Jenny hung back to talk with Mona. She was concerned that she was passing lead to her infant through her breast milk because she'd been drinking coffee and tea made with Flint tap water while at the hospital. Jenny was distressed—she calculated that she'd drunk tainted water throughout her entire pregnancy. Mona calmed Jenny, insisting that her son would be fine, since she wasn't guzzling tap water all day. But many young mothers in Flint—and their children—were.

This passage is another instance in which dramatic irony heightens the tension. Jenny, as a medical professional, was aware of what lead stood to do to her and her newborn child—but many Flint residents didn't have this knowledge, let alone the awareness that there was lead in every drop of water they drank. Jenny and Mona's horror at the silent epidemic of lead poisoning illustrates the urgency of their mission.

The next morning, Jenny already had some numbers ready for Mona to look at. The data was significant—and Mona's hypothesis was apparent in the numbers. There were more children with higher lead levels since the city switched the water supply. Mona and Jenny immediately began talking about gathering more test results and data points. There were fewer screenings being done all across Flint, but Mona needed those screenings to create a larger sample size. Jenny urged Mona to get more data from Hurley, which processed labs for the whole county. Mona knew they'd need institutional review board (or IRB) approval and she also knew such a process could take a long time—but Jenny got to work right away, hopeful that they could get approval within a week or two if they didn't give up.

With data that clearly showed that the switch in Flint's water source had had a direct impact on the blood-lead levels of Flint's vulnerable children, Mona and Jenny knew that they had an opportunity to shake their local and state governments out of inaction. But they were also aware of how dismissively those same governments might react to their research—and so they began taking careful steps to ensure that they were using the utmost caution while still delivering results for the people of Flint. Their neighbors needed help as quickly as it could come—but if Mona and Jenny rushed their research, they could squander their only chance to get important officials' attention.

Mona got word that Brad Wurfel, the mouthpiece for the MDEQ, was going after Marc Edwards and his research team in the press. Mona was agitated and angry about Wurfel's blasé approach to the very serious issue—but she knew that she and her team, at least, would be on the right side of history.

With the facts in hand, Mona was empowered by the knowledge that any attempts to discount the water crisis were nothing but desperate and despicable coverups.

CHAPTER 11: PUBLIC HEALTH ENEMY #1

In Flint, the name "Kettering" is famous—everyone knows the legend of Charles "Boss" Kettering, the head of GM's research department from 1920 to 1947. An engineer and inventor, Kettering founded the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York with Alfred Sloan, the president of GM. But in spite of his achievements and fame in Flint, Mona believes there is "no greater public health villain."

By diving deeper into Flint's history, the book provides a holistic view of how environmental injustice and corruption have shaped modern-day Flint. Through her book, Mona is seeking to overturn some of the biggest myths about the people American culture deems significant and revolutionary, exposing the truths about their legacies.

Lead is a powerful neurotoxin, but it's also a metal that humans have been using for thousands of years. The word "plumbing" is even derived from *plumbum*, the Latin word for lead, due to lead's ubiquity in the ancient world. The Romans used it to line aqueducts and to make wine and paint; they even sprinkled it like salt atop their food. Even though lead was known to be poisonous even then, it was hard to quantify its slow-burning effects on the human body—especially when its benefits as a building material *were* quantifiable.

Even though lead is powerful—and though the damage it does to the human body is irreversible—its effects are often so slow to appear that they aren't noticed. When they are, they're often attributed to other factors. Lead has, for a long time, been a useful building material—and because lead was so useful in the short-term, its long-term effects were ignored. This is a classic example of how industry, greed, and ignorance win out over facts, public health, and common sense.

Lead paint wasn't banned in the United States until 1922—but even after it was prohibited, lead was added to gasoline to stop engine knocking, an idea pioneered by none other than Kettering. Even though leaded gasoline was known to be a toxic nerve gas, it was marketed across the nation until 1924, when noxious fumes poisoned and killed workers in an oil refinery in New Jersey where the gas was being made.

This passage shows that while Kettering knew about the effects of lead, he still pushed it as a necessary solution to an annoying problem. People like Kettering were more concerned with money and fame than with public health—and the decisions these individuals made would have devastating effects for decades to come.

As the public health debate over leaded gasoline began to rage, Alice Hamilton—a social justice pioneer, medical doctor, and professor who specialized in lead toxicology cases—urged GM to stop using lead in their gasoline. She publicly warned people of the dangers, but even as the foremost American authority on lead poisoning, many called her pleas for change "hysterical."

Alice Hamilton was a female public health advocate who used her voice against a Flint institution and was ultimately deemed irrational and unworthy of attention. This is significant because Mona, who was familiar with Hamilton's story and looked to her as a hero, knew that as a woman she too might be cast aside and considered "hysterical" or untrustworthy. Sexism and corruption are powerful parallel forces in both Hamilton and Mona's stories.

GM's own in-house toxicologist, whose name was Dr. Robert Kehoe, extolled the benefits of leaded gasoline and claimed it was safe. At a conference called by the surgeon general in 1926, Kehoe said GM would discontinue leaded gasoline—if it could be proven harmful. This precedent would be used by the tobacco and asbestos industries throughout the 20th century to justify the continued production and dissemination of harmful products. "Safe until proven dangerous" became known as Kehoe's Paradigm. At the end of a seven-month-long study, the surgeon general's office couldn't quantify any visible damage in their subjects due to lead, and leaded gasoline remained on the market. By 1960, about 90 percent of all gasoline contained lead.

This passage illustrates how greed and corruption can have a major, long-lasting influence on public policy. This is an especially dangerous precedent when it comes to something like lead—just because people couldn't see lead's effects doesn't mean they weren't there. This passage also underscores the importance of the old adage Mona teaches her students: "The eyes can't see what the mind doesn't know." While it's tough to visualize and thus quantify the effects of lead, they're all too real. But because officials wouldn't listen to people like Alice Hamilton, policy was shaped around harmful and ignorant tenets like "safe until proven dangerous."

Over the course of the 20th century, lead poisoning began to be seen as a problem that affected only uneducated people living in "slums"—an inaccurate, racist assessment of a problem that today may be responsible for nearly 500,000 annual deaths in the U.S. alone, as well as 12.4 percent of the global burden of developmental disabilities and about 2 percent of the global burdens of heart disease and stroke. This, Mona writes, is Kettering's true legacy.

This passage encapsulates the central idea of environmental injustice. People living in low-income areas often have governments that are less invested in their success—and more quickly to blame them for their own problems rather than acknowledge the slow, systemic accumulation of environmental and public health issues due to policy failure and inequality. Because of Kettering's insistence on the safety of leaded gasoline, there's now lead in the soil all across America—but places with fewer resources to clean up their surroundings are, of course, disproportionately affected by environmental toxins. So while it might seem that environmental issues like lead poisoning only affect "slums," the reality is that disadvantaged areas are the proverbial canaries in the coal mine in many places throughout America.

The government began phasing out the use of lead in paint in 1970s. Lead was restricted in plumbing and leaded gasoline was taken off the market in the United States in the mid-1980s—but some Middle Eastern countries still use leaded gasoline, and lead is still allowed in airplane fuel. Environmentalists and public health officials have linked lead exposure to almost every kind of developmental and behavioral problem there is today, even correlating cities' "lead curve[s]" and "crime curve[s]." There has been a significant decrease in blood-lead levels throughout the last several decades—but the battle against lead, Mona writes, still hasn't been won.

Because lead poisoning affects brain development and often causes lowered IQs, behavioral disorders, and other cognitive and emotional delays, it often seems from the outside like cities with high crime rates are inherently violent places. But in reality, the people in those communities have often been poisoned by policy and neglect. When it comes to neurotoxins like lead, it's no wonder that communities with histories of high exposure are suffering:

Lead paint is still a serious problem: particles of lead make their way into the air, and young children may eat lead paint chips, which taste sweet. Over the course of the last 150 years, there have been many instances of lead-contaminated water in major U.S. cities like Chicago, New York, and D.C. Even the legislation the U.S. government has in place as part of the Safe Drinking Water Act is inadequate. There are still between six and 10 million lead service lines in the country, many of them in low-income, minority-populated urban areas. Moreover, the SDWA still allows for a minimal "safe" level of lead in U.S. drinking water, when, in truth, no level of lead is safe.

This passage further underscores how neglectful policy affects America's most vulnerable communities. Cities whose budgets don't allow for an overhaul of outdated, toxic lead infrastructure are left to fend for themselves. Meanwhile, U.S. legislation ultimately protects those in power from facing consequences for ignoring these communities rather than adequately protecting people from one of the most toxic substances known to man.

While Mona and her colleagues are well-educated in how to treat children who have ingested lead paint chips, their education barely covers the possibility of lead in a drinking water supply. This fact reminds Mona of a familiar D.H. Lawrence quote: "The eyes don't see what the mind doesn't know." For many of Mona's patients who are affected by lead poisoning at a young age—be it through paint chips, water, or bullet wounds—"life isn't long enough to recover from [such] a childhood."

One of the most profound barriers to change is a lack of awareness. This makes Mona's fascination with the D.H. Lawrence quote all the more poignant: people all across America can't understand what's happening in communities like Flint if they don't have any context about its history, or the larger history of lead usage in the U.S. But there's not enough time to slowly educate people about all of these factors, wait for them to make the connections, and wait some more for them to decide to take action. People like Flint's residents need change now.

CHAPTER 12: WHAT FIELD ARE YOU ON?

Even though Elin thought it was risky for Mona to reach out to the "radioactive" Marc Edwards, Mona knew she was onto something—and that she had to start laying the groundwork and finding allies for the fight ahead. Elin emailed Marc on Mona's behalf, and Marc wrote Elin back almost right away, offering advice about where Mona's studies should focus their data. Excited, Mona emailed Marc back and, knowing he'd be in Flint the following week, invited him to lunch. Marc agreed to meet up and compare notes.

Mona's choice to connect with Marc Edwards in spite of his "radioactive" reputation as a whistleblower shows how desperate she was to find a swift answer for the people of Flint. Mona knew that she had to tread carefully with her own research—but her alliance with Marc shows that she was ultimately less concerned about appearances than she was about action.

Meanwhile, Mona and Jenny continued working diligently on their research. Mona knew that their work had to be airtight—there could be nothing suspect about any of it. On top of all this, the study had to be done quickly: real lives were at stake. One afternoon, when Mona was attending her children's soccer game on a field near Elin's new house, Elin came by to watch. Mona showed Elin a printout of her research. Elin looked at the data and was too stunned to speak. When she could finally find the words, she agreed with Mona: the children of Flint were being poisoned, and state officials were letting it happen.

This passage illustrates the difficult position Mona found herself in as her preliminary research trickled in. She couldn't reveal too much too soon, because she knew that if there were any gaps in her work at all she'd be immediately discredited by the government institutions looking to paper over their own misdeeds. But she also knew that there was an urgency behind her work: the children of Flint were being exposed to lead each and every day that no one spoke out or took any action.

That evening, Mona emailed Melany Gavulic, her boss and the CEO of Hurley, to try to gauge Melany's support for the research project. Mona knew she might have a political battle ahead of her. She knew that her and Jenny's research could be ready as soon as the following week, and that the situation could "explode" after that. Melany requested a meeting with Mona and Jenny the following day, during which she underscored the importance of keeping their findings quiet until everyone was sure that they were "unassailable."

Mona's boss, too, knew the delicate nature of the research Mona and Jenny were doing. But she wasn't daunted or offput by their project—instead, she wanted to help them speak up on behalf of their patients and communities.

Back in her office, the anxious and sleep-deprived Mona called a friend and colleague, Lawrence Reynolds, the CEO of a nearby medical facility where many Flint kids were treated. She told Reynolds—a local Black doctor and community activist—about the problems with the water and her struggles getting any blood-lead data from the county or state. Within an hour, Reynolds emailed Mona, stating that he, too, was now working on getting in touch with the state. Mona had yet another ally in Flint.

Mona continued adding to her team allies whom she knew would have a serious stake in what was happening in Flint. Reynolds understood intimately how racism and environmental injustice had impacted the city—and he, too, was a medical professional who would realize the delicate balance that needed to be struck going forward in order to bring real change to Flint.

That afternoon, Mona struggled to listen to one of her residents' lectures as part of a weekly Friday conference series. During a break in the lecture, one of Mona's students, Allison Schnepp, approached her to ask her if she was all right. Mona realized that the toll her work was taking on her was starting to become visible to those around her. She needed to be strong for her impressionable, empathetic residents.

This passage illustrates the emotional toll Mona's work was beginning to take on her. She was under a tremendous amount of pressure, and not just because she knew that with every passing moment the citizens of Flint were consuming contaminated water—she was beginning to reckon anew with the structural racism and environmental injustices that defined life for so many in Flint.

CHAPTER 13: THE MAN IN THE PANDA TIE

The following Tuesday, Mona walked into Jenny's office to check on the status of their application to the institutional review board, or IRB. She found Jenny watching a broadcast of Marc Edwards in front of Flint City Hall, explaining that Flint's water was 19 times as corrosive as Detroit's. Mona was due to have lunch with Marc later that day; her mother, Bebe, was in town to help look after the girls. Bebe, like Mona's coworkers, was beginning to sense that Mona was under a lot of pressure, and that she was losing weight due to stress. Mona didn't want to share what was going on with her mother, though, afraid of worrying Bebe.

Mona didn't just have to strike a careful balance between doing her research as thoroughly as possible while getting it out as fast as possible—she also had to strike a balance between the rage she and other public health activists felt, and the need to remain strong for her family. Just as she drew strength from her family, Mona knew they drew strength from her, too.

Elin came by Hurley to pick Mona up for their lunch with Marc—Dean Dean was meeting them, too. At the restaurant, Mona began sharing some of her latest data with Elin and Dean. Soon, Marc arrived. Mona knew that Marc and Dean knew each other from a heated water issue in Lansing several years ago, but the weary and eccentric Marc showed no signs of recognizing Dean. Mona could tell that Marc was laser-focused on the situation in Flint.

Mona's initial impression of Marc confirmed that he was difficult to read—but intensely passionate about bringing change to Flint. Mona sensed that Marc's focus meant he would be a good ally for her to have. She needed people who were willing to stand up for the Flint community in the absence of real leadership.

Over lunch, Marc warned Mona that they had a long road ahead of them. Flint had definitely been gaming the system, taking shortcuts, and ignoring the sampling that needed to be done before and after the water switch. But still, the EPA wasn't taking over from MDEQ, and Marc suggested that the two agencies were actually working together to bury the problem. As Marc spoke about the pressing need to switch back to Detroit water, hardly anyone present at the lunch was able to enjoy their food.

This passage illustrates that the coverup going on in Flint wasn't just a local issue—other government agencies were stepping in, too, to keep the truth about Flint under wraps. This fact no doubt intimidated Mona—but it also proved to be galvanizing. No one in power was going to admit what was happening in Flint unless someone—or a group of people—forced their hand.

Mona could tell that Marc was a person with a clear moral compass, and that he would be a great ally to her throughout this fight. When Mona asked Marc—hypothetically, to avoid showing him her still-in-progress research—if it would make a difference if the data showed an increase in blood-lead levels after the switch, Marc told her such a scenario would be a "game changer." As the lunch went on and the group discussed how to get ready-to-feed formula to Flint families with newborns to care for, Mona felt grateful to have a "new friend."

Mona could sense that Marc was as dedicated to seeing through the fight ahead as she was. Marc's knowledge of the "game" afoot made him indispensable to Mona—but his passion and good faith made him more akin to a true "friend" than a mere ally in a political fight.

Mona tried to reach out to the Genesee County Health Department's Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, which provides mothers with nutritional support, to see if they could pioneer a ready-to-feed formula initiative. But even with the news about possible lead in the water, the program officials wrote back that they didn't have the resources for something like that. Elin followed up with Kildee's office, but the USDA couldn't do anything to help, either, unless a health advisory or official emergency was announced. But a bit of good news came when Melany wrote back to Mona's email about her lunch meeting with Marc stating that she wanted Hurley to be "part of the solution" to Flint's crisis.

This passage shows that Mona and her team's struggle would be a constant push-and-pull between progress and inertia. Even though they faced difficulties getting initiatives for the people of Flint off the ground due to bureaucracy, there were more and more people joining the fight. For every doubt, there was hope—and hope was what they needed to pull their community together and fight for the truth.

The next morning, after a night staying up late to look at new resident applications, Mona and Jenny got news that their IRB application had been approved. Mona had been getting used to hearing "no" so often that she was shocked and heartened to finally get such a big "yes."

Again, this passage shows that Mona and Jenny would find themselves navigating a series of ups and downs as they pushed forward in the fight for Flint.

CHAPTER 14: ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

Now that they had institutional review board approval, Mona and Jenny could access the blood-lead levels obtained by other doctors and clinics in Flint, as long as the labs had been processed at Hurley. Within a few minutes of submitting a data request for those numbers, they received a full data set—their sample size leapt from 350 to almost 2,000. After quickly examining the data, Mona sent a note to her team urging them to recommend breastfeeding to new mothers and to suggest those feeding their babies formula use only bottled water to mix it. Mona knew that there was still a lot standing between her and a public health advisory and she wondered—not for the first time—if that advisory was so slow in arriving because the people being affected were poor, Black, and living in a city that had been left behind.

With lots of new data, Mona was able to see very clearly that there was an irrefutable connection between the water switch and rising blood-lead levels in Flint's children. Mona's hypothesis had been validated—but rather than rest on her laurels, she sprung right into action, knowing that she had a duty to start speaking out about the risks associated with the water in Flint so that her community would be aware of what was happening. Mona was aware that the government was careless about Flint because they could afford to be—they believed that those affected by the water crisis didn't matter because they weren't as politically powerful as wealthier white citizens.

That afternoon, Mona had a meeting with Kirk Smith, the CEO of the Greater Flint Health Coalition (GFHC), about a community-based children's healthcare initiative. After the meeting, Mona warned Kirk that the water situation and the blood-lead levels of Flint's children were both very bad. She told him that she'd gotten nowhere with the county or the state, but that Marc Edwards was also conducting his own research—and his results were bad, too. Kirk, Mona, and several others in attendance began brainstorming about the fastest way to get a public health advisory announced. Mona felt less alone than ever before.

More and more people continued to show Mona that they were ready to do whatever they could to make sure that Flint's residents would get the resources they deserved—and quickly. While the government was still largely silent, public health officials all over the area were beginning to understand the need for immediate action.

That night, at a board meeting of the Michigan chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (MIAAP), the topic of conversation was vaccination rates in the state—but Mona's mind was still on lead. When the meeting concluded and the executive director asked if anyone in attendance had anything to share, Mona blurted out that there was a lead problem in Flint. She briefly explained the history of the water issue and her research at Hurley—but didn't share any numbers or data just yet. The executive director asked Mona to raise the subject on the next day of the conference.

Mona's decision to speak out at a conference of her peers illustrates her mounting confidence in her fight for Flint. Initially, the government's pointed disinterest made Mona feel like the water crisis might be impossible to call attention to, let alone fix—but as more and more people joined Mona's cause, it's clear that her confidence began to mount. With enough people on her side, Mona could really make some noise about what was going on in Flint.

Throughout the next day of lectures, Mona texted with Jenny about how they should interpret the influx of data available to them after their IRB approval. They consulted with Marc about their study design, and Marc urged them to use the same months of each year in the data set—water-lead levels are affected by heat and seasons. After Jenny remedied the data set based on Marc's advice, Mona forwarded the data to him. Marc replied immediately that he was "ashamed for his profession."

Even though Mona was bringing more people on board, she was still exhibiting a lot of caution when it came to making sure her research was perfect. People like Marc and Mona—people who disrupt the status quo—have to be aware of what effect their whistleblowing will have, and of how to head off the blowback that will surely come their way.

Between lectures, Mona's colleague Dr. Reynolds pulled her into the hall so they could take a call with the Flint state senator, Jim Ananich. On the phone, Ananich told Mona that his office had been prodding the state for information about the water for a long time, but hadn't got anywhere. When Mona told him how bad things really were, he asked Mona what he and his wife should be feeding their adopted newborn. Mona urged him to feed the baby ready-made formula, or to mix formula with bottled water only.

More support from an official in Michigan's state government was important—especially given how few people in local or state organizations were even responding to Mona's requests for help,

After the phone call was over, Mona and Dr. Reynolds discussed the painful problem of environmental injustice. Already, kids in Flint—like kids in Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, and Philadelphia—generally had higher rates of lead exposure just from paint and particles. Now, they had water to contend with too—and no one was helping Flint's poor, predominantly non-white community.

While Mona and Dr. Reynolds could see and quantify the facts of environmental racism, they knew that the very people they'd have to appeal to in order to start mitigating the effects of environmental injustice wouldn't be so eager to identify the connection between Flint's racist past and its beleaguered present.

CHAPTER 15: POISONED BY POLICY

Mona knew that what she and her team needed to do next was to get a health advisory issued in order to alert the public. Kirk Smith reached out to the director of public works in Flint, Howard Croft—but Croft assured him that the water was fine. Mona and Kirk knew he was lying, or that he'd bought someone else's lies. But soon, an email from the mayor, Dayne Walling, reached Kirk—Walling wanted to talk. Mona was relieved that someone was listening, even if the person really in charge of Flint was its city manager, Natasha Henderson. Mona had just two days to make a presentation for the mayor's office to convince them that a health advisory was necessary.

After weeks of inaction, a sudden influx of attention from local government officials started to pour in for Mona and her team. This was a situation that had to be handled delicately. Mona would have to present her research to these local officials in order to get a public health advisory issued—but she knew that just because she presented them with the facts didn't necessarily mean they would listen.

The weekend of September 19th, Mona's brother Mark was in town for a law school reunion. Like Mona, Mark (a public interest lawyer) was always fighting for the underdog. Though Mona was busy with the conference that weekend, she was able to make time to visit with Mark and his children—and to update Mark on the situation with the Flint water. Mark, a politically astute activist, warned Mona that the mayor—who was up for reelection—might not be motivated to admit there was something wrong. Mark also warned Mona that she would soon be seen as a whistleblower. She'd definitely face pushback, and possibly even graver retaliatory measures from the county and the state.

In this passage, Mark's advice reveals the dark side of any struggle for social justice and meaningful change. Mona's brother Mark knew that the government of Flint would not be so readily willing to admit that there was a crisis—and they'd be especially less motivated to connect the crisis to the city's history of racial injustice. Even though Mona's movement had been gathering support, Mark didn't want her to forget about the consequences of exposing corruption.

Mona was already stressed, but the idea that things could get worse for her personally and professionally didn't faze her—her mind was only on the children of Flint and their well-being. Mark and Mona kept their conversation quiet, hoping not to worry Bebe. But as Mark's words sunk in, Mona began feeling worried—she didn't want to bring aeb (Arabic for "shame") onto her family. But even as Mona's anxiety mounted over the course of their conversation, Mark encouraged her to remain strong in her resolve—he told Mona that she already knew what it was she had to do.

Even though Mark was warning Mona of some potential adversities ahead, he was still encouraging her to press forward with her work. This illustrates that Mona's entire family supported the values she believed in—and that because of this, she could turn to them in times of crisis for validation and strength.

CHAPTER 16: SHORTWAVE RADIO CRACKLING

During the weekend of Mark's visit, Mona's father, Jidu, was still in China, consulting with an auto parts manufacturer. A curious, dedicated researcher with a profound interest in his family's history, Jidu was able to track his family's roots back over 300 years. Jidu's research revealed that his family were descendants of a Nestorian priest named Israel Raba, who was born in 1541.

By providing some historical context about her family's background, Mona uses this section of the book to illustrate how helpful it is to be able to draw on her family's traditions and values for strength and motivation. Mona's family's hunger for the truth—and their values of openness and solidarity—go back many generations.

Jidu also revealed their family's connections to Paul Shekwana, and to one of Bebe's uncles, Nuri Rufail Koutani, a revolutionary in the 1930s who studied in America before returning to Iraq, where he became a radical organizer who used the pseudonym Anwar. Nuri founded the Association Against Imperialism and Fascism in 1935, a leftist organization that was a starting point for the Iraqi independence movement. Nuri's political activities sent him into hiding with his brother Haji's family—he fled to Paris in 1937, where he continued fighting fascism with the International Brigades. Mona has always been drawn to Nuri's story because of his bravery and his dedication to a progressive cause that transcended borders.

In this passage, Mona highlights even more of her family's erstwhile heroes. By focusing on Nuri's story—a story marked by radical politics, resistance against wrongdoing, and finding support in one's family and community—Mona illustrates how her family's legacy shaped her into the person she became as an adult. Mona's family lore always concerned fighting for what was right—and so Mona carried on that mission in her own life.

Jidu's research revealed that his own father, Dawood Hanna, had met Nuri when Nuri was rounded up with leftists and dissidents in 1956 and transported by train to a prison fortress. Dawood, the railway station manager, risked his life to seek out Nuri and offer him words of comfort. Nuri survived imprisonment and was freed two years later.

This passage further illustrates how Mona's family's legacy has always been one of radical risk-taking and empathetic solidarity.

Jidu's childhood was marred by the decline of his homeland—anarchy and revolution defined his youth, and while a brief window of peace visited Iraq in the 1960s, fundamentalism soon reared its head once again. After Dawood was imprisoned during the Ba'ath revolution, Jidu traveled to Yugoslavia to study at the University of Zagreb. On a trip home, he met Mona's mother, and they moved to England so that Jidu could finish his education. But when it was time to return to Iraq, the situation there was so bad that they moved to Michigan instead.

Because Mona's parents were effectively displaced from their homeland, perhaps, their reliance on family stories and traditions became all the more important. This section of the book is significant because it illustrates the reasons why Mona's family have clung so tightly to their past: they didn't want to leave their amazing stories and traditions behind.

As Saddam Hussein's regime took over Iraq, Mona's parents knew the homeland they loved was disappearing forever. Both Mona's parents were furious with how Saddam's "anti-communist zeal blinded Europe and the United States to his true nature." Jidu became outspoken and active in the States as he wrote anti-regime newsletters and distributed them throughout his community in Michigan (and sent more copies to Iraqis abroad). Mona remembers that when she was growing up, her father was always stressed, upset, and traumatized. She remembers Jidu showing her pictures of the genocide of Halabja in Kurdistan when she was very young.

In this passage, Mona interrogates her family's complex relationship with life in America. On the one hand, her parent were furious with how the U.S. turned a blind eye to many of Saddam Hussein's most terrible deeds because they valued him as an ally against communism. On the other hand, her parents were trying to carve out a place for themselves in a new country. They were working to participate in the American Dream, but their hearts and minds were back in Iraq, where terrible things were taking place. Mona's parents couldn't help their communities back in Iraq, which perhaps caused them to double down on the belief that the community actions one could take were all the more important.

From then on, Mona learned what it meant to challenge injustice and to stand up for the weak and vulnerable. Now, Mona and Elliott make sure to remind their daughters that empathy, service, and a sense of justice are important. They tell their children their family's stories, so that the girls always know the rich history of resistance and activism from which they come.

This passage shows that Mona and her husband have made a concerted effort to pass on the family values that have made them who they are. They want their daughters to grow up valuing truth, solidarity, and history.

CHAPTER 17: MEETING THE MAYOR

Mona had high expectations for her meeting with the mayor—she assumed that after she showed him her study results, he'd rush to release a health advisory that would urge Flint's citizens to stop drinking their tap water. She worried that because Walling had overseen the switch, he might be reticent to admit his own fault in the crisis—but she was also buoyed by the fact that he was a Democrat, and she hoped he held the same progressive values and desire to confront the state that she did.

Mona had been so horrified by the news about the water crisis for so long that she had no doubt that anyone hearing about it—especially someone in charge of caring for Flint's citizens—would feel the same call to action that she did. But Mona didn't account for the ways in which corruption and concealment often take precedence over the truth.

In the conference room where the meeting was to take place, Mona sat at the head of the table. The mayor, Dayne Walling, greeted her warmly. But across the table, Natasha Henderson (the Flint city manager) and Howard Croft (the head of the public works department) were icy and distant. As meeting attendees filed into their seat, Mona felt bolstered by the presence of a number of colleagues and fellow physicians—including Jenny.

This passage shows that while Mona was excited for the meeting, she was up against some skeptics who had a vested interest in keeping the water crisis covered up. This scene suggests that despite all of Mona's hard work and preparation, she still had a long fight ahead.

After some introductions, Mona began giving her presentation on the lead exposure in Flint, and how it was a failure of primary prevention measures. To bring the data in her presentation to life, Mona created a composite character based on many of her real-life patients: an infant named Makayla. Mona used the story of "Makayla" to explain how healthy-seeming infants and children can still be tormented slowly by lead's insidious neurotoxic properties. Mona explained the real risks—biological and social—associated with prolonged lead exposure. She looked around the room and noticed that many of the meeting's attendees looked "shaken."

In this passage, the book shows how Mona attempted to appeal to the emotions of the group of officials before her in order to force them to take action on the water crisis. And her emotional angle seemed to have worked—by putting a face on the water crisis and showing how children are especially vulnerable to lead poisoning, Mona was reminding these officials of what was really at stake.

Mona ended her presentation with a list of directives for the city and county's next moves, then she showed one more picture of the little girl she called Makayla. She warned her listeners that inaction would mean pain and suffering for an entire generation of Flint residents. Walling spoke, thanking Mona for bringing Flint's very real problem to light. Then Dr. Reynolds spoke, urging the city officials in attendance to take immediate action.

This passage seems to suggest that Mona's presentation was a success, and that Flint's city officials would finally start listening to doctors, parents, and Black residents of Flint and working together with them to find a solution.

Mona was surprised when the mayor spoke up again to say that a meeting with the EPA and MDEQ suggested that there wasn't a corrosion issue, but simply a problem with many residents' homes having old pipes. Mona was shocked and disturbed. One by one, the city officials in attendance began suggesting that the flushing measures already in place were enough. Natasha Henderson spoke up and reiterated that the water was fine, and that there was no chance of switching back to the Detroit pipeline.

This passage represents a swift turnaround—even though the people in attendance at Mona's presentation had visible emotional reactions, others were determined to hold the line and refuse to admit that anything was wrong. This illustrates the deep, widespread corruption within the Flint local government, as well as their lack of empathy for the low-income and Black residents of Flint.

Sensing the city officials' reticence to act, Mona essentially delivered an ultimatum. Addressing the mayor directly, she told Walling that if his office did not make an announcement that there was a lead crisis in Flint, she and her team would hold a press conference and do so themselves. She said if she didn't hear from the mayor's office by Wednesday at noon, she'd go forward with her own statement. The mayor said Wednesday might be difficult for him—he was scheduled to go to D.C. to meet with the pope. Mona underscored how urgent the situation was, and the mayor promised to be in touch.

This passage shows that even the mayor of Flint was largely disinterested in finding immediate solutions to the issues affecting the community he was charged with taking care of and looking out for. When officials like Walling abandoned their duties to their community, it was up to Mona and her team to take care of their community on their own.

As soon as the meeting was over, Mona and her colleagues began hatching a plan. They realized they couldn't count on the mayor—he was mayor in name only, and it was clear that the power belonged with other city officials, none of whom seemed motivated to face the crisis. But Senator Ananich was on Mona's side, and Mona struggled not to blame herself for failing to capture more city officials' attentions.

Even though it was clear that the mayor didn't see Flint as a priority, there were deeper issues at play. The mayor knew that he didn't have any real power—Flint's future was in the hands of its emergency manager. In this failure of government, an individual who was charged with making decisions based on austerity and cutting costs was deciding the futures of thousands of vulnerable, poor, marginalized Flint residents.

Marc Edwards, meanwhile, had been hard at work writing the mayor, the health department, the governor's office, and more, as well as sending in Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to obtain state and EPA email records in hopes of finding some answers about what was really going on. But his work was slow-moving. On a phone call with Marc, Mona blasted the Republicans in control of Michigan, but Marc retorted that he himself was a Republican. Mona was forced to consider the idea that no political party had a "monopoly" on care and action—and that regardless of his political affiliation, Marc was on her side.

This passage shows that Mona was learning many lessons about the people on her team and the politics of care. Marc was different from her in many ways—but his passion for helping the people of Flint and uncovering the truth was undeniable.

As Tuesday went by, Mona still hadn't heard anything from the mayor's office. She gave yet another presentation to a county medical society group and found that it was much easier to convince a group of doctors of what her research said about the situation in Flint. At the end of the meeting, the doctors passed a resolution pledging their support for Mona and her team—the city and state might be behind schedule, but at least Mona had a group of colleagues at her side.

This passage shows, once again, how when the officials elected or appointed to care for a community abandon that community's needs, it's up to everyday citizens to step up and commit to a fight for justice.

Andy Leavitt, Ananich's chief of staff, contacted *The Washington Post* about their developing story, knowing that a report from a national newspaper would make it difficult for the state to discredit Mona's work. Marc Edwards also sent the story to a local newspaper, *The Flint Journal*. Mona was concerned about a sudden flood of press—but with the mayor still refusing to back Mona's team, she knew that she had to do all she could to rally support from other sources.

Mona's team knew that the fight ahead of them was about to get ugly—and that they needed to rally all the supporters they could to ready themselves against the state's inaction (and a potential attack in the press). Mona's team was prepared for the worst—for Flint's government to continue denying that there was a problem at all.

On Wednesday morning—the deadline Mona had given the mayor—Mona took Bebe to the hospital for a minor eye surgery. After the procedure, Mona brought Bebe home and got her into bed. Bebe asked Mona what was going on. Mona didn't give her mother any specifics, but she explained that she was doing "the kind of thing [Bebe] taught [her] to do." Mona looked at her phone and noticed that it was noon—the deadline had passed, and there was still no word from Walling.

This passage shows that Mona continued to draw strength from her family in the darkest moments of her fight for Flint. Even though the mayor's deadline had passed—and with it had come the crushing realization that the government was not going to stand behind her—Mona had an important revelation in this moment: she was working every day to uphold her family's values and fight for her community.

CHAPTER 18: AEB

A representative from Ananich's press office called Mayor Walling to confirm that he was aware the deadline had passed. In response, the mayor's office declared that Mona and her team would receive no support or cooperation from them. So, Mona and her team pressed on. The Hurley press office helped Mona put together a press conference while other members of Mona's team gathered support from the professional health and medical worlds. Kildee and Ananich's offices were behind them, as were Marc Edwards and some of his "EPA buddies," such as Miguel Del Toral.

Without the support of their government behind them, Mona and her team pressed on for the sake of their community. They knew that if they didn't bravely bring the truth to light, the government would continue engaging in its massive coverup—and that thousands of lives would be affected by the slow burn of lead poisoning.

On Wednesday night, Mona struggled to calm her nerves—her press conference was in the morning, and she was abuzz with emotion. She was excited and nervous, but there was also a deeper worry "eating away at" her. Aeb, an Arabic term that loosely translates to the imprecise word "shame," denotes the idea that no one is ever acting independently of their family or community. *Aeb* is a reminder that one's actions always reflect back on those one is closest to. Though Mona has never liked the "debilitating and ugly concept" of *aeb*, she knew that to get the press conference wrong and embarrass her family, her colleagues, and her clinic would be "the most colossal *aeb* of all."

In this passage, Mona introduces the concept of aeb. *Though aeb seems like a frightening concept at first, the idea that one is always acting because of and within a family or community can also be seen as an empowering one. After all, Mona wasn't acting alone—her actions* were *a result of her upbringing, and they* were *a reflection of her values. Mona had told herself before that she was on the right side of history—so even though doubt was creeping in, she was trying to stay strong to bring honor and pride to her family.*

As Mona fought to fall asleep, she looked back on her childhood: her parents used to send out yearly Christmas cards, newsletter-style, to their friends and family members near and far. The letters combined Mona and Mark's personal accomplishments at school and in their community with notes from Jidu and Bebe about how it felt to watch the Iraqi people struggle from afar. The normally quiet and restrained Jidu wrote each year about the situation in Iraq with great intimacy and emotion.

When Mona was a young girl, she had to watch her parents suffer and mourn their homeland—she couldn't do anything to help them. But now, she had the chance to draw on their sorrow over human rights injustices—and their faith in the power of sharing the truth—and do something to actually help people in her community.

With the press conference looming, Mona was at last able to look back on these memories and realize that her parents' journey through loss, displacement, and longing was what had given her a desire to fight for the right thing. Leaders, Mona learned at a young age, must be held accountable; it is up to everyday people to stand up for what is right in their communities. Mona knew that her whole self was in the fight. She was drawing on the tenacity and optimism not just of her family, but of her heroes: Alice Hamilton, Nuri, John Snow, and Paul Shekwana.

In this passage, Mona finally takes a look back at the road that has brought her to this point. She realizes that she's been drawing on a desire to embody her parents' values, to fight for her community, and to stand tall alongside her greatest heroes and other public health activists.

Mona rose in the middle of the night to email Jenny about redoing one of the graphs in the presentation—Mona wanted everything to be perfect. She knew she needed to capture and keep her audience's attention, so she called Hurley and asked a nurse on the night shift to put a can of powdered formula in her office. Then she texted Allison, who had a newborn baby, and asked if Allison could bring a bottle to the hospital in the morning.

After drawing strength from her memories of her parents and her favorite stories about her ancestors and heroes, Mona felt revitalized and renewed. She was ready to throw herself into her mission with a new fierceness—regardless of whether or not the government would stand behind her.

CHAPTER 19: THE PRESS CONFERENCE

In the morning, Hurley and *The Flint Journal* both released stories announcing that Mona was giving a press conference that afternoon. When the governor's office got wind of what was happening, they called Hurley and demanded to see Mona's data. Mona was outraged—for weeks she'd been reaching out, time and time again, to state and local officials for help, and they'd ignored her every step of the way. Angry calls poured in from different offices, but Mona's boss, Melany, told her not to worry.

No one in the government wanted to help Mona when she actually needed their attention and aid. But now that she was about to reveal their complicity and corruption in the horrific water crisis, they wanted to be a part of the narrative so that they could control it. They didn't have a real interest in helping their community—they just didn't want to get called out for their negligence.

Mona arrived at the clinic early to meet with Ron Fonger, a journalist from *The Flint Journal*. Fonger had written lots of articles about the Flint water crisis over the course of the last year—he promised to support Mona by reporting on her press conference after she'd delivered it. Allison came by to deliver the baby bottle Mona had requested, and then Mona went to work sharpening up her presentation. When it was nearly time to leave, she filled Allison's baby bottle with water from the bathroom sink. The water looked fine—but that was what Mona wanted. She wanted to make a point about "what the eyes don't see."

Even though Mona was angered and frustrated by the local government's response, this passage shows that she still had the full strength of her allies and supporters behind her. Mona was going to have the chance to make a real impression not just on people in Flint, but on the entire country. By deciding to bring her press conference back to the concept of "what the eyes don't see," Mona illustrated her dedication to the holistic methods she'd used her whole career—methods rooted in anti-racism and social and environmental justice.

A few floors down in the Hurley conference room, Mona queued up her presentation before a crowd of forty or fifty people. One of Mona's team members informed her that Mark Valacak, the head of the county health department, was planning to attend. Mona was glad that an ally was on the way, especially when she spotted some doubters from the public works office in the audience. People kept pouring in until about a hundred reporters, photographers, hospital employees, activists, and members of Mona's team filled the room.

The constant push and pull between ally and adversary and truth and corruption defined much of Mona's journey to her landmark press conference. In the room where she was about to deliver her groundbreaking research, she found herself surrounded by all kinds of dualities. She was committing herself to standing on the right side of history, no matter the consequences.

Mona made her way to the podium, and her tireless team joined her at the front of the room. For about 40 minutes, she delivered her presentation, in awe of the silence and focus in the room. Mona reused the story of "Makayla" for this presentation. She held up Allison's baby's bottle, as well. Even though the water in it looked clear, she explained, it was effectively poison. In showing her audience the bottle, Mona was hoping to underscore the human angle and open her audience's eyes to the real costs of what was going on in Flint.

Mona had sensed that the mayor and other government officials had been genuinely moved by the human angle of her previous presentation—even though they didn't take action to support her. By doubling down on this angle, Mona sought to remind people all over the country of the very real suffering that was beginning to take root in Flint's most vulnerable populations.

When it was time to answer questions, the media went into a frenzy, lobbing rapid-fire questions at Mona and her team while also surrounding other major figures in the crowd, such as Valacak and Natasha Henderson. Mona scanned the crowd—the mayor was nowhere to be seen. As the press conference ended and Mona stepped away from the podium, she felt full of adrenaline and euphoria. Her team enthusiastically congratulated her on a job well done. But Mona knew deep down that this feeling might not last—she was certain that her press conference had awakened new enemies in Flint.

Mona's exhilaration in this passage doesn't obscure the reckoning she knew was coming. The water crisis in Flint happened due to a lethal combination of racism, corruption, and a failure of duty—and the government would go very far to obscure its role in the crisis.

CHAPTER 20: SPLICE AND DICE

The backlash began immediately. Even though the city announced its own press conference the following day, the state of Michigan began working right away to undermine and discredit Mona's findings. Brad Wurfel, the spokesman for the MDEQ, released a statement saying that everything in Flint was fine. He painted Mona as an "irresponsible" rogue researcher. While Mona and her team recognized the MDEQ and state health agency's attempts to "confuse, distort, and dismiss," Mona also worried about what the public would think of these state agencies' words.

This passage shows that even when the truth emerged, Michigan state officials continued walking the path of corruption and denying outright that there was any kind of problem. They smeared Mona and her team rather than admitting to any version of the truth. Corruption, the book suggests, is an insult to honest, hardworking citizens and a blight that must be stamped out with the truth.

After the press conference, Mona had just a few hours to get ready for Layla's back-to-school night. Mona knew that her daughters had noticed how distracted she'd been lately. While she understood their frustration with her, she couldn't focus on anything but Flint's water. On the way to school, Mona received a call from Andy and Senator Ananich, who told her that the MDHHS's press department was claiming that the Hurley data had been "spliced and diced." The accusation felt like a "public stoning"—the health department was actively trying to discredit her work.

Mona's struggle to balance her ongoing public work as a whistleblower and her domestic life as a wife and mother illustrates the very real demands of community action. Mona knew that her patients needed her most acutely—and yet with every step she took on their behalf, she faced retaliation that prevented her from giving what little energy she had left to her family.

Mona knew that she'd risked a lot by releasing her study without having it peer-reviewed, but she also knew that if she didn't release the numbers, it could have taken months or years before anyone took any action on the water crisis. As Mona walked into back-to-school night and sat at Layla's desk with the other parents, she felt her body shaking. She couldn't stop checking her phone: the media had found her, and the backlash was beginning. Mona felt herself feeling dark and full of doom: she had told the truth, and now it was possible that no one would listen.

Mona made a lot of difficult decisions in the run-up to her press conference—she was constantly torn between an allegiance to procedure and the urgent, unprecedented nature of the lead-water crisis. Mona knew the truth needed to get out as soon as possible—but by prioritizing speed, she'd left herself vulnerable to a very specific kind of attack from the authorities who were looking for any excuse to deflect blame and keep their corrupt activities concealed.

Mona left back-to-school night early, overwhelmed by the psychological stress of what had begun to happen. Even though her brother had warned her that this would happen, Mona still felt guilty and uncertain about whether she'd done the right thing in raising her voice after all. She didn't want to add more anxiety, uncertainty, and pain to her patients' and their parents' already stressed lives. That night, after Elliott arrived home from parent-teacher conferences, he comforted Mona by telling her she'd done the right thing and playfully reminding her that her favorite TV show, *Scandal*, was about to air. But Elliott's words couldn't reach Mona—she felt small, ridiculous, and unsure of all her hard work.

In this passage, the book shows how Mona was able to find strength and support in her family's words and actions even in her darkest moments. This passage is also quietly humorous, as Mona's husband attempts to distract her by encouraging her to watch Scandal*—a television show about a high-powered professional woman who works to expose political corruption at the highest levels of government, knowing the toll her actions might take on her personal life. Mona had the support of her family and the roadmaps of her heroes large and small, but even those things couldn't erase the fear she was feeling.*

CHAPTER 21: NUMBERS WAR

After sleeping soundly for several hours, Mona woke up suddenly in the middle of the night and went downstairs with her phone and her laptop. She felt something new stirring inside of her—her despair was being erased by a feeling of strength and surety. She had finally remembered that this fight was never about her: it was about the children of Flint, her beloved patients. The war of numbers and data she was fighting was about real people—real children who couldn't speak up for themselves. Mona realized that the negligent state experts were the incompetent ones, and she got to work on her "next move."

Even in the depths of her despair, Mona was able to find solace by turning to the stories of her very real, very vulnerable patients. This illustrates that for Mona, the work of exposing the water crisis was always about protecting her community and acting on behalf of those who couldn't speak up for themselves.

Bolstered by words of support from her mother and her husband, and once again confident in the worth of her data, Mona got to work looking at the state's counterattack. It consisted of a flimsy, basic tally sheet of the total numbers of children in Flint zip codes with elevated lead levels. The state's numbers were almost comically unscientific.

After drawing strength from her family's words, Mona was able to refocus the situation in her head and look at it clearly, rather than allowing herself to become distracted and overwhelmed by self-doubt.

Mona had a sudden flash of inspiration: she knew that if she and Jenny could find a way to use geographic information systems software (GIS) to clearly define the neighborhoods in the city where the water was piped in, their study would be airtight. She wanted to create maps of Flint, like John Snow created maps of his London neighborhood, to prove that the children in neighborhoods that received Flint water did indeed have higher blood-lead levels. Mona emailed a friend, Rick Sadler (a nutrition geographer at MSU), for help using the latest GIS software.

Mona looked to the stories of her heroes, too, to find the strength and resources to carry on with her fight. Just as John Snow took action on behalf of his community when no one else would step up to fight, Mona knew she had to innovate and get ahead in order to make real change in the city of Flint.

Even though the state showed no signs of backing down in the days that followed, the mayor's office did issue a "lead advisory" the Friday after Mona's press conference. Meanwhile, Rick's software helped Jenny and Mona create even more new findings using precise mapping technology. Now, they could pinpoint lead hotspots in certain neighborhoods. Two journalists from the *Detroit Free Press* lambasted the state for trying to discredit Mona and her team—and for being so inattentive for so long to the very real problems plaguing Flint.

As Mona and her team held fast to the truths they'd uncovered, small things began to change. The state wasn't admitting its role in the crisis—or even really acknowledging that there was one—but certain people and institutions, inspired by Mona's team's dedication, were starting to put pressure on the government to answer for its actions.

Meanwhile, Mona's team got to work trying to sort through the logistics of getting bottled water and filters to the families of Flint. Mona knew that there is no magical remedy or easy fix to lead contamination—the treatment is prevention. Even though early trauma and toxic stresses impact children's development, Mona knew that there were interventions known to mitigate the effects of toxic stress. It was time for the science of child development to "lead the way" in Flint's recovery. Mona and her team began making a list of demands on behalf of Flint's kids, who deserved all the help they could get and more.

There was still a long road ahead for the citizens of Flint. Decades of neglect and environmental racism needed to be addressed and remedied. But the fight didn't seem impossible to Mona—she felt empowered by the things she knew about Flint's history and its needs. She refused to waver in her sense of duty to her community.

Mona knew that she had an opportunity to make her case "loudly and clearly and scarily" again and again in the press. It wasn't the time for her to be calm and comforting, the way most doctors are—it was her job to expose just how bad things were in Flint, and exactly who was responsible for these "entirely preventable" tragedies. In daily interviews—sometimes more than one—Mona hammered home that there was no cure for lead poisoning. Even though the machinery of the state continued its work to discredit her, Mona remembered the legacy of Alice Hamilton and wore the state's insults like "badge[s] of honors."

By committing to airing the truth in an unabashed way, Mona was echoing her family's long legacy of action in the name of social justice. The power of the truth, Mona's family's legacy had taught her, was undeniable—and her public health heroes' stories had only embedded that narrative more deeply within her. Mona's commitment to being "loud" and "scary" when it came to the truth, she knew, was the only way to expose and fight corruption at the highest levels of government.

Mona and her team were horrified by the state's resistance to their research—but they remained dedicated to their own work and continued making a list of programs that could help Flint's kids: school health initiatives, early literacy programs, and funding for nutrition and transportation services. Mona and her team waited for someone at the state or county level to announce that they were sending in relief—but when none came, they realized that for the state to do so would be to admit blame.

This passage underscores the true casualties of corruption. Individuals suffer longer when corrupt organizations refuse to admit to any wrongdoing. By speaking the truth as loudly and frequently as she could, Mona was working to expedite aid for the people of Flint—but she knew that until the state folded, no help would arrive. Again, the state was prioritizing its own image over the vulnerable citizens of Flint.

For now, it was Mona and her team trying to figure out how to navigate a large-scale health crisis. In spite of all the work they had to do to get supplies to Flint families and establish prevention measures, Mona and her team never lost sight of their main goal: to get Flint's water source switched back to Detroit.

Mona and her team's commitment to their community illustrates the need for individuals to act in solidarity when the government institutions charged with caring for citizens abandon their duty.

CHAPTER 22: DEMONSTRATION OF PROOF

The week after the press conference, Eden Wells—the chief medical officer for the state of Michigan—called Mona and apologized for not reaching out earlier. Mona was uncertain whether she should be relieved or nervous about Eden was reaching out to her. Eden stated that she was the state's "point person" for the "controversy" in Flint, and she had some questions for Mona about her research.

This passage shows that at this point, Mona no longer trusted anyone in the Michigan government. She was aware of the corruption that ran deep throughout every level of governance—and even Eden's coded language about the "controversy" in Flint showed that the government still wasn't ready to admit that anything was really happening.

Mona told Eden that she and Jenny were running their numbers again, using GIS software to make sure the data was even more precise. Eden assured Mona that the state was going to look at its data again, too. Mona felt relieved that someone at the state level was actually thinking about science rather than focusing on damage control.

Even though Mona was uncertain about whether or not to trust the state government, she took Eden at her word. By admitting that they were looking at their research again, it seemed the state was actually starting to budge—Mona's commitment to the truth was working, it seemed.

Later, when Mona's FOIA requests went through and the MDHHS emails became public, Mona would learn that the state had doubled down and gone on the attack immediately rather than rechecking their own results. State officials used the rhetoric of "seasonality" to undermine Mona's research. She realized that no one at the state level cared about Flint's kids—all they cared about was winning. Eden's directive to the state to actually reconsider their numbers would prove to be a game changer.

Once Mona realized that the state was picking apart any vulnerability in her research they could find, she understood that the state had abandoned its duty to its citizens. Rather than being horrified and motivated toward action, they were entirely on the defensive. Racism and corruption continued to define the state's response to the crisis.

On October 1st, the Genesee County Health Department declared a public health emergency. Nick Lyon, a higher-up with the MDHHS, was planning a news conference. Andy called Mona to tell her that the state was going to confirm her findings at the conference—they were surrendering. Eden called her to confirm this, too: the state was reversing its position.

In the midst of what seemed like a never-ending coverup, Mona and her team received the shocking news that the state was at last capitulating. This illustrates the power of truth and honesty. Mona and her team brought the truth to light with motivation and integrity—and their commitment to the facts won out in the end.

Mona arrived at the state news conference on the Kettering University campus. She and Kirk entered a room packed with media. As the conference began, Eden noted that there was an increase in the percentage of kids with elevated blood-lead levels—according to Mona's research *and* the state's. Dan Wyant, the head of MDEQ, stepped forward to outline an action plan—but Mona felt that the plan was empty and hollow. The state had admitted that there was a problem, but they still weren't admitting their culpability in the crisis.

Even though Mona and her team were excited about the state's reversal of its position, the official press conference illustrated that there was still a lot of work to be done—the fight for Flint wasn't over yet. The state was continuing to do the bare minimum—again demonstrating the racist, individualist politics of denial and concealment at the heart of their entire operation.

After the press conference, Mona and Kirk got to meet with some state officials and go over the plan. The atmosphere in the meeting room was tense. Mona confronted Brad Wurfel about how he'd characterized her research as "irresponsible," and he apologized to her face. But Mona knew that she wasn't the one he should be apologizing to—he really owed an apology to Flint residents.

This passage illustrates the long-term effects of corruption and concealment. Even though Mona got an apology from a state official, it felt beside the point. Wurfel's duty should have been to the citizens of Flint—but he abandoned that duty and left thousands of vulnerable people to fend for themselves. So Mona wasn't satisfied with the truth or with an empty apology: she wanted to change the way government officials experienced a sense of responsibility to their constituencies.

On Saturday, October 3rd, United Way began distributing water filters to the public at the University of Michigan's Flint campus. Mona's residents volunteered at the distribution while Mona stayed home with Nina and Layla, knowing she owed them some of her time and attention after such a long fight. While playing with her girls, Mona paused to send Jenny a text: "We did it," she wrote. "Kids are going to be protected."

There was still a lot of work to do—but real, meaningful, community-wide change was happening on the ground in Flint because of Mona and Jenny's perseverance and commitment to the truth. They worked hard for their community—and they delivered results that the government never would have.

CHAPTER 23: ALL THE THINGS WE FOUND OUT LATER

Later, Mona and her team would continue to find out more and more "troubling" things about the water crisis. FOIA releases revealed that the state had been denying claims of a water crisis since 2015 with empty, carefully crafted "talking points" designed to cover up reality and perpetuate a web of lies.

This passage suggests that the truth always comes to light—and that only a reckoning with reality can hold people accountable for their corrupt actions.

Even while state officials told Flint residents that their water was fine, they were, behind the scenes, arranging for water coolers to be distributed throughout the Flint State Office Building so that state employees wouldn't have to drink the contaminated city water. The city and state were manipulating the water samples from Flint homes so that they wouldn't have to issue an advisory about the presence of lead, using covert methods to warp results and make it seem like Flint's water really was fine.

This passage shows that many higher-ups in the government knew there was a crisis—but rather than admitting the truth and taking action to protect their community, they simply sought to look out for themselves and keep the facts buried. This neglect—especially in a place like Flint—illustrates profoundly the long-lasting effects of environmental racism and injustice.

To this day, Mona writes, no one knows why corrosion control wasn't added to the water, or why so many other shortcuts were taken and red flags were ignored. But what was clear was that while the MDHHS had done an analysis of spiking blood-lead levels back in 2015, they dismissed and covered up the results. Legionnaires' disease was on the rise back in 2014—the number of cases quadrupled after the water switch—yet still, the county health department didn't do anything about the spike. Mona and her team were amazed by the disdain, cruelty, arrogance, and indeed racism of the institutions that were duty-bound to protect their citizens.

This passage illustrates the insidious long-term effects of corruption and injustice. The egregious coverup of the water crisis left many citizens suffering or even dead. Rather than address the problem ravaging their community, state officials chose to ignore the citizens of Flint—whom they likely saw as unimportant or even dispensable because they were poor and Black.

Mona and her team knew they couldn't rest until the water source was switched back to Detroit—the people of Flint needed a long-term solution, not water filters and bottled water. As activists across the country learned more about the water crisis and as Flint residents organized and mobilized, more and more people began putting pressure on the governor to switch the source back. On October 8th, Governor Snyder announced that the water would be switched back to Detroit. Right away, supportive and congratulatory calls and texts began pouring into Mona's phone—but she felt numb.

Mona's team's commitment to the truth had a ripple effect throughout the community of Flint, the state of Michigan, and indeed the entire U.S. The more people learned about the truth, the angrier they became—and the more committed they were to standing up for the citizens of Flint, knowing that Flint's government would not do so. This illustrates how truth is the most powerful weapon against corruption and concealment: it casts light over darkness.

During the same press conference, Eden Wells came forward to discuss the fact that three schools in the Flint area had been found to have toxic levels of lead. Right after announcing this, Eden began to talk about other preventative measures, such as vacuuming, mopping, and cleaning windowsills to mitigate lead paint contamination. Mona was furious—she knew that the state was still trying to deflect its culpability and shift focus away from the water crisis.

The state was admitting that there was a problem—but it was still trying to suggest that factors other than its own negligence were to blame for the crisis. This illustrates how deep corruption runs and how it rots a community from the inside out by ignoring history and placing blame on the most vulnerable.

Rather than dwell on her fury, though, Mona returned to her office, where she turned her focus to her upcoming conferences with her residents—she needed to turn her attention to the people in her life she'd been neglecting since the start of her involvement in studying the water crisis.

This passage illustrates how Mona continued, all the way through her fight, to draw strength from her family in times of doubt and fury.

On the day the water was to be switched back, October 16th, Senator Debbie Stabenow paid a visit to Hurley. Stabenow, a former social worker, had always been a strong advocate for children and a public health warrior. Mona was excited to have the chance to share her research with the senator. Stabenow was rattled by the things Mona shared with her, and she promised to fight for federal funding for long-term support in Flint—and to pressure the governor to make a "disaster declaration" so that more resources would reach the city. But Mona had a more pressing need: she asked the senator for help getting ready-to-feed formula to Flint babies. Stabenow promised Mona she'd do everything she could to make it happen.

Mona's fruitful, emotional meeting with Stabenow shows that there were, after all, government officials who were invested in social change and true justice for their constituents. Even though corruption and racism had stymied Flint's growth, there were people who were dedicated to making an investment in the city and its residents.

That same day—in spite of all the red tape, denial, and excuses they'd faced—Mona and her team watched proudly as the EPA acknowledged the water crisis, established a Flint Safe Drinking Water Task Force, and vowed to crack down on state water agencies and fraudulent testing methods. With the simple flip of a switch, the lives of families all over Flint began to change.

This passage shows that a relentless dedication to truth, anti-racism, and environmental justice—along with a healthy dose of community activism—can make real, meaningful change.

CHAPTER 24: FIRE ANT

With the water source switched back, Mona and her team switched their focus to a new goal: they demanded that a state of emergency be declared. Eighteen months of corrosive water had damaged the city's pipes, and the water still wasn't safe to drink. To make sure this goal was possible, Mona doubled down on her list of science-based demands for Flint kids, and a more accurate publication of the blood-lead data she'd refined using geospatial software. If she published a new article using GIS data and received a "scholarly stamp of approval" from a peer-reviewed journal, her data would be seen as even more unassailable.

Even though Mona and her team had achieved one of their biggest goals, Flint was still in trouble. The city's deeply entrenched problems with racism and corruption hadn't evaporated overnight—there was still a lot of work to be done to ensure that the state could no longer neglect Flint's needs. Mona knew that she still had a role to play: she had to do all she could to secure an unimpeachable set of figures that would prove Flint's ongoing need for resources and assistance.

Mona and Jenny were nervous—in spite of all their progress—that their communications and research could still be used against them. They kept their data on an encrypted USB drive and used code names in their emails to each other: Jenny's was Red Panda, and Mona's was Fire Ant. Mona liked using a fake name because it reminded her of Nuri's *nom de guerre*, Anwar. They finished the paper by late October, had it peer-reviewed by colleagues, and then submitted it to the prestigious *American Journal of Public Health*. When it was published in November, Mona knew she'd now have more leverage to talk about long-term solutions for Flint down the line.

In this passage, Mona found herself in a frightening situation—she feared her communications were being monitored by state authorities looking for any information they could possibly use to cut her down. But rather than buckle with fear or dread, Mona drew on the strength of her family's stories and traditions and found solace and even excitement in carrying on her family's legacy of fearless resistance.

The governor's office, meanwhile, was still trying to downplay the danger of childhood exposure to lead—and, even worse, the state didn't have the budget to implement any real change in Flint. The ACLU and the Natural Resources Defense Council filed many lawsuits against the state, causing the state and county authorities to panic even more.

As more and more individuals and organizations across the country began to realize the magnitude of what had happened in Flint, the state realized it would have to answer in some way for its actions—but backed into a corner, state authorities would choose to go on the defensive rather than admit defeat.

In January of 2016, Mona agreed to attend a press conference featuring Governor Snyder and the new mayor of Flint, Karen Weaver, as they spoke about the crisis. Mona reluctantly agreed to attend, but as soon as she arrived and began speaking with state officials—including Nick Lyon and Eden Wells—she realized that the press conference was a desperate scramble to do some damage control. Mona realized that she was "behind enemy lines."

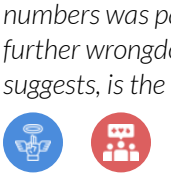
This passage illustrates how poisonous corruption is. There was no reason for the state to continue lying—they'd already been put on the spot. And yet the damage control they sought to do through this press conference was more about protecting their own reputations than protecting their constituents.

As Mona stood with the governor, the mayor, Eden, and Nick at the podium, an "onslaught of misinformation and lies" began. The MDEQ blamed the high water-lead levels in the schools on school fixtures—then Nick announced that throughout the entire crisis, only 43 children had been exposed to lead. Mona was outraged and furious. Every child who lived in Flint had been exposed—nearly 10,000 kids. Mona began shaking her head, knowing full well that the conference was being filmed and broadcast. Each time an erroneous fact was reported, Mona defiantly shook her head and watched as her allies in the audience encouraged her.

Even when they were claiming to tell the truth or to be acting in the name of transparency, state agencies in Michigan continued to lie and deflect blame. Mona had fought so hard for so long already—and she wasn't about to let a new crop of baseless lies derail her work on behalf of the people of Flint.

The clip of Mona shaking her head throughout the press conference made the rounds on the news and the internet. Within a week, the state had once again changed their position and admitted that many more than 43 children had been exposed to leaded water. As the state's position changed again, Mona finally began to feel that some real help was on the way for the children of Flint.

Mona's repeated insistence on the truth had real-time effects. Her refusal to accept the state's flimsy research and offensively low numbers was part of what ultimately made the state admit even further wrongdoing. Sticking staunchly to the truth, this passage suggests, is the best weapon against corruption.



The new mayor, Karen Weaver, soon declared a citywide state of emergency. Then, Governor Snyder declared an emergency in Genesee County—and, on January 16th, 2016, President Barack Obama declared a federal emergency in Flint. A disaster categorization would have meant more resources, and Mona was upset that the children of Flint still weren't getting all the help they needed. But the U.S. public health service officials who took charge of the situation were, luckily, just as passionate about fixing the crisis as Mona was.

This passage shows how, finally, as local, state, and federal officials began to name what was happening in Flint, the city started to receive some help and attention. By bringing the truth to light, Mona had been able to help make change. Truth is the only thing, this passage suggests, that can overcome corruption and concealment.

Mona, Jenny, and Kirk continued working on their list of Flint's children's needs. Mona suggested many preventative measures and social initiatives and included the demand for a registry of anyone exposed to the crisis, like the one used for victims of 9/11. Mona wanted to make sure that everyone who needed support and resources would get them.

No one in Flint could be left behind any longer, and Mona and her team worked hard to ensure that all those affected by the water crisis would be seen, acknowledged, and cared for.

With the support of MSU and Hurley, Mona came up with a public health program that would bring help and healing to Flint. Truckload after truckload of donated bottled water and other resources were arriving in Flint every day—but Mona knew that her patients would need an "investment in [their] tomorrows" that went beyond immediate solutions. She and her team created an advisory committee called the Flint Child Health and Development Fund and submitted their list of preventative initiatives to the Emergency Operations Center. At last, someone was telling the federal government exactly what the kids of Flint needed to survive and to thrive.

This passage shows that Mona's fight was about much more than restoring clean water to Flint. The water crisis was a symptom of the city's ongoing problems with racism, corruption, and governmental neglect. By shining a light on the truth of what life in Flint was like, Mona was able to demand real, structural change that would help her community grow and prosper for years to come.

CHAPTER 25: TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

In February of 2016, while Mona was at work in her office at the clinic, four Michigan state police officers in earpieces and dark suits barged in: they told her that the governor was here for a visit. They swept her office with metal detectors and other "security gizmos," and then Rick Snyder entered with a "posse" including the Lieutenant Governor and MDHHS director Nick Lyon. The governor apologized to Mona—but by this point, Mona only cared about actions, not empty apologies.

The surprise visit from the governor of Michigan illustrates the fact that the state government was doing too little too late. Mona had tried desperately to secure transparency and open dialogue with state officials—but they rejected her and attacked her. By the time of Snyder's visit, she was disillusioned and had lost much of her faith in the government's investment in Flint.

As Snyder went on, though, Mona could see genuine remorse in his eyes. He wanted to discuss the new state budget and his long-term plans for Flint. As he shared the details of the budget with her, Mona was shocked to see that almost all of her nutrition, health, and education initiatives totaling upward of $100 million were included in the new budget.

Even though Snyder played a massive and terrible role in the water crisis, his resolve to funnel money into Flint in order to try to repair the community's foundation speaks to the power of community action and solidarity.

When Governor Snyder asked Mona if she'd attend the press conference at which he was announcing the new budget the following week, Mona declined. She was going to be testifying about the Flint water crisis before Congress. She knew that Snyder's support had plummeted in the last several months. But he had only himself to blame, having ignored the crisis and instead tried to engineer a coverup in the name of saving money. Many people in Michigan and throughout the U.S. knew that the water crisis would never have happened in a predominantly white city. "If it were happening in another country," wrote director Michael Moore in a *Time* magazine article, "we'd call it an ethnic cleansing."

No matter how contrite the leaders who permitted the Flint crisis to happen were, nothing could erase the fact that what they'd done was tantamount to "ethnic cleansing." By ignoring the needs of a community of low-income, minority individuals, the government was essentially sanctioning the deaths of thousands of Americans—people whose lives the government felt weren't worth the effort it would take to remedy the crisis.

The new Flint water task force was made up of five men, and so Mona called it the "Five Guys Committee." She was skeptical that the committee would hold up their duty to Flint—and pleasantly surprised when, in March of 2016, the Five Guys released a detailed, comprehensive report about what had happened in Flint (and who was responsible). The report clearly stated that race had played a role in this egregious environmental crisis and kept it going long after it should've been stopped.

By connecting the severity of the crisis to Flint's history of structural racism, the Five Guys made sure that the Flint crisis would be remembered as one of the most egregious examples of contemporary environmental injustice. Stating that racism played a role in what happened in Flint sent a message to local and state governments across the country: that America's history of racism and environmental injustice couldn't be tolerated any longer.

White America was surprised by the crisis in Flint—but for Black Americans, who could easily spot the connection between Flint's racist history and its present tragedy, there was nothing surprising at all about the government's negligence. Mona, too, was able to have a unique perspective on the crisis because of her cultural history: she knew that most people in government don't wake up in the morning planning on poisoning thousands of people, but that the desire to deflect blame and admit fault can make people do (and tolerate) terrible things.

This passage again illustrates that America is—and always has been—a deeply unequal place. There are "two Americas"—and white Americans, especially those of financial privilege, aren't aware of the many roadblocks on the path to the American Dream. But Black Americans and immigrants like Mona and her family know, both from their experiences in the U.S. and from their families' stories of corruption and violence abroad, that institutions can't always be trusted and that the members of marginalized communities must take care of one another.

In June of 2016, the three state budget supplements the governor proposed passed; Flint was due to receive about $200 million in aid. The package wouldn't pass in Congress for another six months, but Mona had, by that point, learned that a life of advocacy is a slow one. The small victories and the crushing disappointments accrue over time, and all one can do is press onward.

Mona's work had produced real, quantifiable results. Her steadfast commitment to advocacy and action—even though it was a slow, difficult battle—ultimately made a real difference in her community.

In March of 2016, Miguel Del Toral came to town. His back was bothering him, and so Mona, LeAnne Walters, and Marc Edwards met him at his hotel. Mona was at last able to meet one of her heroes.

Mona's journey brought her into contact—and into community—with so many people she admired and looked up to as advocates of justice and equality.

In April, a lot was happening in Flint—people at the MDEQ like Brad Wurfel and Dan Wyant were losing their jobs or resigning, and there were many criminal charges that had been filed against state officials in the MDEQ and the MDHHS who'd participated in the coverup. Nick Lyon and Eden Wells would later be charged, too, with involuntary manslaughter for their failure to act in the crisis. Flint city officials like Natasha Henderson and Howard Croft, were charged with felonies and removed from their posts. Mona was heartened by the fact that people were being held accountable for their neglect—but she vowed again to remain focused only on the children of Flint.

This passage illustrates the consequences that many of the people involved in burying the truth about the Flint water crisis eventually faced. Without the work of Mona and her team, it's possible that these individuals would have continued lying as long as they could have. This further underscores the need for dedicated community-minded collective action. Without solidarity and the pursuit of justice, the people who turned a blind eye to Flint's suffering might never have answered for their actions.

Mona looks back on a time when she ran into Marc in D.C.—they were both there for a meeting of the EPA drinking water committee at which the existing Lead and Copper Rule would be up for discussion. On the way to the hearing, a woman who recognized Marc stopped him, introduced herself as a D.C. mother and fellow activist, and thanked him for his activism in the D.C. water crisis. Mona was reminded of her own patients' parents in Flint who would no doubt be questioning their children's well-being for years to come.

This passage shows that while Marc and Mona, together with the rest of their extended team, did a lot of important work in beginning a healing process in Flint, not even their hard work would be able to erase the long-lasting scars of environmental justice and structural racism. The work to truly heal a community in need must be concentrated and ongoing.

After a successful hearing, Marc took Mona aside and complimented her on how good she was at advocating for her community. The compliment meant a lot to Mona, but she knew that she couldn't have done the things she did for Flint without Marc and the rest of her team. Later, Marc would give Mona a necklace made from a slice of lead pipe from a D.C. home, encased in gold.

Marc and Mona's support of one another's work illustrates the goodness and change that can come from community action and solidarity. These two very different people came together to fight for a place in need and succeeded in bringing many important truths to light.

At lunch with Elin in April of 2016, Mona noticed that her friend's manner was lighter and easier. Eight months had passed since the barbecue when Elin had first told Mona about the water in Flint. In those months, Mona and Elin had both transformed and had experiences they'd never imagined. Elin told Mona that she felt grateful that her career had coincided with what was happening in their city in the way it did—there was a point, after all, to all the setbacks Elin had faced during her time at the EPA.

In this passage, it becomes clear that Elin, too, is a part of Mona's "family"—Elin is, after all, a person Mona has known most of her life, and a person whose values of justice and activism helped shape Mona into the person she is today. Mona and Elin drew strength from one another—and from their long friendship—throughout their fight to restore clean water to Flint.

Mona, too, began thinking about how her ability to participate in advocacy and activism in the crisis was largely a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Her ancestors' resilience and her family's progressive values had readied her for a fight—even a fight that never should have happened in the first place. Mona was just a piece in a much larger puzzle.

This passage demonstrates Mona's unique view of her role in the Flint water crisis. She sees herself almost as a conduit for the Flint community's larger concerns—the activists, parents, and community leaders on the ground began the fight, and Mona just happened to be a person in a position with enough resources and power to bring the truth to light. Mona is humble in this passage as she recalls her experiences, citing the strong foundation her family gave her over the course of many generations as the reason she was able to summon the courage to fight the powers that be.

When Mona received the Michigan Environmental Council's Distinguished Service Award, she got to talk with Bunyan Byrant—a renowned environmental justice pioneer. She thanked Byrant for paving the way for people like her. Mona always knew that throughout the Flint crisis, she was standing "on the shoulders of giants" like Marc, Alice Hamilton, John Snow, and Bryant himself.

This illustrates Mona's true sense of community and collectivism. Though she played an important role in bringing the crisis to light, she remained humble throughout her entire fight and always paid homage to the social justice and public health pioneers who paved the way for her.

CHAPTER 26: PRESCRIPTION FOR HOPE

In October of 2016, Nakala came back to the clinic for her 18-moth check-up. She was now a healthy, chubby, happy toddler. Mona apologized to Nakala's mother, Grace, for giving her bad advice about the tap water a year earlier. Grace had been using bottled water to fix all of her children's food and formula for over a year. At the end of the check-up, Grace asked Mona if Nakala and her sister Reeva were going to be all right. Mona couldn't blame Grace for worrying. She knew that the whole community of Flint was reckoning with city-wide PTSD from the neglect, trauma, and uncertainty they'd been living with since the onset of the crisis (and, for many, much longer).

By circling back to the story of Grace, Reeva, and Nakala—three Flint residents affected by the water crisis—the book illustrates Mona's investment in her patients' long-term health, both physical and psychological. Mona recognized the toll the water crisis was taking on the families she saw every day—and she was determined to make sure they felt seen and supported in the long aftermath of the crisis.

The American Dream, Mona writes, worked for her and her family: they fled oppression in a foreign country and found safety and prosperity in the United States. But there are two Americas, and Mona still glimpses the second one in her clinic each and every day. Life is a struggle from the very beginning for babies like Nakala—and, for many people battling institutional racism and environmental injustice, the American Dream is out of reach.

The American Dream was real for Mona and her family, but impossible to attain for so many families in Flint and other places like it. Mona suggests that the American Dream can't be wholly real until it's within reach not just for a privileged few, but for everyone.

All Mona could do for Grace was to prescribe hope. She urged Grace to continue reading, talking, and singing to her children, feeding them tons of fresh fruits and vegetables, and taking care of her own mental health so that she could better support her children. Mona advised Grace that the badness Reeva and Nakala had been unfairly exposed to could still be overcome by goodness.

Even though the people of Flint have suffered a great deal, this passage underscores Mona's belief in the power of hope to heal many wounds. Reeva and Nakala—and countless children like them—faced a difficult start in life. But together, the people of Flint brought the truth to light—and committed to an ongoing investment in making Flint a better place for children just like Reeva and Nakala.

EPILOGUE: HAJI AND THE BIRDS

One night, while working late, Mona heard Bebe and Elliott getting the girls ready for bed—and Nina and Layla protesting loudly against their bedtime. Rather than intervene, Mona waited and listened. Soon, she heard Bebe gently telling the girls a bedtime story: the story of Mona's grandfather Haji and his **birds**.

By offering a view into a chaotic nighttime moment, Mona illustrates how her family was able to remain strong, connected, and resilient in the face of sadness and crisis by drawing strength from one another.

Haji, Bebe's story went, lived in Baghdad when he was a young boy, in a big house surrounded by a garden of citrus trees, palms, and flowers. Haji loved the plants—but even more than that, he loved the many different kinds of **birds** that visited his garden each morning. Each day, Haji would feed the birds seeds and grains.

This bedtime story that Bebe tells Nina and Layla further illustrates Mona's family's deep investment in the stories and myths that have long served as guideposts and lessons for them all.

One afternoon, while picking dates from a palm tree, Haji fell off his ladder and broke his leg. He called out for help—and a small **bird** came, offering to take him to the doctor. Haji laughed, knowing the small bird couldn't carry him. But soon, a whole flock of hundreds of birds surrounded Haji, lifted him up by the hem of his *dishdasha*, or tunic, and lifted him into the air to fly him through Baghdad to the hospital.

This story is significant because it illustrates several important lessons and values. First, the story teaches the power of collective action. One bird alone couldn't lift Haji—but together, their action could make a real difference. The story also teaches the power that generosity has. Haji took care of his birds consistently and selflessly, each and every day, so when he was in need, they rushed to his aid.

The moral of the story, which Mona has always loved, is that when you treat every being with respect, you will be treated with that same respect in return. To live generously is the simplest and best way to live. Haji was always devoted to Baghdad, the city he loved, and to his family. Ten years after his death, Mona could still feel Haji and his magic lifting her and her family up to great heights.

The fact that Mona ends her book with an ode to the memory of her grandfather's goodness and generosity shows that, for Mona, family is the most important thing. She draws her strength, her values, and her sense of self from her family, and their support is the reason she has been able to do so much and work so hard on behalf of others.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Tanner, Alexandra. "*What the Eyes Don't See.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 24 Feb 2021. Web. 24 Feb 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Tanner, Alexandra. "*What the Eyes Don't See.*" LitCharts LLC, February 24, 2021. Retrieved February 24, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/what-the-eyes-don-t-see.

To cite any of the quotes from *What the Eyes Don't See* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Hanna-Attisha, Mona. What the Eyes Don't See. Random House. 2018.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Hanna-Attisha, Mona. What the Eyes Don't See. New York: Random House. 2018.