

Darius the Great is Not Okay



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ADIB KHORRAM

Khorram was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. In high school, he was an avid participant in school theater productions, and he also took several afterschool writing classes. At Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, Khorram studied design and technical theater; he then worked for several years in event production. *Darius the Great is Not Okay*, published in 2018, was Khorram's first novel, and it was published to great acclaim—it's been awarded YALSA's William C. Morris Award for Best Debut Author Writing for Teens and was listed as one of the best teen books of 2018 by Buzzfeed, the New York Public Library, *Time*, and BookBub. Khorram continued Darius's story in *Darius the Great Deserves Better*, and he's also written several other novels for young adults. Several aspects from *Darius* are based on Khorram's personal experiences: he was raised Bahá'í, like Sohrab in the novel (though Khorram identifies as an atheist), his family is Iranian, and though it's not made explicit until *Darius the Great Deserves Better*, Darius is, like Khorram, queer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Darius touches on a number of social issues in both Iran and the United States. While Oregon is in no way a hot spot for Iranian immigrants, between 10,000 and 15,000 Iranians live in the Portland Metro area, where Darius and his family live. Through Sohrab, Darius learns some about Bahá'í persecution in Iran. While Iran's constitution stipulates protections for Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians, leaving out the Bahá'í faith (which is the largest religious group after Muslims in the country) means that it essentially doesn't exist in a political or legal sense—and as Sohrab explains, this means that Bahá'ís are often killed or imprisoned for no reason. The Iranian government has also systematically denied Bahá'í children education, which is why Sohrab is worried about achieving his dreams of becoming an architect or engineer. While abuse against Bahá'ís has been widely condemned by the United Nations, the European Union, and the U.S., the fact that Iran's government is an Islamic theocracy means that there's no religious freedom in the country. This is why, for instance, Darius explains that his Zoroastrian relatives in Iran can no longer practice “sky burials,” as this type of burial was banned after the Islamic revolution in 1979. Finally, both Darius and Dad are diagnosed with depression, which the World Health Organization estimates affects about 5 percent of the world population.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In 2019, Khorram continued Darius's story in *Darius the Great Deserves Better*, which picks back up several months after *Darius the Great is Not Okay* ends. As a novel about bullying, particularly about ethnically, religiously, or physically motivated bullying, Darius shares similarities with novels like [American Born Chinese](#) by Gene Luen Yang, [Don't Call Me Ishmael](#) by Michael Gerard Bauer, and [Wonder](#) by R. J. Palacio. And given Darius's sexuality (he's revealed to be queer in *Darius the Great Deserves Better*), Darius is often grouped with other young adult novels featuring queer protagonists, including [They Both Die at the End](#) by Adam Silvera and [You Should See Me in a Crown](#) by Leah Johnson, but especially with Becky Albertalli's hit novel [Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda](#). The sometimes difficult relationships between fathers and sons is a popular literary subject; works as varied as Barack Obama's *Dreams from my Father*, the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling (and particularly her play [Harry Potter and the Cursed Child](#)), and the aptly titled 19th-century Russian novel [Fathers and Sons](#) by Ivan Turgenev explore father-son relationships. Within the novel itself, Darius adores J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series, and he also makes a brief reference to Herman Melville's classic novel [Moby-Dick](#). The idea of the Übermensch, or the ideal man (which Darius uses to refer to his dad), is one that Nietzsche proposed in his philosophical work [Thus Spoke Zarathustra](#).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Darius the Great is Not Okay
- **When Written:** 2017
- **Where Written:** Kansas City, Missouri
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** Portland, Oregon and Yazd, Iran
- **Climax:** After Sohrab lashes out at Darius, Darius and Dad speak honestly with each other for the first time.
- **Antagonist:** Various bullies such as Trent Bolger, Ali-Reza, and Hossein
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Darius the Great. While Darius decides that Alexander the Great was the biggest bully of the ancient world, Darius the Great was no saint—he overthrew the legitimate king of the Achaemenid Empire and took the throne for himself. However, he's remembered for his many construction projects, namely

roads, which helped to connect far-reaching parts of what was then the biggest empire in the world.



PLOT SUMMARY

Life is hard enough for teenage Darius, but things get even worse on the day that bully Trent Bolger and his fellow Soulless Minion of Orthodoxy, Chip Cusumano, steal Darius's bike's wheels and seat while he's at work. Trent and Chip replace the bike seat with rubber testicles that people sometimes hang from trailer hitches. Darius has to call Dad to come pick him up from work at The Tea Haven. As usual, Dad suggests that Trent would stop bullying Darius if Darius only stood up for himself. Clearly, Dad has never been bullied—he's a Teutonic Übermensch, a highly successful, Audi driving, perfect architect.

After dinner, Darius and Dad go to the living room for their evening ritual: watching one episode of *Star Trek*, which is the only time they can be a "real father and son." Midway through the episode, Mom accepts a video call from her parents in Iran, Mamou and Babou. Darius and Dad briefly say hello, finish their episode, and then go to the kitchen to take their medications—they both take medication for depression. Dad shares with Darius that Babou, who has a brain tumor, isn't going to get better. The family is going to visit Iran and they'll be there over Nowruz, the Persian new year.

A few weeks later, Darius carries his sleepy younger sister, Laleh, through the airports and tries to ignore Dad when Dad polices what Darius eats (Darius is overweight because of his medication, not because he lacks self-control). Darius is also resentful because Chip broke Darius's backpack yesterday, so he has to use a **messenger bag** of Dad's as his carry-on bag (he hates messenger bags). The family lands in Tehran just before sunrise. After a frightening interrogation with a customs officer, Darius and his family are greeted by Mamou and Dayi Jamsheed, one of Darius's uncles. They drive the few hours to Yazd, and—after a shower—Darius promptly falls asleep.

Darius wakes to a human-shaped shadow crossing outside his window. When he goes outside, Babou has just climbed onto the roof to water his fig trees while a boy about Darius's age, Sohrab, passes him the hose from the courtyard. Babou certainly doesn't look sick, and he tells Darius and Sohrab to be friends. As Sohrab takes Darius to his uncle Agha Rezaei's store to buy something for Mamou, he explains that he and his family are Bahá'í. He also invites Darius to play soccer tomorrow with some of his friends, and Darius accepts. The next day, Darius braves a public locker room with no stalls to change into borrowed soccer gear and shower after—and Sohrab and his friends, Ali-Reza and Hossein, tease Darius for being uncircumcised, calling him "Ayatollah Darioush." Later that afternoon, Sohrab comes to Mamou's house to apologize. He

admits he only bullied Darius because it was nice to not be Ali-Reza's target for once; Ali-Reza is very prejudiced against Bahá'ís. Darius accepts his apology, and somehow he knows he and Sohrab will be friends forever.

The next day, Sohrab joins Darius's family on their trip to the ruins of Persepolis. There, Darius sees carvings of his namesake, Darioush the Great—but he doesn't feel great and brave like Darioush. Babou drives, but on the way home, he gets angry and pulls over. Dad finishes the drive and Sohrab whispers to Darius what happened: Babou got lost. He won't be able to drive again after this.

It's Nowruz a few days later. Darius starts the day feeling secure in his identity and in his place in his family. He feels even better when Sohrab gifts him a soccer **jersey** for the Iranian national team. But his uncle Dayi Soheil calls Darius fat, and Dayi Jamsheed suggests Darius isn't very Persian since he doesn't like cucumbers. Even Dad seems to fit in better than Darius, since he plays Rook with Babou and Darius's uncles. Darius and Sohrab sit in the garden, talking about Darius's fraught relationship with Dad and how Darius doesn't feel like he fits in. Sohrab also reveals that he's here with only his mom, Khanum Rezaei, because Sohrab's dad was wrongfully arrested and imprisoned years ago, just for being Bahá'í. He's now in solitary confinement in a Tehran prison, and Sohrab worries he won't see his dad again.

On the day after Nowruz, it's traditional to visit friends. So, Darius goes to visit Sohrab. Sohrab introduces Darius to his favorite food: romaine lettuce leaves dipped in mint syrup, which Babou used to make until his brain tumor made that difficult. They then go to a park to sit on top of a squat public restroom and stare out at the city. That night, though Dad brought *Star Trek* on his iPad so he and Darius can continue their tradition, Dad insists on letting Laleh watch with them. It's obvious to Darius that Dad loves Laleh better.

Early the next morning, Darius and his family visit the Towers of Silence, where Zoroastrians used to bury their dead until sky burials were outlawed. When they get back, Darius and Sohrab take Laleh to get ice cream at Agha Rezaei's store. Laleh is fluent in Farsi, and she chatters at Sohrab in Farsi, which Darius doesn't speak. Sohrab asks her to speak English so Darius can understand.

Over the next week, Sohrab joins Darius's family to visit Dowlatabad, a palace and gardens, and invites Darius to play soccer again with Ali-Reza and Hossein. Though the boys continue to call Darius "Ayatollah," Sohrab tells the younger boys they're playing with that this is because Darius is in charge—and Sohrab and Darius shower after the other boys are finished and have already left. They play daily for the rest of the week, and then Sohrab and his mom join Darius and his family for chelo kabob, a huge treat, at the end of the week. After the meal is over, Sohrab and two of Darius's older cousins, Parviz and Navid, teach Darius to play Rook. Darius is terrible

at it, but he has fun.

Babou insists on taking everyone to the Atashkadeh, the Zoroastrian fire temple, the next day. But when the family arrives, Babou isn't feeling well, so he and Mamou stay in the car. It's a sobering experience for Darius, as he thinks about Babou's mortality while staring at the ceremonial flames that have been burning for about 1,500 years. When the family gets home, Darius finds Mom looking at photo albums. She shows him a photo of Dad holding baby Darius, which makes them both sad: if only Dad and Darius could act like father and son, and if only it was easy like it seems in the photo.

The next morning, Darius wraps a pair of cleats he bought as a going-away present for Sohrab to replace Sohrab's two pairs, which are falling apart. But when Darius gets to the Rezaeis' house, Sohrab and his family members are distraught—Sohrab's dad was killed in prison. Wild with grief and anger, Sohrab tells Darius to go away and that nobody wants him. Darius believes Sohrab and runs to the public restroom roof, where he sits for hours and cries.

Dad finally finds Darius and joins him on the roof. He tells Darius not to cry, which makes Darius cry more—Dad, he snaps, just wants Darius to never feel emotions and to be perfect. Soberly, Dad shares that he's just trying to protect Darius from depression's dangerous effects. He reveals that just before Laleh was born, Dad's meds stopped working and he spent a few months taking heavy tranquilizers so he wouldn't hurt himself. Dad admits he fears the same thing happening to Darius, and he feels awful for passing depression on to his son.

It's Darius's birthday the next day. While everyone else visits the Rezaeis, Dad and Darius wander around Yazd together and then rejoin the family for Darius's birthday dinner. Darius packs his suitcase, including the soccer jersey from Sohrab, his "Persian camouflage"—which Darius loves, but which maybe turns him into someone he isn't. Late that night, Sohrab stops by to apologize and to thank Darius for the shoes. The boys go to the bathroom to stare out at the city and sit in companionable silence. They return to Mamou's house and say goodbye, and Darius knows he and Sohrab will stay friends. In the morning, Darius bids Mamou and Babou goodbye and gets into Dayi Jamsheed's SUV for the ride to the airport.

Darius spends two days recovering before he finally returns to school. He uses Dad's messenger bag rather than get a new backpack; it feels better these days. His gym class is playing soccer and the teacher, Coach Fortes, is impressed with Darius's skills, which have improved since he spent so much time playing soccer in Iran. Coach Fortes suggests Darius try out for the school team in the fall, and Darius agrees to think about it—it'd be fun to tell Sohrab about playing on a team in one of their almost-daily emails. It also surprises Darius when Chip apologizes for helping Trent destroy Darius's bike, and when Chip reveals he knows that Darius's namesake is Darius

the Great. That evening, Dad and Darius watch *Star Trek* and then sit down for tea in the kitchen, which is their new tradition. Darius finally feels okay.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Darius Kellner – The novel's protagonist, Darius is a high school sophomore and a self-described "Fractional Persian"; that is, his mom is Iranian and his dad is white. Darius lives in Portland, Oregon and doesn't feel like he fits in at all. Bullies Trent and Chip tease him incessantly at school and work, and Dad regularly suggests that if Darius was a little more "normal" and stood up for himself, he wouldn't get picked on. This causes major strife between Dad and Darius; indeed, the only time they get along is when they watch an episode of *Star Trek* every night. Darius is forced to reevaluate his identity when his family visits Yazd, Iran to see his grandfather Babou before he dies of a brain tumor. There, Darius makes his first real friend, Sohrab, and learns the value of having trusting, honest friendships with people (including with family members, like Mamou). Still, he never feels entirely like he fits in, as he doesn't speak Farsi and dislikes some classic Persian foods. Darius also struggles with depression, which his Persian relatives don't understand. Eventually, though, Darius and Dad are able to connect more honestly—and Darius internalizes the idea that it's not his fault when people bully or are mean to him. He returns to Portland with way more confidence, and after several weeks spent playing soccer with Sohrab in Iran, he even agrees to consider trying out for the school soccer team in the fall.

Sohrab Rezaei – Sohrab is Mamou and Babou's neighbor, and when he and Darius meet, he quickly becomes Darius's best friend. He's lean, muscular, loves soccer, and dreams of being an architect or a civil engineer when he grows up—though because he's Bahá'í, he worries he won't be able to follow either career path (the Iranian government systematically denies Bahá'ís education). He and Darius connect in part because Sohrab knows what it's like to be bullied for being different, as he's one of only a few Bahá'í boys at school. Darius appreciates Sohrab because Sohrab is comfortable showing physical affection, is a good listener, and is the sort of person who can make others feel heard and cared for easily. However, Sohrab struggles some to understand Darius's fraught relationship with Dad, as Sohrab's dad has been imprisoned for years and Sohrab fears he'll never see his dad again. This fear ultimately comes to pass; Sohrab's dad is murdered in prison. In his grief, Sohrab lashes out at Darius—but he also then makes a point to apologize and take ownership of his misplaced anger. Darius and Sohrab remain friends after Darius leaves Iran, and they email each other daily.

Dad – Darius's dad is a partner at an architecture firm in

Portland. Darius refers to him as a Teutonic *Übermensch*, as Dad is white, tall, conventionally attractive, seems to have never struggled with bullying or his weight, and is highly functioning despite having diagnosed depression. He and Darius don't get along, as he regularly suggests that if Darius only acted a bit more "normal" and stood up for himself, bullies would stop picking on him. The times Dad and Darius can happily coexist is when they watch an episode of *Star Trek* together every night. It's perplexing when, in Iran, Darius observes that Dad seems to fit in with the Persian relatives even better than Darius does—he plays Rook well and has the best technique for making chelo kabob. Darius and Dad don't come to an understanding until Dad admits that just before Laleh was born, his medication stopped working and he began considering self-harm. He spent months on tranquilizers, which kept him safe but damaged his relationship with Darius (he stopped telling Darius stories during this time). This admission makes Dad seem more relatable and human, and after this conversation, Dad also seems to try harder to love and support the son he has.

Mom – Darius's mom is a UX designer. She's also Iranian; she immigrated to the U.S. and married Dad 17 years ago, though her initial plan wasn't to stay in the U.S. Though Darius knows his mom is flawed, he loves her dearly. She regularly stands up for Darius when Dad is unwittingly cruel or callous towards his son; she encourages Dad to let go of his expectations and love the son he has, not the one Dad wishes Darius could be. Still, Mom becomes even more relatable when the family visits Iran to visit her parents; her dad, Babou, has a brain tumor and isn't going to get better. Surrounded by relatives, Mom apologizes to Darius for not teaching him Farsi and tells him happy stories about Babou and her childhood in Yazd. The visit is emotionally difficult for her, as everyone knows that it's going to be the last time she sees Babou.

Laleh Kellner – Laleh is Darius's eight-year-old sister. Unlike him, she manages to be wildly popular at school—though Darius doesn't hold this against her, as he adores his little sister and she idolizes him in return. She's bright and opinionated, and she isn't above throwing tantrums if she's hungry or extremely bored. Because Mom taught her Farsi and she's nearly fluent, she has an easier time than Darius does integrating into the extended Bahrami family in Yazd. Secretly, Darius believes that his parents decided to have Laleh so they had a second chance to raise a child who wasn't such a disappointment as he believes he is (though he goes out of his way to not punish Laleh for this). And though he tries not to blame Laleh for it, Darius is distraught when Dad allows Laleh to watch *Star Trek* with them and says he likes watching it with her—Darius sees this as proof that she's the preferred child in the family.

Mamou – Mamou is Mom's mother and Darius's grandmother. She lives with her husband, Babou, in Yazd, Iran. Darius adores his grandmother and always has—she's loving and open—but he

struggles to know what to say to her, especially over video calls. When Darius and his family finally visit her in Iran for the first time, Darius is struck by how openly affectionate she is. She takes every opportunity to hug or kiss Darius, or to tell him she loves him, and she keeps him constantly fed with his favorite food and desserts (she's known locally for her cooking and baking). Still, Darius isn't able to truly open up to Mamou and get to know her until he notices she's listening to ABBA on the radio—and she says ABBA is her favorite group. He recognizes that Mamou is struggling, as Babou's brain tumor means that he's sometimes cruel, angry, or forgetful, and he often takes out his emotions on her.

Babou – Babou is Mom's dad and Darius's grandfather. He and his wife, Mamou, live in Yazd, Iran and have for their entire lives. Although Babou speaks English, he's more comfortable speaking Farsi, which Darius doesn't speak. Babou has a brain tumor, and when it becomes clear that he's not going to improve, Darius's family decides to visit Iran—so Darius meets his grandfather for the first time at this point. He finds Babou confusing and somewhat difficult to love. Sometimes, Babou seems to adore Darius and be very proud of him. Other times, he nitpicks at Darius, Dad, and at Mom's choice to marry an American and live abroad, which makes Darius feel inadequate and ashamed. Darius's feelings toward his grandfather are complicated further by the fact that the tumor causes Babou to occasionally lash out and get angry for no reason—though Mom and Sohrab both tell Darius stories that suggest Babou's true personality isn't cruel or violent.

Trent "Fatty" Bolger – The antagonist of the novel, Trent Bolger is one of the most popular kids at Darius's school. Though he's a known bully, because kids at school tolerate his behavior, he's technically not in violation of the school's Zero Tolerance Policy against bullying. Darius refers to him as a Soulless Minion of Orthodoxy; that is, he dresses and acts like a stereotypical cool kid and bullies others because he actually has no soul. Trent targets Darius more than other kids, as Darius's name starts with D and therefore cruel nicknames like "D-Bag" are an easy choice.

Chip Cusumano – Chip is one of Trent's cronies and a Soulless Minion of Orthodoxy, though he's not as cruel as Trent and might actually be a nice person. He regularly accompanies Trent when Trent bullies Darius, though he apologizes to Darius later and even expresses regret that he was involved at all.

Sohrab's Dad – Sohrab's dad doesn't appear in person in the novel, as he's been imprisoned by the Iranian government for several years. He was arrested during protests—but he wasn't a protester. Sohrab explains that his dad was arrested because he is Bahá'í, and the Iranian government cruelly targets Bahá'ís. Sohrab's dad was in the Yazd prison for several years but is in solitary confinement in Tehran by the time Darius gets to Iran. A few days before Darius leaves, Sohrab and his family get the

news that his dad was stabbed and died.

Sohrab's Uncle/Agha Rezaei – Agha Rezaei, Sohrab's uncle, owns a grocery store in Yazd. Darius is struck both by how stereotypically Persian Agha Rezaei looks (he has a lush beard and lots of chest hair) and how unusually tall he is. A kind man, Agha Rezaei has helped support Sohrab and Khanum Rezaei since Sohrab's dad, his business partner, was imprisoned. Darius also notices that Sohrab seems more relaxed around his uncle, as if his uncle makes Sohrab feel like it's okay to be a kid.

Ali-Reza – Ali-Reza is a boy whom Hossein and Sohrab regularly play soccer with. At first, Darius thinks Ali-Reza is a friend of Sohrab's—but he soon realizes that the two are more like enemies. This, Sohrab explains later, is because Ali-Reza is very prejudiced against Bahá'ís. Darius ultimately concludes that Ali-Reza is just an Iranian Soulless Minion of Orthodoxy.

Dayi Jamsheed – Dayi Jamsheed is Mom's brother, one of Darius's uncles. He's the only Bahrami, aside from Mamou and Babou, who still lives in Yazd, so he's the one to drive Darius's family to and from the airport. Though he's kind, he also unwittingly makes Darius feel bad by suggesting that Darius isn't very Persian because Darius doesn't like cucumbers.

Coach Fortes – Coach Fortes is the soccer coach and physical education teacher at Darius's school. He's generally cool and supportive of his students—he doesn't punish Darius when Darius is late due to his backpack breaking, and he encourages Darius to try out for the school soccer team when he sees how good of a player Darius is.

Customs Officer II – Customs Officer II is a hulking customs officer who pulls Darius away from his family for questioning at the Tehran airport. With his turban and beard, he looks extremely Persian and makes Darius feel less so—especially when he gives Darius a hard time for taking medication for depression. However, as soon as Customs Officer II learns that Dad is an architect, his demeanor totally changes, and he enthusiastically welcomes Darius to Iran.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sohrab's Mom/Khanum Rezaei/Mahvash Rezaei – Sohrab's mom, Mahvash, was Mom's childhood friend. Darius likes her because she's kind, enthusiastic, and adores Mamou, though he also thinks that with her wild hair and low forehead, she looks a bit like a Klingon from *Star Trek*.

Hossein – Hossein is a boy whom Sohrab and Ali-Reza regularly play soccer with. Like Ali-Reza, he is prejudiced against Bahá'ís, but he doesn't seem as bigoted as Ali-Reza.

Mr. Apatan – Mr. Apatan is Darius's boss at The Tea Haven. Though he's extremely literal and rejects anything he interprets as elitist (such as sniffing teas or steeping different teas at different temperatures), he's kind and generous, and Darius thinks he's a pretty cool boss.

Javaneh Esfahani – Javaneh is the only other Iranian student at Darius's school, though she's far more popular than Darius and, according to him, only tolerates him. She was, like Darius, born in the United States and has never been to Iran.

Dayi Soheil – Dayi Soheil is one of Darius's uncles and is Mom's brother. Though he's kind and genial, he offends Darius by calling him fat when they meet for the first time at Nowruz.

Zandayi Simin – Zandayi Simin is Dayi Soheil's wife, Darius's aunt. She doesn't speak much English, but she enlists Sohrab to help her translate so she can talk to Darius and tell him about the family.

Dr. Howell – Dr. Howell is both Dad and Darius's doctor; he manages their depression medications.

Navid – Navid is one of Darius's cousins; he's in his early twenties.

Parviz – Parviz is one of Darius's cousins; he's in his early twenties.

Nazgul – Nazgul is Darius's obnoxious cousin.

TERMS

Bahá'í – The Bahá'í faith is the second-largest religious group in Iran, after Muslims—but as **Sohrab** explains, the Islamic Iranian government systematically targets Bahá'ís and denies them education, security, and human rights.

Zoroastrianism – Zoroastrianism is a religion based on the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster. Zoroastrians are one of several minority religions practiced in Iran. Unlike the Bahá'ís, Zoroastrians enjoy legal protections in Iran's constitution. However, the government still bans certain Zoroastrian customs, such as sky burials.



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.



FRIENDSHIP

Darius the Great is Not Okay follows its titular teenage protagonist as he visits Iran, where Darius's mom is from, for the first time. Darius is alone and mostly friendless in Portland, but in Iran, he meets his first real friend, Sohrab. The novel presents friendship as something of an antidote to bullying: while Darius is bullied incessantly in Portland, in Iran, he and Sohrab are able to bond over their shared experiences with bullying (Sohrab is bullied

for being Bahá'í) and dull some of its worst effects. For instance, Darius used to play soccer, but he quit when he began taking medication for depression and could no longer concentrate on the game. So though Darius believes he's not good at soccer, Sohrab invites Darius to play with some of his friends—and with Sohrab's encouragement, Darius discovers that he's actually pretty good. Additionally, Sohrab shows how supportive friends can make what could be an awful bullying experience mostly positive. Sohrab's friends, Ali-Reza and Hossein, tease Darius after their first game for being uncircumcised, and they begin calling him "Ayatollah" after Iran's Supreme Leader (they snicker that Darius's penis resembles the Ayatollah's turban). Though this initially devastates Darius, Sohrab manages to turn the nickname into a positive when they play again with younger kids: he tells the younger boys that the nickname is because Darius is in charge. Thanks to Sohrab's quick thinking, by the end of his trip, Darius thinks he likes the nickname.

The Ayatollah incident in particular highlights for Darius what the novel suggests is one of the most important ingredients to a fulfilling, healthy friendship: trust. Darius trusts Sohrab to stick up for him, so he's ultimately willing to play soccer again with Ali-Reza and Hossein. And Darius finds that Sohrab is the first person who doesn't want to change him into someone different. He accepts Darius as he is: American, overweight, depressed, and anxious, and through his words and actions, he shows Darius that it's okay not to be okay. His friendship with Sohrab helps Darius feel okay for the first time with who he is, suggesting that trusting friendships can, as in this circumstance, help a person feel more secure in their community—and in their own identity.



FAMILY

Darius the Great is Not Okay is, in many ways, the story of how its titular teenage character learns to be part of his family. Family, Darius learns, isn't just about being related to someone by blood. Rather, it's about the support that family members show each other that makes a family. Darius begins the novel feeling cut off from most of his family members. He and Dad have a fraught relationship, while Darius's only interactions with his Iranian maternal grandparents, Mamou and Babou, have been over Skype. As such, Darius doesn't feel particularly connected to Dad, Mamou, or Babou. When it comes to his relationship with Dad, Darius also feels like he'll never be able to please his seemingly perfect, exacting father for various reasons. This leads Darius to feel generally alone and unsupported.

Darius's trip to Iran forces him to rethink his ideas about family. Over the course of his trip, he develops a close and loving relationship with Mamou, and he marvels that she sees every chance to kiss him or say "I love you" as an opportunity, rather than a burden. His joyful relationship with Mamou, however, contrasts with the anxiety Darius continues to feel around

Babou and Dad. Babou, Darius feels, is disappointed in many family members: almost all have moved away from Yazd, Mom married an American and is raising non-Zoroastrian children, and Darius, in addition to not being Zoroastrian, has depression (which Babou erroneously blames Darius for) and speaks little Farsi. However, Darius is able to take Mamou's example and essentially come to the conclusion that while he's not sure he likes his grandfather much, he still loves Babou and tries to show it as best he can—for instance, he hugs and kisses Babou goodbye when he leaves. It's also transformative for Darius when he and Dad finally speak openly to each other. During this conversation, Dad explains that what Darius perceives as constant disapproval is actually Dad trying to protect Darius. When Dad changes his behavior and tries to be more supportive of who his son is, it opens the door for them to connect more deeply and honestly—and to feel more like "a real father and son" more often. Familial relationships, Darius acknowledges, aren't always perfect or comfortable, but he ultimately decides that being willing to try to support one's family members in the way they need and want to be supported is more important than anything else.



PERSIAN IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Darius is what he calls a "Fractional Persian:" Mom is from Iran, and Dad is a white American, so Darius and his sister, Laleh, have grown up immersed in both Persian and white American mainstream culture. As Darius and his family visit Iran and celebrate Nowruz (the Persian new year) there, much of Darius's narration involves describing various foods, drinks, and customs for readers, all of which are things that Darius believes make his life richer (and tastier). In this way, *Darius the Great is Not Okay* presents being multicultural, as Darius and his family are, as a wholly positive thing: in many ways, Darius gets the best of both worlds as he gets to enjoy Persian holidays and celebrations in addition to American holidays.

However, Darius also finds his Persian identity somewhat anxiety-inducing, as he often fears that he's not "Persian enough." It's a source of shame for him that he doesn't speak much Farsi, especially when Laleh is nearly fluent. At Nowruz, Darius's uncles also give him a hard time for not liking cucumbers (and Darius feels self-conscious about disliking figs), and Darius is also humorously bad at Rook, a traditional Persian card game. Rather than seeing any of these qualities as either quirks or things that are beyond Darius's control (it's not, for instance, Darius's fault that Mom didn't speak to him in Farsi, as she did with Laleh), Darius sees them as moral failings that prove that he's not truly Persian or a real member of his family. But at home in Portland, Oregon, Darius also finds that his Persian identity sometimes causes problems: bullies claim that he's a terrorist and that he rides camels, and Darius goes out of his way to make sure his biggest bully, Trent Bolger, doesn't

learn the Persian version of his name (Darioush) for fear that Trent's bullying would escalate further. Thus, *Darius the Great is Not Okay* suggests that culture isn't just about knowing language, food, and certain customs. A person's relationship to their culture is also something highly personal, and it's possible for it to shift and change over time as a person encounters new ideas and experiences.



MENTAL HEALTH, DEPRESSION, AND CONNECTION

Both Darius and Dad struggle with diagnosed depression. Throughout the novel—depending on context—depression is framed as something that is either neutral and nothing to be ashamed of—or a huge source of shame and isolation. For instance, on the plane to Iran, Mom warns Darius that Iranian culture doesn't see depression the same way that American culture does. Upon learning that Darius takes medication for depression, various Iranian friends and family members insist that Darius needs to try harder, eat better, and simply think happier thoughts. This is profoundly alienating for Darius, and it makes him feel like he'll never measure up to his relatives' high standards. Similarly, though Dad encourages Darius to see his depression as just a thing he has to manage (and Darius's medication simply as something Darius requires to live a good, fulfilling life) Darius believes that his depression is something that *Dad* is ashamed of. Darius's perception contributes to his fraught relationship with Dad, as it seems to Darius that Dad, who has been successfully managing his depression for decades, has forgotten how hard it can be for Darius, who is young and still figuring out how to manage his mental illness.

However, when Dad and Darius finally speak honestly with each other at the novel's climax, Darius discovers that medication hasn't always made Dad the high-functioning, emotionally stable, ideal man that Darius sees him as. Rather, Dad shares that when Darius was little, his medication stopped working; in order to keep him from hurting himself, Dad's doctors temporarily put on heavy tranquilizers. This is revelatory for Darius—for once, Dad seems like a relatable person with flaws and struggles of his own. But this conversation also reminds Darius and readers alike that managing depression isn't always easy and straightforward, even if it seems that way from the outside. Depression is, as Dad maintains, nothing to be ashamed of—but that doesn't mean it's not also sometimes painful and frightening. Dad and Darius also find, though, that speaking openly and honestly with each other about Dad's struggles helps them connect and develop empathy for each other. *Darius the Great is Not Okay* thus suggests that, in certain contexts and with trusted people, opening up about one's mental illness can be a source of connection and support.



BULLYING

At home in Portland, Darius is Trent Bolger's favorite bullying target. Darius is nerdy, overweight, half Persian, and has a name that starts with D, which lends itself to all manner of cruel nicknames (like "D-Bag"). Initially, Dad and, to some degree, Darius himself blame Darius for the bullying he experiences: Dad insists that if Darius could just act a little more "normal" and stand up for himself, bullies wouldn't pick on him, while Darius maintains that he's destined to be a target thanks to his half-Persian identity and his name. This outlook makes Darius feel powerless and even worse about himself, as no matter what Dad says, Darius knows he can't singlehandedly stop Trent from bullying him. But as the novel progresses, Darius and his friends and family—even Dad—come to a new understanding about bullying: that it's never about the person being targeted, and it has everything to do with the bully himself.

Darius first begins to understand this when he meets Sohrab in Yazd and they play soccer for the first time. While Sohrab seems nice at first, he joins his friends in teasing Darius for being uncircumcised. Later, though, when he apologizes, Sohrab reveals that he only joined in on the bullying because it was nice, for once, to not be the target himself. In other words, Sohrab chose to bully Darius because of his *own* insecurities, not because there's anything wrong with Darius. Darius eventually discovers that Dad's misguided attempts to blame Darius for Trent's bullying is also about Dad's fears and insecurities, not proof that Darius is actually disappointing: Dad is trying in the only way he knows how to protect Darius, though his methods are harmful rather than helpful. And while readers never get any insight into Trent's psyche or motivations for bullying, Darius does recognize that Trent has no idea what he's talking about when he calls Darius a "terrorist" or teases Darius about encountering camels and cacti in Iran—his ignorance, selfishness, and need to make himself feel better by putting others down leads to his cruelty. While the novel acknowledges that knowing this about bullies doesn't always make bullying less painful, it nevertheless helps Darius feel more secure in who he is—to believe, for the first time in his life, that he's fine just the way he is and doesn't need to change himself to please people who are impossible to please.



SYMBOLS

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



THE JERSEY

The Team Melli (Iranian national team) soccer jersey that Sohrab gives Darius symbolizes Darius's relationship to his Persian identity. Prior to receiving the jersey,

Darius doesn't feel particularly Persian. On Nowruz, the Persian New Year, Darius's uncles tease him for his weight and for not liking cucumbers, something that they suggest makes him less Persian and more like Dad (who's white and American). Sohrab gives Darius the jersey late in the evening, and it makes Darius feel far more Persian. With the jersey, Darius feels way more comfortable traversing Yazd's streets, playing soccer with Sohrab and other boys, and simply existing in Iran—it makes him feel at home and like he truly belongs. In fact, Darius even refers to his jersey as his “Persian camouflage.”

However, following Sohrab's cruel behavior toward Darius a few days before he leaves Iran, Darius starts to feel like he doesn't actually fit in; that his “Persian camouflage” is a disguise and he never should've tried to, in his understanding, be someone he wasn't. Still, he decides to take the jersey home with him and save it, just in case he needs it again or wants to be the person it turns him into again. Darius's understanding at this point isn't particularly nuanced, but when he considers joining the school soccer team after getting home, it suggests that the jersey wasn't actually camouflage or a disguise—it just represents one aspect of Darius's identity, the part that's proudly Persian and more athletic than Darius realizes. And just as Darius can choose to wear the jersey (or not) and look visibly athletic (or not), Darius can decide how much he identifies with his Persian identity and culture in any given situation.



THE MESSENGER BAG

The Kellner & Newton messenger bag that Darius borrows from Dad to take to Iran represents Darius and Dad's changing relationship. Darius explains initially that he hates the bag for various reasons ranging from that he dislikes messenger bags in general to seeing this particular branded one as a reminder that Dad is disappointed Darius won't ever be an architect like him. It signifies, to Darius, all the ways he'll never be good enough for his dad—and moreover, Darius insists at this point that it's not even worth *trying* to be good enough.

Over the course of the trip though, Darius's relationship to the messenger bag begins to change, as does his relationship to Dad. It's surprising for Darius to discover in the airport that carrying a messenger bag rather than a backpack has its perks: he can, for instance, easily carry both his little sister Laleh and the bag. Similarly, as he and Dad finally speak openly and honestly with each other at the end of their trip to Iran, Darius comes to the conclusion that Dad himself isn't so bad—he's flawed for sure, but he's nevertheless doing the best he can to support and protect his son. This mirrors how, when Darius and his family get home, Darius decides to take the messenger bag to school as his schoolbag rather than let Mom buy him a new backpack. Darius has, thanks to his experiences in Iran, become

a different person. Though Darius maintains that he's never going to be an architect and please Dad in that regard, Darius has decided that he can take from Dad any bits and pieces that he likes (such as his bag preferences), and by doing so, he can connect with his father while also honing his own sense of self.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Darius the Great is Not Okay* published in 2019.

Moby the Whale Quotes



☹️ I took my pills and gulped down the whole glass of water. Dad stood next to me, watching, like he was worried I was going to choke. He had this look on his face, the same disappointed look he had when I told him about how Fatty Bolger had replaced my bicycle's seat with blue truck nuts.

He was ashamed of me.

He was ashamed of us.

Übermensches aren't supposed to need medication.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner (speaker), Dad, Trent “Fatty” Bolger

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Darius and Dad are in the kitchen taking their antidepressants together (they both have diagnosed depression and take medication to manage it). At this point in the novel, readers might take Darius's interpretation of Dad's behavior at face value: that Dad is concerned for Darius and disappointed that they're both depressed and need to take medication. Additionally, it's significant that Darius likens the look on Dad's face to the one Dad wore when Darius told him about a significant bullying incident—both being bullied and being depressed, as Darius understands it, are things he should be ashamed of.

It is, of course, not true that someone struggling with depression should feel ashamed of that fact—and bullying isn't the victim's fault, either. And as the novel progresses, Darius and readers eventually learn that Darius has been misinterpreting Dad's supposed shame. Dad, Darius eventually learns, has been trying to protect his son from some of depression's worst symptoms. So, in this passage, it's possible to see Dad's worried look as genuine worry that Darius might choke—or as worry that Darius might not be

taking the pills, and so might be denying himself the tools he needs to stay healthy. There are many interpretations for Dad's behavior, but it's not until much later that Darius learns Dad genuinely wants to protect him, not just micromanage him.



Then, Dad later reveals that what Darius interprets here as Dad's shame for being depressed is actually shame at having passed the illness on to his son. Depression is sometimes genetic, and later, Dad shares that he struggles with himself knowing that his genes are likely somewhat responsible for Darius's depression. Again, this has nothing to do with Darius; it's not Darius's fault at all. But for now, because Darius believes that Dad is ashamed of both of them for having depression and is ashamed of Darius for being a bullying target, Darius doesn't understand what Dad is actually doing in this passage.

Slingshot Maneuvers Quotes

☝☝ Dad never really talked about his own diagnosis for depression. It was lost to the histories of a prior age of this world. All he ever said was that it happened when he was in college, and that his medication had kept him healthy for years, and that I shouldn't worry about it. It wasn't a big deal.

By the time I was diagnosed, and Dr. Howell was trying to find some combination of medications to treat me properly, Stephen Kellner had been managing his depression so long that he couldn't remember what it was like. Or maybe he'd never had Mood Slingshot Maneuvers in the first place. Maybe his medication had recalibrated his brain right away, and he was back to being a high-functioning Übermensch in no time.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner (speaker), Dad, Dr. Howell

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 33-34

Explanation and Analysis

Darius describes his struggle to find an appropriate medication for depression, which segues into telling readers about his first major mood swing. Darius notes that, as far as he knows, Dad has never struggled to manage his depression. This belief (which ultimately turns out to be false) helps explain why Darius sees Dad as an unknowable, perfect alien—to Darius, Dad seems so perfect that he barely seems human. Additionally, Darius believes that because Dad is so perfect, it's impossible for Dad to empathize with Darius when Darius struggles. So, though

Darius and Dad have a lot in common (namely their depression diagnoses), Darius never feels comfortable turning to Dad for help, as admitting that he's not doing well feels like admitting weakness.

In this passage, Darius does offer some clues that suggest that Dad is trying really hard to do the right thing. Dad doesn't vilify medication and he makes it clear that antidepressants keep him and Darius healthy. This is a really important attempt to normalize what Darius is feeling and not make Darius feel bad for struggling with mental illness. Still, doing this isn't enough to outweigh all the problems Dad is causing with Darius by being so private about his own struggles with depression and medication. It's not until much later in the novel, when Dad shares that he spent several months on tranquilizers to keep himself safe and alive, that Darius finally realizes that Dad is indeed flawed and experiences normal human struggles. So, while Dad thinks he's doing the right thing by saying that medication is good and Darius doesn't need to worry, he nevertheless ends up hurting Darius and their relationship by not making it clear that lots of people—including people who seem perfect, like Dad—struggle to manage their depression sometimes.

Temporal Displacement Quotes

☝☝ “You can't keep trying to control him,” Mom said. “You have to let him make his own decisions.”

“You know how he gets treated,” Dad said. “You really want that for him?”

“No. But how is making him ashamed of everything going to fix it?”

“I don't want him to be ashamed,” Dad said. “But he's got enough going on with his depression, he doesn't need to be bullied all the time too. He wouldn't be such a target if he fit in more. If he could just, you know, act a little more normal.”

Related Characters: Dad, Mom (speaker), Darius Kellner, Trent “Fatty” Bolger

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In the Dubai airport, Darius returns to the bathroom and overhears this snippet of his parents' conversation. Darius's desire for a meaty Subway sandwich—and Dad's suggestion that Darius choose something with vegetables instead—precipitates Darius leaving and the conversation.

Mom and Dad clearly take very different approaches to raising Darius. As Mom sees it, they must let him be himself, make his own choices, and live with the consequences if there are any. Put simply, she fully accepts that Darius is his own person and that he needs their support to be his own person. Dad, on the other hand, reveals here that by trying to control Darius's behavior, he's really just trying to protect Darius. This backfires spectacularly at multiple points throughout the novel. When Dad insists Darius cut his hair, Darius feels angry and unloved; when Dad insists Darius choose salad instead of carbs or meat, Darius feels micromanaged and like Dad thinks Darius's weight is Darius's own fault. All of this suggests (and, ultimately, Dad comes around to believing) that Dad isn't effectively protecting Darius from anything, even if Dad's intentions are noble. Dad's help, in other words, isn't helpful: all it does is make Darius feel like his dad doesn't love or support him. It's not Darius's fault bullies target him, and it only makes Darius feel worse about himself to know that Dad thinks Darius just needs to be "a little more normal."

The Dancing Fan Quotes

☝☝ "I love you, maman."



Grandma and Oma, Dad's moms, didn't say that very often. It's not that they didn't love me and Laleh, but they were full of Teutonic reserve, and didn't express affection very often.

Mamou wasn't like that.

For Fariba Bahrami, love was an opportunity, not a burden.

I swallowed away the lump in my throat. "I love you, Mamou."

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Mamou (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

In the car between the airport and Mamou's house, Mamou holds Darius close, kisses his forehead, and tells him she loves him. This is a new experience for Darius, whose other grandparents, Grandma and Oma, are "full of Teutonic reserve" (that is, they're stoic and not big on displays of affection like this). It's interesting that Darius describes Mamou's perception of love as being an "opportunity," rather than a "burden." By extension, this suggests that at least in Darius's interpretation, Grandma and Oma—and perhaps even Dad, whom he also describes as "Teutonic"—see love as a burden. And while Darius might be

more used to it, being warmly embraced by Mamou, kissed, and told in no uncertain terms that he's loved is also something that Darius finds really positive and fulfilling. So, Mamou's open way of loving family members ultimately guides Darius to try to be more open himself. It also teaches him to treat each opportunity to tell his family members (and his friends) that he values them as an opportunity.

Throughout the novel, Mamou's relationship with Darius remains warm and positive, in part because she so clearly loves him unconditionally. She makes Darius feel like he doesn't have to do anything but be himself to earn her love, and she never once makes him feel bad for being overweight. This all boosts Darius's confidence, and again, shows Darius how he likes to be treated—and in turn, how he'd ideally like to treat his loved ones.

☝☝ In theory, *taarof* means putting others before yourself. In practice, it means when someone comes to your house, you have to offer them food; but since your guest is supposed to *taarof*, they have to refuse; and then you, the host, must *taarof* back, insisting that it's really no trouble at all, and that they absolutely must eat; and so on, until one party gets too bewildered and finally gives in.

I never got the hang of *taarofing*. It's not an American Social Cue.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner (speaker), Mom, Mamou, Babou, Dayi Jamsheed

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Darius and his family have just arrived at Mamou and Babou's house, and now, Darius is having to *taarof* with his uncle Dayi Jamsheed (Darius has offered to help carry luggage in; Dayi Jamsheed is refusing the help).

As Darius explains here, *taarofing* is an Iranian custom that in most contexts, doesn't exist (or at least doesn't exist to the extreme Darius describes) in American culture. Because Darius has been raised in the United States, surrounded by people who are culturally American, he hasn't had much practice with *taarof*. Further, note the tone in Darius's explanation of the practice: he frames it as something that's pretty ridiculous, especially when he insists that the party who finally "gives in" does so because they're "too bewildered" to keep standing their ground. Given Darius's tone, part of the reason he never learned to *taarof* well is

because he doesn't find it a particularly useful custom. However, throughout Darius's time in Yazd, not being comfortable with taarof makes Darius feel like he's on the outs and will never fit in. As silly as he might find the practice, he also realizes that it's just a fact of life here—and if he can't join in, it'll be really obvious to people that he's American and not truly Persian.

A Holodeck Vision Quotes

☝️ Nearly every car parked on the street (or occasionally up on the curb) was light-colored and angular, makes and models I had never seen before.

I wondered where Iranian cars came from.

I wondered what Stephen Kellner thought of Iranian cars, and how they compared to his Audi.

I wondered if he was still asleep. If he'd wake up and we'd be able to get along, the way he wanted.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner (speaker), Sohrab Rezaei, Dad, Sohrab's Uncle/Agha Rezaei

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Sohrab and Darius are walking to Agha Rezaei's store on Darius's first morning in Yazd. This is Darius's first close look at Yazd's architecture and the cars, and his first thought is to wonder what Dad thinks of this all. The fact that these are Darius's first thoughts upon seeing the unfamiliar Iranian cars shows clearly that whatever Darius might say, he does crave a relationship with his dad. He wants to know what his dad thinks about things, and he wants to be able to connect by sharing their thoughts and interpretations as they enjoy their first visit to Iran. However, Darius and Dad aren't able to connect like that at this point, and not just because Dad is asleep. Dad, for his part, struggles to show Darius that he genuinely loves him and cares about what he thinks. So, even though Darius often wants to ask Dad questions like the ones he poses here, he seldom (if ever) feels comfortable actually voicing them and giving Dad an opportunity to connect.

☝️ I couldn't eat in front of someone who couldn't eat with me.

"I'm okay for now. Can we come back after Nowruz? Then we can both have some."

Related Characters: Darius Kellner (speaker), Sohrab Rezaei, Sohrab's Uncle/Agha Rezaei

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

On Darius's first day in Iran, Sohrab takes Darius to his uncle's store, where Agha Rezaei offers Darius a treat called *faludeh*. But Sohrab is fasting until Nowruz, since he's Bahá'í, and Darius decides to wait on the treat until both he and Sohrab can enjoy it.

This passage highlights Darius's kindness and the fact that he knows exactly how to be a good friend, even if he ostensibly has no friends of his own at home. He doesn't want to be rude and make Sohrab feel different or like he's missing out, and to Darius, it's not a big deal to wait on the *faludeh*—it'll be better and more fun to share it with a friend later, anyway. Ultimately, this becomes a turning point in Darius and Sohrab's budding friendship. For much of the novel, Sohrab is the one who makes concessions like this for Darius, as by sharing his better pair of cleats with Darius and using his pair that's falling apart, or by explaining things that are uncomfortable to Darius. Here, though, Darius shows that he's just as willing to make these kinds of concessions and help a friend feel included and appreciated.

Soccer/Non-American Football Quotes

☝️ I could sense the disappointment radiating off him.

I never expected Ardeshir Bahrami to have so much in common with his son-in-law.



"What are you depressed for?" he shook the pill bottle. "You have to think positive, baba. Medicine is for old people. Like me."

"It's just the way I am," I squeaked.

I would never be good enough for Ardeshir Bahrami.

"You just have to try harder, Darioush-jan. Those will not fix anything." He glanced at the table. "Did you have enough to eat?"

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Babou (speaker), Dad, Mom

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Babou has just walked into the kitchen and discovered Darius taking his antidepressants. Now, he's telling Darius that medicines don't work to help depression; Darius simply has to "think positive" and he'll be cured.

On the plane to Iran, Mom warned Darius that mental health isn't thought of the same way in Iran as it is in the United States. Indeed, in many parts of the world, mental illness isn't seen at all as a matter of brain chemistry (and so remedying a mental illness with medication is unheard of). So, what Darius encounters here with Babou isn't Babou genuinely trying to hurt Darius's feelings or make him feel inadequate. Babou's words reflect his understanding of mental illness, which is entirely different from Darius's.

The effect on Darius, however, is still the same: he interprets Babou as being disappointed and as looking down on his grandson. This highlights one of the novel's main ideas, which is that a person can have the best intentions—but that doesn't mean their actions can't still cause major harm. That idea explains why Dad manages to consistently hurt Darius's feelings, even though he's actually just trying to protect Darius from further harm, as well as Babou's behavior here.

●● I thought about that: How back home, all Persians—even Fractional Persians like me and Laleh—were united in our Persian-ness. We celebrated Nowruz and Chaharshanbeh Suri together in big parties, Bahá'ís and Muslims and Jews and Christians and Zoroastrians and even secular humanists like Stephen Kellner, and it didn't matter. Not really.

Not when we were so few in number.

But here, surrounded by Persians, Sohrab was singled out for being Bahá'í.

He was a target.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner (speaker), Sohrab Rezaei, Laleh Kellner

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Sohrab has just explained to Darius that since he and his family are Bahá'ís, a religious minority in Iran, the Iranian government targets them. At one point, Sohrab explains simply that the Iranian government "doesn't like Bahá'ís," but this is an understatement. Iran is an Islamic theocracy, but

while the other religious groups Darius mentions in this passage (Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians) are guaranteed rights and protections in Iran's constitution, the Bahá'í faith isn't listed. This means that Bahá'ís have no legal protections, so practitioners are denied education, arrested, and even killed for their faith. In this sense, Sohrab's faith constantly puts his life and livelihood in danger.

This is a totally new idea for Darius, who has grown up in the U.S. surrounded by Iranians and Iranian Americans who practice a variety of religions. He recognizes that since Iranians on the whole are a minority group in the U.S., their religions don't matter nearly as much as the fact that they all came from or have family from Iran. As Darius listens to Sohrab and begins to put this together, he gains a more nuanced view of what life in Iran is like and how it differs from life at home. Knowing that Sohrab is a "target" here also increases Darius's empathy and desire to be Sohrab's friend, as Darius is a bullying target at home in Portland.

The Ayatollah's Turban Quotes

●● And then Sohrab said, "Ayatollah Darioush," and all three of them laughed.

At me.

I thought I understood Sohrab.

I thought we were going to be friends.

How had I misjudged him so badly?

Maybe Dad was right.

Maybe I would always be a target.

Even for things I couldn't help. Like being from America. Like having a foreskin.

Those things were normal back home, but not in Iran.

I would never fit in. Not anywhere.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Sohrab Rezaei (speaker), Dad, Ali-Reza, Hossein

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Darius, Sohrab, Ali-Reza, and Hossein are showering after playing soccer together. The Iranian boys have just asked about Darius's penis (Darius is uncircumcised, unlike them), and now they're laughing at Darius for his penis looking like the Ayatollah's (Iran's Supreme Cleric) turban.

As Darius notes at various points, this is the most

humiliating experience of his life. He can't control that he's not circumcised, so it seems like he's just destined to be a bullying target forever, for anything, in any culture. However, it's ultimately the fact that Darius can't control this sort of thing that allows the novel to show that bullying is often about the people doing the bullying, not the targets. As Sohrab explains later, he only picks on Darius here because Ali-Reza usually bullies him, and it's nice to finally not be Ali-Reza's target. In other words, Sohrab's choice to bully Darius has nothing to do with Darius's penis, and everything to do with Sohrab's insecurities and his own desire to fit in.

At this point, though, Darius struggles to believe that there's nothing wrong with him, and that bullying is about other people and not about his own supposed faults. This is in part because Dad regularly makes Darius feel like he's responsible for the bullying he suffers, insisting that Darius wouldn't be picked on so much if he would just be a bit more "normal." Being uncircumcised is, of course, one of several "normal" ways for a penis to look—so in this situation, at least, the bullying is not something Darius can control. For now, though, thanks to Dad's habit of stoking Darius's insecurities, Darius remains convinced that nobody is going to love him, appreciate him, or like him for who he is.

The Desert Capital of the Ancient World Quotes

☝☝ Mamou popped the lid and unsealed the tea. "It looks good, maman. Thank you. You are so sweet. Just like your dad." She pulled me close and kissed me on both cheeks.

If I had been drinking tea at that moment, I would have imitated Javaneh Esfahani and shot it out of my nose.

No one had ever called Stephen Kellner sweet.

Not ever.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Mamou (speaker), Dad, Javaneh Esfahani

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

Darius has been in Yazd for a couple days, and he's just given Mamou the artisanal tea from Portland that he brought her as a gift. It's absolutely shocking, in this moment, that Mamou says that Darius is "sweet" like Dad is—as far as Darius knows, Dad isn't sweet, and nobody has ever had any reason to think he was. This, however, ultimately highlights how little Darius actually knows about

his dad, which is part of the reason why their relationship is so fraught. Throughout the trip to Iran, Darius witnesses Dad do dishes, help Mamou cook, and do other kind things—and multiple people refer to Dad as kind and sweet. Eventually, Mom even confides in Darius that her parents were concerned that Dad was going to "spoil" her if they got married, since Iranian men don't normally do dishes. All of this makes it really clear that Darius doesn't know everything there is to know about Dad.

Part of what feeds Darius's assumption, though, is that Dad is seldom sweet *to him*. Darius and Dad have a fraught relationship, and Darius often feels like Dad is picking on him or finding things to be disappointed about. And since Darius is always on the defense, he never has the opportunity to see what Dad is really like. This all begins to improve at the end of the novel, after Darius and Dad finally speak honestly and openly with each other for the first time. But for now, this passage highlights that Darius is making a lot of assumptions about what kind of a person his dad is, and this reflects Darius's insecurities more than anything true about Dad.



Sins of the Father Quotes

☝☝ I mean, it was inevitable that Laleh would acquire a taste for *Star Trek*—eventually. She was my sister, after all. And Stephen Kellner's daughter. It was in her genetic makeup.

But I thought I would get to keep that bit of Dad to myself for a little while longer.

It was the only time I ever got to be his son.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner (speaker), Dad, Laleh Kellner

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Darius is shocked and hurt to discover that Dad has invited Laleh to watch *Star Trek* with him and Darius, as Dad and Darius's nightly *Star Trek* episode has been the one time of day that Dad and Darius act like a "real father and son." Though Darius has a fraught relationship with Dad and doesn't exactly want to spend a ton of time with him, Darius reveals here that on some level, he does desperately want to feel like Dad's son and as though they actually love each other. It's therefore threatening to have Laleh waltzing in and seemingly taking Darius's place as Dad's preferred *Star Trek* buddy, as now, Darius feels like he's lost the one in-road

he had to his father. Darius's conflicting emotions about spending time with Dad, and about sharing that time with Laleh, highlight the difficult spot he's in as he and Dad try to navigate their relationship to each other. They both want to make things better, but they continue to struggle to figure out how to actually connect and communicate with each other.

The Kolinahr Discipline Quotes

☝☝ “Mamou thought it was too much driving to come here. To see this. But it's important for you to know where you come from.”

I didn't understand Ardeshir Bahrami.

Yesterday I wasn't Persian enough because I didn't speak Farsi, because I took medicine for depression, because I brought him and Mamou fancy tea.

He made me feel small and stupid.

Now he was determined to show me my heritage.

Maybe Ardeshir Bahrami experienced Mood Slingshot Maneuvers too.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Babou (speaker), Mamou

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

Babou has brought the family to Persepolis and is explaining to Darius why he insisted they make the six-hour drive. Babou's explanation is wildly confusing for Darius. Darius sees Babou's desire to “show [Darius his] heritage as something exceptionally kind and noble. And this kind and noble version of Babou seems totally at odds with the Babou Darius has been getting to know over the last few days. That Babou makes Darius feel “small and stupid” because Darius is depressed, doesn't speak the language, and likes different kinds of teas than just Persian teas. So, it's hard for Darius to know how to respond, as it's hard to understand whether Babou's behavior here reflects the real Babou, or whether Babou is actually kind of mean. It's possible, of course, for Babou to be both kind and mean, and Darius acknowledges this to some degree when he concedes that Babou might experience “Mood Slingshot Maneuvers.” But in general, Darius takes this surprising turn of events as evidence that he's going to have a hard time getting to know his grandfather, even if Babou is sometimes

kind, generous, and informative.

Bette Davis Eyes Quotes

☝☝ I was used to being a disappointment to Dad, and being a disappointment to Babou didn't seem that different. But I hated that he was disappointed in Laleh too, for something she couldn't change.

I swallowed.

Babou looked up at me. There was something sad and lonely in his eyes, in the way his mustache drooped over his frown.

I wanted to tell him I was still his grandson.

I wanted to tell him I was glad I was getting to know him.

I wanted to tell him I was sorry about his brain tumor.

I didn't tell him any of that, though.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner (speaker), Dad, Laleh Kellner, Babou

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Babou has just shared with Darius that while Dad is a fine person, he's not Zoroastrian—and so Babou is disappointed in both Darius and Laleh for not being Zoroastrian, like he and Mamou are. Hearing this is somewhat shocking for Darius, particularly because he's not used to hearing that Laleh is a disappointment. In fact, in Darius's mind, Laleh is perfect: she speaks Farsi, she's cute, and she's popular at school. So, Darius's feelings of responsibility to his sister rise up here. He wants to protect her from feeling the same way that Darius does all the time: like he'll never be good enough.

However, Darius can't put any of this into words, so he and Babou are never able to work through this particular supposed transgression. As Darius thinks through the things he'd like to say, he demonstrates that he has a pretty firm idea of how family members should relate to each other. He wants to be loved and valued simply for being Babou's grandson, and even if he doesn't like Babou all the time, he recognizes that it's still important that he's finally meeting his grandfather. But because Darius can't bring himself to speak up, his and Babou's relationship doesn't improve much until much later in Darius's trip.

Persian Casual Quotes



☝☝ And even though I hated getting shuffled around and grabbed by my love handles, my rubbery constipated face did relax into a smile.

I had never been surrounded by my family before. Not really.

When Dayi Jamsheed started herding us together into a big group photo, my eyes started burning. I couldn't help it.

I loved them.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner (speaker), Dad, Mom, Laleh Kellner, Mamou, Babou, Dayi Jamsheed

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

As the Bahrami family takes photo after photo on Nowruz, Darius finds himself relaxing and having fun—and ultimately, overwhelmed with love for this side of his family. This is something of a shock for Darius, as he's never really felt like he fits in with his family before. For instance, he and Dad struggle to connect, and Darius believes Mom and Dad had Laleh specifically to replace Darius with a less disappointing child. But here, on an important Persian holiday, surrounded for the first time by the huge extended Bahrami family, Darius feels like he fits in and can see himself in his relatives. Especially since Darius goes on to describe recognizing his own physical features in his family members, this suggests that a huge reason Darius feels like he fits in here is because for once, he doesn't stand out in terms of appearance. Here, his dark curls and darker complexion are the norm, rather than something that marks him as an outsider. In contrast, this highlights how alone and conspicuous Darius often feels at home, especially since he's one of only two Iranian students at his high school.

My Cousin, the Ringwraith Quotes

☝☝ “You are not very Persian,” he said. “Not like Laleh.”



I looked down at my Team Melli jersey, which I still had on over my button-up.


This was the most Persian I had ever been in my entire life, and it still wasn't enough.

“You are more like your dad. He doesn't like them either,” he said. And then he grabbed a cucumber for himself and wandered off.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Dayi Jamsheed

(speaker), Sohrab Rezaei, Dad, Laleh Kellner

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 182-183

Explanation and Analysis

On Nowruz, Dayi Jamsheed accuses Darius of not being very Persian because unlike Laleh (and, it's implied, all other Persians), Darius doesn't like cucumbers. This is wildly uncomfortable for Darius, mostly because the soccer jersey that Sohrab gave Darius earlier makes Darius feel extremely Persian. It makes him feel like he fits in and is truly Iranian—he now has a signal that he supports the Iranian national team, after all. And yet, this exchange shows Darius that he can wear whatever he wants and look however he wants, but there will always be something about him that marks him as not Persian enough.

It's worth keeping in mind that Dayi Jamsheed is making a sweeping generalization when he implies that all Persians like cucumbers. Cucumbers may be a traditional Persian food, but there are no doubt Persians who dislike them, just as there are Americans who dislike traditionally American foods like apple pie or hamburgers. That is, Darius's food choices aren't actually what make him Persian, no matter what Dayi Jamsheed says.

However, what stands out the most to Darius is that Dayi Jamsheed likens Darius to Dad—someone with whom Darius feels like he has little in common, aside from sharing some DNA and a depression diagnosis. This suggests that Darius and Dad may have more in common than Darius thinks, including but not limited to a dislike of cucumbers.

The Borg of Herbs Quotes

☝☝ “It was hard for me, you know? Moving to America. When I left here, I was sure I was going to come back. But I didn't. I fell in love with your dad and stayed, even though I never really felt at home. When you were born I wanted you to grow up American. So you would feel like you belonged.”

I understood that. I really did.

School was hard enough, being a Fractional Persian. I'm not sure I would have survived being Even More Persian.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Mom (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

In the middle of the night after Nowruz, Darius finds Mom doing dishes and the two have a surprising conversation. Mom has just apologized for not teaching Darius Farsi, and here she explains why she didn't teach him. This is an uncomfortable moment for Darius. He does, on some level, wish that Mom had taught him Farsi—he knows that would make it easier for him to fit in here in Yazd, with his mainly Farsi-speaking relatives. However, he also knows that Mom did the best she knew how, and he finds her reasons for not teaching him Farsi extremely understandable. Being visibly Middle Eastern, for instance, has made things difficult enough for Darius; kids at school occasionally taunt him about being a “terrorist.” Such taunting, he seems to believe, would no doubt be worse had he also known Farsi or been more Persian in other more obvious ways.

Still, for all Mom's attempts to give Darius the best chance possible at fitting in, Darius recognizes that her attempts haven't done all that much. Darius is mercilessly bullied at home in Portland. Feeling American and not speaking Farsi does nothing to improve that. It's a sign of Darius's maturity that he's able to recognize that multiple things can be true at once: Mom wanted to help Darius, her “help” wasn't actually all that helpful, and yet he still loves and appreciates his mom and doesn't assume ill intent.

The Towers of Silence Quotes

●● My grandfather seemed so small and defeated then, bowed under the weight of history and the burdens of the future.

I didn't know what to say.

The singularity in my stomach was back, pulsing and writhing in sympathetic harmony with the one I knew lived deep inside Babou.

In that moment I understood my grandfather perfectly.

Ardeshir Bahrami was as sad as I was.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner (speaker), Babou

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 230-231

Explanation and Analysis

Darius and his family are visiting the Towers of Silence in Yazd, where Zoroastrians used to bury their dead until “sky

burial” was banned in 1979. Babou is so “small and defeated” because he's explaining to Darius both that Zoroastrians can't perform sky burials anymore and that most of the Bahrami family has moved away from Yazd, where the family has lived for generations.

Darius doesn't entirely understand Babou's sadness. However, he does realize that he doesn't have to fully get what it's like to see one's children move away and make lives elsewhere, or to have the government ban one's spiritual practices, to understand the main point: that Babou is really sad. Darius is sad too for a variety of reasons, and it's comforting to realize that he and his grandfather share this. It turns Babou into a sympathetic person, rather than the stern, stoic man Darius has seen on video calls his entire life. It's also possible to interpret this passage as Darius realizing that he doesn't need to be ashamed of his depression, which is a major contributing factor to his general sadness. Babou might not understand depression as a medical issue, but he does understand sadness—and Darius seems to see that in a lot of ways, being sad and being depressed are functionally the same thing. As Darius makes these connections with Babou (even though Darius doesn't voice any of these thoughts), Darius's relationship with Babou deepens and Darius learns to empathize with this man who, up until now, has seemed totally unknowable.

Yesterday's Enterprise Quotes

●● Sohrab glanced at me and turned back to Laleh. “Laleh,” he said. “It's not polite to do that. Darioush can't understand you.”

I blinked.

No one had ever made people speak in English around me before.

Not even Mom.

“It's okay,” I said.

“No,” Sohrab said. “It's not polite.”

“Sorry, Darius,” Laleh said.

“It's fine.”

I looked at Sohrab. He squinted at me with his spoon in his mouth.

“Thanks.”

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Sohrab Rezaei, Laleh Kellner (speaker), Mom, Sohrab's Uncle/Agha Rezaei

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 235



Explanation and Analysis

Darius, Sohrab, and Laleh have gone to get treats at Agha Rezaei's store—but on the way home, Laleh insists on speaking Farsi, which alienates Darius and makes him feel like he doesn't belong. Sohrab, noticing, tells Laleh to speak English so they can include Darius. This is a shocking and new experience for Darius, which highlights how long he's felt like he doesn't fit in. And the aside that not even Mom has asked people to speak English in front of Darius helps explain why Darius feels constantly out of place, even among friends and family: due to the language barrier, he can't understand what's going on. Asking Laleh to speak English is one way that Sohrab can show Darius he's a good friend and cares about Darius—he doesn't want Darius to feel alone and unwanted. Still, though Darius ultimately allows Sohrab to draw this line with Laleh and include him, it's significant that Darius resists so strongly at first. Darius, perhaps, doesn't want to feel like an imposition or have everyone acutely aware of the fact that he doesn't speak Farsi. He's trying to be polite, but at least in this situation, Sohrab suggests that the onus is on himself and Laleh to include Darius, rather than on Darius to be quiet and be okay with not knowing what's going on.

Make It So Quotes

☝️ “You don't keep the leaves in?” Mamou asked.
 “It gets bitter if you let it steep too long.”
 “Oh. Thank you, maman. I love this tea.”
 I loved my grandmother.
 Before, she had been photons on a computer screen.
 Now she was real, and full of the most amazing contradictions.
 I wanted to know more.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Mamou (speaker), Babou

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

Mamou and Darius are in the kitchen listening to music, and Mamou has just shocked Darius by revealing that the band ABBA is her favorite. Darius is also brewing Mamou some artisanal tea he brought her from Portland, which is brewed differently than traditional Persian tea.

Throughout Darius's trip to Yazd, his relationship with

Mamou grows and stands as what the novel suggests is a great example of a healthy familial relationship. In this passage, Mamou shows Darius she respects his expertise by allowing her to explain how to properly brew the tea—and then shows she appreciates him by appreciating the tea. This contrasts sharply, for instance, with the way Babou demanded that Darius to brew proper Persian tea and then scolded Darius for trying to smell it. While Babou made Darius feel small and unintelligent, Mamou makes Darius feel safe, valued, and loved.

By making Darius feel this way (and also by surprising him with her love of ABBA), Mamou sparks Darius's curiosity. This in turn causes their relationship to deepen, as Darius goes on to ask Mamou when she started listening to ABBA. Asking these kinds of questions and getting to know Mamou turns Mamou into a real, layered person in Darius's mind, rather than the “photons on a computer screen” she'd been until he arrived in Yazd.

Chelo Kabob Quotes

☝️ “What I like to do is use oil on my fingers, instead of water,” Dad said. “That way they don't stick as much. It's messy, though.”

The Bahrami men nodded in approval.

I wasn't jealous of him.

Not really.

Maybe Dad's place had been empty too.

Maybe he'd figured out how to fill it.

Maybe he had.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Dad (speaker), Sohrab Rezaei, Babou, Dayi Jamsheed, Dayi Soheil

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

Darius has slipped into the kitchen for more food and finds Dad, Babou, and Darius's uncles engrossed in conversation about the best techniques for packing meat onto skewers to make *chelo kabob*. Initially, Darius wonders if Dad is doing okay, but he then realizes that Dad is doing his best to fit in and may even be having a good time. It's bittersweet for Darius to recognize that his dad is somehow able to fit in so well with his Iranian in-laws—especially since in some ways, Darius feels like Dad fits in better than Darius himself does. This is why it's left pretty ambiguous how jealous Darius is

of Dad: Darius desperately wants to fit in, and it hurts to feel like Dad, who isn't Persian except by marriage, is somehow more Persian than Darius, whose mom is Persian. Still, Darius tries to look at the situation generously by applying a phrase that Sohrab taught him, "your place was empty," to the situation. Sohrab explained earlier that Persians use the phrase to say that they missed someone, but throughout the novel, he also uses it to refer to how meeting new friends and family members gives a person a fuller understanding of who they are—and also makes them happier. So here, Darius reasons that perhaps Dad is genuinely getting a lot out of this time with his in-laws. Maybe, Darius wonders, Dad was missing important people in his life prior to getting to spend this time with Mom's dad and brothers.

First, Best Destiny Quotes

☝ "It made me into a zombie. That's why I couldn't tell you stories. I could barely tell the time of day."

I didn't know.

"I lost myself for a long time, Darius. I didn't like who I became on those pills, but they saved my life. They kept me here. For you. And your mom. And by the time I was doing better and Dr. Howell tapered me off, your sister was born and I just...things were different. She was a baby, and she needed me. And I didn't know if you even wanted stories anymore. If you were ever going to forgive me."

"Dad..."

"Suicide isn't the only way you can lose someone to depression."

[...]



"And it kills me that I gave it to you, Darius. It kills me."

There were tears in his eyes.

Actual human tears.

I had never seen my father cry before.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Dad (speaker), Mom, Laleh Kellner, Dr. Howell

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

Dad has come to find Darius and make sure he's okay. Over the course of their emotional conversation, Dad finally shares with Darius why he stopped telling Darius stories almost a decade ago: he became severely depressed and

spent months on tranquilizers, which kept him safe but made it so he could barely function.

This admission is eye-opening for Darius. Throughout the novel, he's characterized Dad as perfect. Even though Dad does require medication to stay healthy, Darius insists that Dad probably had an easy time finding the right medication. Dad's story makes it clear that this hasn't always been the case; he, like Darius, has struggled and experienced very difficult times. That revelation, combined with the fact that Dad is crying "Actual human tears," suddenly turns Dad into a relatable person for Darius rather than the unknowable "Übermensch" Darius has referred to Dad as for much of the novel. And in turn, this forms the basis for Darius and Dad to begin to repair their relationship in the coming days.

In general, Dad's story of being on tranquilizers and the fact that the medicine severely impacted his relationship with his family highlights that managing depression isn't always straightforward or easy. It can take trial and error, as Dad and Dr. Howell discovered—and as Darius learned when he first started taking medication. Dad also acknowledges that sometimes, the things that people must do to stay alive and well don't always guarantee a great quality of life; this is what Dad means when he refers to himself then as a "zombie" and says that he "lost himself" for a while. Still, though, Dad makes it clear that it was a sacrifice that was worth making, as it kept Dad alive—and that, in turn, means that Dad has the rest of his life to be there for Darius, Laleh, and Mom.

Through a Wormhole Quotes

☝ Dad had never hidden his depression from me. Not really. But I never knew how close I had come to losing him.

How hard he fought to stay with us, even if it made him into a Borg drone.

I didn't want to lose him.

And he didn't want to lose me.

He just didn't know how to say it out loud.

I think I understood my father better than I ever had before.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner (speaker), Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

The night after Darius and Dad finally speak honestly with

each other about Dad's depression and how Dad's behavior hurts Darius, the two go to a local mosque together to have a touristy experience. As Darius watches Dad look around, he finally acknowledges that he didn't fully understand Dad prior to their conversation last night. Essentially, Darius realizes that he's misinterpreted many of Dad's words and actions as antagonistic or cruel, when really, Dad was either trying to protect Darius or just didn't know what to say (and then chose to say nothing). Darius has also spent years thinking Dad was perfect when really, as Dad admitted last night, he went through a very difficult period where his medications stopped working and he began to consider hurting himself. But up until last night, neither Dad nor Darius have been able to speak honestly with each other, which led to these misunderstandings and strife between them.

Now, Darius acknowledges that their conversation last night needed to happen for Darius to learn to humanize his dad. But now that they've had that conversation, Darius decides that it's actually not necessary to continue trying to find the words to express things that are difficult to talk about. Instead, they can use their actions to show each other that they love and care for each other—and in Darius's case, it's implied that he'll also try harder to not misinterpret Dad's actions as malicious if they don't come across as Dad intends them to.

“I was hurting. And you were there. And I knew how to make you hurt as bad as me.”



He still wouldn't look at me.

“I'm so ashamed,” he said. “Friends don't do what I did.”

“Friends forgive,” I said.

“I didn't mean it, Dariouish. What I said. I want you to know.” He finally met my eyes. I'm glad you came. You are my best friend. And I never should have treated you that way.”

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Sohrab Rezaei (speaker), Sohrab's Dad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

The night before Darius and his family leave Iran, Sohrab comes to apologize for hurting Darius several days earlier, after he got news that his dad had been killed in prison. Apologizing, in and of itself, is how Sohrab shows Darius

that he wants to be a good friend—apologizing is how people going through conflict make up with each other and express remorse. And Darius, as the wronged party, demonstrates how to gracefully accept an apology and help his apologetic friend move on. This is particularly true when he notes that “Friends forgive.” That is, Darius knows that he and Sohrab will never heal their friendship and be able to move on unless Darius accepts the apology and essentially gives his permission for them to do so. This exchange is significant too because this is the first time Darius has ever had a friend, and so it's the first time he's ever had to make up with a friend after a fight. And yet, Darius still has a good sense of how this interaction should go, highlighting his naturally kind and generous nature.

The Best of Both Worlds Quotes

“I thought about Coach Henderson.

I thought about lack of discipline.

“I guess I didn't think I was that good.”

“Well, you've got some skill. Why don't you try out in the fall?”

My ears burned. I almost told Coach no.

Almost.

But that's what Darius would have done.

Dariouish would have tried out.

I thought about telling Sohrab that I had made the team. And sending him photos of me in my kit. And him squinting and congratulating me.

Related Characters: Darius Kellner, Coach Fortes (speaker), Sohrab Rezaei

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 306-307

Explanation and Analysis

On Darius's first day back at school after his trip to Iran, his gym class plays soccer. Impressed with Darius's performance, after class, Coach Fortes suggests that Darius try out for the school team. This invitation comes as a huge shock to Darius, mostly because he played soccer as a kid—and his youth soccer career ended dramatically when he was put on medication for depression. This is what he references when he mentions Coach Henderson and “lack of discipline”; Coach Henderson didn't understand why

Darius suddenly couldn't concentrate on the game and accused him of having no drive or discipline. Though that wasn't true—Darius's concentration issues were just a side effect of a medication—Darius has carried Coach Henderson's assessment with him and believes his youth coach was right. As Darius considers believing Coach Fortes instead of Coach Henderson, it highlights that Darius is growing up and taking more control of his identity. He's also choosing now to surround himself with people who will support him—and perhaps more importantly, he's choosing to believe those people when they pay him compliments.

Then, when Darius notes that Darioush rather than Darius would try out for the team, it highlights that Darius is still working to integrate his American and Persian identities.

Darioush is the Persian version of his name; most of his Iranian friends and family called him Darioush while Darius was in Yazd. So, when Darius notes that Darioush would try out, he means that the Persian part of him—the one that played soccer every day with Sohrab and got pretty good at it—would totally be willing to try new things. The American and insecure Darius, on the other hand, would not. Even though Darius is now at home in the U.S., he's beginning to move more toward the person he experimented with being in Yazd. And as he mentions how fun it'll be to tell Sohrab about playing soccer, Darius also highlights how his friendship with Sohrab is giving him the confidence he needs to step out of his comfort zone and try new things.



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.

THE CHIEFEST AND GREATEST OF CALAMITIES

As Smaug the Terrible—Darius’s name for the industrial water boiler—displays an error message, Darius sweats. His boss, Mr. Apatan, wiggles a hose and returns Smaug to his normal, happy self; he reminds Darius that he doesn’t have to check the water’s temperature. At the Tea Haven at the Shoppes at Fairhaven, all tea is steeped at a full boil, despite all the printed articles Darius has given Mr. Apatan informing him that different teas require different temperatures. The Tea Haven doesn’t carry nice teas, though, which Darius finds deeply offensive. He’s only half Persian, but he inherited the entire Persian tea-loving gene from Mom. He enjoys her Farsi tea joke (that Persians make tea by “put[ing] hell in it and damn[ing] it”; in Farsi, *hel* is cardamom and *dam* is “to steep”). Mr. Apatan doesn’t think the joke is funny.

At Mr. Apatan’s request, Darius refills sample thermoses and restocks plastic sample cups, which he finds disgusting—though there’s enough sugar in the tea here to maybe hide the plastic taste. The Tea Haven is a pretty good place to work and hopefully, Darius can work at an artisanal tea shop next—or ideally, at Rose City Teas. But disaster strikes when Darius hears Trent Bolger laughing outside. Trent and one of his “Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy,” Chip Cusumano, enter the shop. Trent greets Darius by calling him “D’s Nuts.” Mom and Dad actually named Darius after Darius the Great, but he’s anything but great. He’s just Trent’s biggest, easiest target.

Technically speaking, Trent isn’t a bully. His and Darius’s high school, Chapel Hill, has a zero tolerance policy toward bullying. Basically, because everyone tolerates Trent’s bad behavior, he’s not a bully. He’s a poor athlete and isn’t attractive at all, and yet he’s wildly popular. Cyprian “Chip” Cusumano is better-looking and cooler, and he’s nicer—so he’s less popular. Trent shares a last name with Fredegar “Fatty” Bolger, the most boring Hobbit from *Lord of the Rings*. And yet, Darius has never called Trent “Fatty.”

The reader’s first introduction to protagonist Darius shows them what he cares about: The Lord of the Rings series (Smaug is a dragon antagonist in [The Hobbit](#), J. R. R. Tolkien’s prequel novel) and tea. The tea in particular ties Darius to his Persian (Iranian) identity, and he has very particular ideas about the appropriate way that one should steep and drink tea. He’s also able to find the humor in this particular hobby with the Farsi tea joke. This highlights that Darius himself is fun loving and willing to look critically and humorously at his Persian culture—though Mr. Apatan, on the other hand, isn’t.



Darius is, at this point, happy to have a job that isn’t terrible. When he’s so worried about Trent and Chip’s arrival, though, it suggests that part of the appeal of the Tea Haven gig is that nobody bullies Darius there, unlike at school. Interestingly, Darius seems to feel like he’s entirely powerless to stop the bullying—it’s just a fact, in his mind, that he’s nothing like the ancient ruler Darius the Great, whom he’s named after and whom he figures never suffered bullying. Darius has instead accepted a very different identity, one where he’s destined to be bullied.



Though Darius presents it as a fact that Trent is a terrible bully, notice that on some level, he’s aware that bullying is a choice. It’s possible, Darius acknowledges, to make fun of anyone for some reason—he could make fun of Trent’s name if he so chose. But he chooses not to. This suggests that Trent could also choose not to be a bully, but Darius doesn’t seem able to acknowledge that Trent is also making a choice to be cruel when he calls Darius mean names.



Darius has worked hard to not let anyone at school find out where he works specifically to avoid Trent. But now, Darius greets Trent with the corporate-mandated greeting. When Trent asks if the shop sells tea bags and suggests that Darius might really enjoy them, Darius is reminded that he's not in a place with a zero-tolerance bullying policy. Darius says he's trying to work and offers Trent a sample of Orange Blossom Awesome Herbal Tisane. Trent declares the tea tastes like "orange juice and balls." Just then, Mr. Apatan appears and asks if Darius brewed the tea right. Winking, Trent calls Darius "D-Bag" and leaves. Mr. Apatan says the tea is perfect, asks if Trent called Darius "tea bag," and asks if Trent is a friend from school.

Being bullied by Trent at work is even more traumatic than it might be otherwise because of Mr. Apatan's obliviousness—he has no idea that Trent is tormenting Darius with cruel jokes about testicles and sex acts. This makes Darius feel even more alone and powerless, as the one person in this situation who could stand up for him has no idea that's even necessary. This passage also highlights how society's insistence that Darius be polite to customers at work keeps him from standing up for himself: he could risk being reprimanded if he told Trent to go away.



TRUCK NUTS

When Darius gets to the bike rack after work, his bike's wheels and seat are missing—and where the seat was is a pair of blue rubber testicles. It's obvious who did it, and unfortunately, now Darius has to call Dad for a ride. Dad answers with his usual "Is everything okay?" (he never greets Darius first), and then, to Darius's humiliation, explains what truck nuts are. He agrees to come get Darius and sighs with disappointment when Darius admits he forgot to pick up the goldfish.

It seems like Darius is correct that Trent left the testicles on his bike, given that Trent's bullying earlier was mostly related to testicles. As with Mr. Apatan's obliviousness though, Darius's humiliation and powerlessness ramps up when Dad explains what truck nuts are (people sometimes hang them on truck hitches to make the truck and driver seem more masculine). Rather than validating Darius's feelings, Dad instead makes Darius feel embarrassed and alone.



Though he's only a 10-minute drive away, Dad and his beloved Audi arrive 30 minutes later. After they load Darius's bike, Darius slumps in the front seat with the bag of goldfish and tells Dad that Trent Bolger stole his seat and wheels. As Dad careens around the parking lot, Darius gives him a cursory explanation of Trent's visit to work, leaving out any mention of testicles. True to form, Dad asks how Darius knows it was Trent—and suggests that if Darius stood up for himself, bullies would leave him alone. Dad then declares that Darius's almost shoulder-length hair needs to be cut.

Dad's actions speak loudly: as Darius sees it, Dad doesn't care about him enough to show up right away when such a thing is possible. His words do as well, as Dad essentially proposes that Trent bullies Darius because Darius lets him. And while there may be some truth to the idea that ignoring a bully can deprive them of some power, Dad is missing the fact that Darius can't ignore Trent at work, where Trent can act like a customer and torment Darius as much as he pleases.



Dad's hair is short and blond, and he has blue eyes. He's basically "the Übermensch." Darius, on the other hand, looks like Mom: black, curly hair and brown eyes. "Standard Persian." It makes Dad uncomfortable when people say he has "Aryan looks," since the word used to mean noble and now means "something different." Aryan is, according to Mom, also the root word for Iran. Darius gets uncomfortable when he thinks about being "half Aryan and half Aryan." It's weird how a word's meaning can change so much. And sometimes, Darius doesn't feel like Dad's son.

The Übermensch, which roughly translates to "ideal man," is an idea that the philosopher Nietzsche proposed in his book [Thus Spoke Zarathustra](#). Using it to refer to Dad highlights how perfect Darius thinks Dad is—and in contrast, how poorly Darius thinks about himself. As he talks about the term "Aryan," Darius also references Adolph Hitler's use of the term, which has become associated with white supremacy. Feeling caught between the two meanings of Aryan highlights how uncomfortable Darius is with his identity at this point.



THE DISTINGUISHED PICARD CRESCENT

Darius changes out of his uniform when he gets home and sits down for dinner. It's not falafel, like Fatty Bolger might assume (falafel isn't even Persian); it's spaghetti and meat sauce. Mom only cooks Persian food on the weekends because it's all so labor- and time-intensive, and she's a UX designer who's always overwhelmed. Dad is an architect and a partner at a firm that designs "centerpieces for urban living," like museums. Mom, Dad, Darius, and his little sister Laleh all sit around the table and listen to Laleh regale them with a play-by-play of her class's game of Heads Down, Thumbs Up. She's in second grade with a very Persian name and is somehow more popular than Darius. Darius won't say it aloud because it's not manly, but he adores Laleh.

When Laleh finishes her story, Darius reaches for more pasta—but Dad hands him the salad bowl instead. Dad is big on policing Darius's "dietary indiscretions." Then, after dinner, Darius and Dad wash dishes, and Darius waits for his electric kettle to reach 180 degrees so he can steep his genmaicha. The tea has toasted rice in it, and nobody but Darius drinks it. Darius really doesn't want Mom to know it has rice in it, since Persians are very particular about their rice. Finally, Darius and Dad settle on the couch for their nightly ritual of watching one episode of *Star Trek*. They've seen all the episodes many times; now, they're working through *The Next Generation*. Darius loves this ritual: for 47 minutes, Dad pretends to enjoy Darius's company.

Moments into the episode, Mom's computer beeps, signaling that she's getting a video call. Dad and Darius smile at each other (they can do this without it being weird during a *Star Trek* episode) and Dad turns up the volume. Mom always yells on video calls. Darius listens to Mom greet her brother Jamsheed in Farsi. Darius doesn't know much Farsi—only greetings, food words, tea words, and family relations. Mom never taught Darius, but she taught Laleh, and Laleh is mostly fluent. Now, Farsi seems like Mom and Laleh's special thing, while Dad and Darius have *Star Trek*. Still, whenever Dad and Darius are the only non-Farsi speakers in a group, they just stand awkwardly.

Laleh plops onto the couch and announces that Mom is talking to Dayi Jamsheed, who's at Mamou and Babou's house. Just then, Mom calls for Dad, Laleh, and Darius to come say hi. Darius and Dad shrug at each other and follow Laleh upstairs.

It's a sign of how much Trent's bullying gets to Darius that Darius feels the need to assure readers that his family isn't eating falafel for dinner. But Darius also gets at the idea that Trent is ignorant when he bullies Darius, since falafel isn't even Persian. His methods for bullying Darius, in other words, are rooted in his own ignorant beliefs and perhaps have little to do with Darius. As Darius describes Laleh, it shows too that Darius can't help but compare himself to all his family members. And in his mind, his family members are all better, more functional, and more popular than he is.



*Again, Dad's actions loudly proclaim how he thinks about his son, namely that Darius should lose weight and make supposedly better choices about what he eats. This, of course, ignores what Darius wants to put in his body, which no doubt contributes to his belief that Dad doesn't really care about who Darius is. However, Darius then reveals that he and Dad do have some moments where they enjoy each other's company: when they're watching *Star Trek*. Still though, note that Darius insists Dad is just pretending to enjoy Darius's company; he doesn't believe Dad actually likes the ritual.*



While Darius leans into the Persian "tea-loving gene," he realizes that he's missing out on some aspects of Persian culture, such as the language. This, it's worth noting, will make it harder for Darius to connect with any Farsi-speaking relatives. Additionally, Darius recognizes that he and Dad should get along better than they do, based solely on the fact that neither of them speak Farsi. The fact that they don't, though, suggests that there's more to their difficult relationship than surface-level stuff like this.



Since she speaks Farsi, Laleh no doubt has a better grasp of what's going on in Mom's conversation with Dayi Jamsheed than either Dad or Darius does. This highlights again that the language barrier cuts Darius off from his extended family.



MOBY THE WHALE

Mamou is on the screen, speaking to Laleh in Farsi about school. Dad and Darius kneel on the floor around Mom and Laleh, who are both in the office chair. Even though Darius loves seeing his grandmother, he never knows how to talk to her. He can't let his feelings out; he doesn't know how. So, he tells Mamou that school and work are fine. As Dayi Jamsheed appears on the screen and as Mamou says that Jamsheed took Babou to the doctor today, Darius waves and follows Dad out of the office. Darius is a bit confused. He always wants to talk to Mamou, but it feels like she's a universe away and in a different reality. And it seems like Laleh belongs in that reality, while Dad and Darius don't.

Once Dad and Darius finish the end credits of *Star Trek*, Dad goes back upstairs to check on Mom. Laleh lurks by the Haft-Seen, admiring the goldfish. The Haft-Seen is an altar that Persian families set up in anticipation of Nowruz, the Persian New Year, which is the first day of spring. In Darius's family, Dad's the one who insists on putting it up before anyone else, early in March. It traditionally has things on it that start with s in Farsi, like vinegar and apples. The fish have something to do with the zodiac, but Mom agrees to the fish mostly because Laleh likes them. Laleh also insists on putting a photo of Dad on the Haft-Seen, since Dad's name is Stephen. Sometimes, Darius wonders if Dad likes Nowruz more than anyone else in the family because it lets him feel a bit Persian.

Laleh directs Darius's attention to the goldfish: one only has one eyeball. She declares she's naming it Ahab after Captain Ahab from "Moby the Whale" (Darius doesn't correct her; he won't say "dick" in front of his sister). The rest of the fish, she insists, are Simon, Garfunkel, and Bob. Darius kisses Laleh and she squirms. She's not good yet at pretending she doesn't like affection from Darius.

Then, Darius heads for the kitchen, washes his teacup, and gets out water and his pills. Dad appears in the doorway and asks Darius to grab his pills, too. He slides the pocket door closed, and Darius privately remembers how he and Dad used to pretend the door was a Turbolift Door from *Star Trek*. When Darius smashed his fingers in it once, they stopped playing that game. As Darius shakes out his and Dad's pills, he explains to readers that he and Dad both take medication for depression. They both see the same doctor, which is a bit weird, but Darius tries not to think about it. Dad watches Darius swallow his pills; he's clearly disappointed with Darius and himself—after all, Übermensches aren't supposed to need medication.

Here, Darius delves a bit more into how not speaking Farsi separates him from Mamou: it seems to him like she, Mom, and Laleh are simply part of a different world. So, though Darius is Persian, he sees himself as less Persian than Mom and Laleh; he sees himself as being more like Dad. However, Darius has already made it clear that he and Dad struggle to connect, which suggests that Darius feels pretty alone in his family for various reasons. It's also interesting that he notes that he doesn't know how to let his feelings out—communicating in general, this suggests, is difficult for Darius.



Darius doesn't take his thought exercise all the way, but he essentially wonders here if everyone else in his family also wants to be a little bit more Persian—even Dad, who is in no way Persian except through his marriage to Mom. Still, the fact that Dad can set up the Haft-Seen so early and feel like he's participating in a Persian cultural tradition highlights how traditions like these allow people inroads to a culture, even if it's just their adoptive culture. This moment also suggests that Dad and Darius might have more to connect over, if they could figure out how to communicate with each other.



The book Darius and Laleh reference is [Moby-Dick](#). Refusing to say "dick" in front of Laleh is Darius's way of protecting her—recall that much of Trent's bullying has to do with genitalia, so Darius may be particularly averse to using penis euphemisms to avoid feeling at all like Trent.



Here, readers learn about one more thing that Darius and Dad have in common: diagnosed depression, which they take medication to manage. But while Darius doesn't say much about his own thoughts about his diagnosis, note that he's pretty convinced Dad is ashamed of himself and of Darius. It's not entirely clear where Darius gets this, as Dad doesn't seem to be trying to hide his depression from Darius or make Darius feel bad for having depression and taking medication. So, this may reflect Darius's beliefs about mental illness rather than Dad's.



Then, awkwardly, Dad says that Babou went to the doctor today. Darius has never met Babou; Babou barely speaks to him on video chat. Darius already knows that Babou has a brain tumor, but Dad says things aren't looking good—Babou won't get better. So, the family is going to visit Iran.

Darius may also struggle to connect to his extended family because he's never met them in person, and in general that can make things difficult. Still, Dad steps in here and lets Darius know that they have no choice but to show Babou they care (and Mom as well) by going to visit.



SLINGSHOT MANEUVERS

A few weeks later, after the family has gotten plane tickets and visas, Darius tells his lunch companion, Javaneh Esfahani, that he's leaving for Iran tomorrow. She promptly sprays Dr Pepper out her nose, tucks her hair back into her headscarf, and says, "Wow." Javaneh isn't really a friend, but she tolerates Darius. She says she'd love to see Iran, but her parents don't want to risk the trip. Then, she notes that Darius will be there for Nowruz and will miss Chaharshanbeh Suri, but Darius privately isn't upset about that.

Traveling to Iran can be complicated and sometimes dangerous for American citizens, which Javaneh and Darius both are. Still, on some level, Darius's family and Javaneh both express that the risk would be worth it to see where their families come from—the trip would connect them more deeply to their culture.



Chaharshanbeh Suri is the Tuesday night before Nowruz, and it's celebrated with copious amounts of Persian food and fire jumping. Mom and Dad take the family to the celebration at Oaks Park every year. Dad has long legs and is a great fire jumper; Darius doesn't enjoy it at all. Apparently, Dad tried to jump while holding two-year-old Darius once, and Darius screamed so much the family had to leave. When Dad tried it with Laleh years later, she clapped.

The implication here is that Darius sees himself as less Persian than Laleh, since he couldn't be excited about fire jumping with Dad in the same way that she could. Also interesting is that Dad—who isn't Persian—is such a skilled fire jumper. This may also contribute to Darius's sense that he's not Persian enough, as even Dad seems to integrate into Persian culture more easily than Darius does in some contexts.



After lunch, Darius goes to the school nurse to take his pills (the school's Zero Tolerance Policy toward drugs means the nurse has to dispense all medications). Darius uses a crinkly paper cup to get water; he can't take his pills dry like Dad does. The one time he tried, he got a Prozac stuck in his throat and it was disgusting. Darius was only on Prozac for a few months, but they were the worst of his life. It gave him mood swings that were basically "Mood Slingshot Maneuvers."

Darius continues to compare himself to Dad in a way that's somewhat perplexing and perhaps unhealthy—it's not a moral failing, for instance, that Darius can't take his pills dry. As he details his experience on Prozac, a common antidepressant, he makes it clear that depression isn't always easy to manage. Finding the right medication can be a challenge, but again, that doesn't mean the depressed person is morally suspect or a failure.



Dad never talks about his diagnosis; it happened in college and medication has been helping him for years. But this meant that by the time Darius got diagnosed and was trying to find the right medication, Dad seemingly had forgotten what it's like to struggle with mood swings (or maybe he never experienced them in the first place). Medication seemed to immediately turn Dad into a "high-functioning Übermensch." Prozac was the third medication Darius tried, and after six weeks, it caused a Slingshot Maneuver. When a boy in Boy Scouts made fun of Mom's accent, Darius hit the kid. He was enraged, then felt sorry, then felt angry again, and then ashamed. Darius isn't ashamed that he stood up for Mom, but Dad was very disappointed.

Interestingly, Darius doesn't seem to offer up any concrete evidence that Dad's relationship to medication has always been easy and positive. There could be more to this story than Darius realizes, if Dad has decided to keep any struggles with finding the right medication private. As Darius sees it, hitting the kid who made fun of Mom was maybe not the best choice, but it was righteous in any case. It's cruel, after all, to make fun of a person's accent. So it's possible that Darius is misinterpreting Dad's disappointment here—or at least where Dad is directing his disappointment.



A NON-PASSIVE FAILURE

Darius is halfway down the stairs to the gym when he hears Chip Cusumano calling his name behind him. When Darius doesn't wait for Chip, Chip tugs at Darius's backpack—and the backpack splits, spilling everything but Darius's tablet down the stairs. Chip apologizes with a goofy grin on his face and reveals that he and Trent left the tires to Darius's bike in the bushes. Still, Darius refuses to let Chip help gather his things, so Chip says he'll let Coach Fortes know what happened.

Darius has no reason to think that Chip is trustworthy, given his association with Trent and his willingness to bully Darius. So, even if Chip breaking Darius's backpack is a genuine accident, it's hard for Darius to believe this and not blame Chip for actively harming him. Still, it does seem like an accident, and Chip does a nice thing by agreeing to let Coach Fortes know why Darius is going to be late—assuming, that is, that he goes on to tell Coach the truth.



When Darius gets to the locker room, Coach Fortes shakes his head and tells Darius to get dressed. The class is learning about "Net Sports," or badminton, ping-pong, and volleyball. Darius is horrible at net sports. He used to play soccer and is better at games where he can run. This surprises people, as Darius is overweight. That's why Dad keeps offering Darius the salad bowl, though Darius is overweight because of the meds, not because he lacks discipline. Dad's behavior just makes Darius feel even worse.

Weight gain is one of the most common side effects of antidepressants, which makes it somewhat surprising that Dad seems so intent on policing Darius's weight and food. And his inability to understand why Darius is the size he is—and that being overweight for any reason isn't a moral failing—contributes to Darius's belief that Dad doesn't like him and is even ashamed of him.



Darius joins the class for warm-ups and is on his third lap when Chip catches up. Chip calls Darius "D"; he can't add the -Bag at school were there's a Zero Tolerance Policy toward bullying. He says he was just going to tell Darius that his backpack zipper was open, and he's sorry about Darius's bike. Darius almost believes him. Darius is on Fatty Bolger's team for volleyball, so Fatty has ample opportunity to make jokes about balls at Darius. Chip is on the opposing team, and he and Trent battle intensely. Darius doesn't get it: if he had a best friend, he'd be happy for them if they won.

There's a lot to suggest here that Chip isn't as evil as Darius makes him out to be, especially since his apology seems genuine. As Darius watches Trent and Chip battle it out on the volleyball court, he reveals what he thinks the mark of a true friend is: being loyal and happy for a friend, rather than treating them like an enemy. So, even if Darius maintains that he doesn't have friends at school (recall that Javaneh apparently just tolerates him), he has a firm idea of what being a good friend is all about.



When Coach tells Darius to get involved, Darius bumps the ball—and it hits a teammate in the back of the head. Trent calls Darius a “terrorist.” This doesn’t happen often as teachers always get mad if they hear a kid say that, but Darius is Middle Eastern, so it still happens. And really, “terrorist” doesn’t bother him as much as “D-Bag,” since “terrorist” is absurd. Mom claims that jokes like that don’t bug her, since Persians don’t get up early enough to bomb anything. Darius knows it does bug her, though—but if she makes fun of herself, she can get ahead of people like Fatty Bolger. Maybe the insult *does* bug Darius.

When Trent calls Darius a “terrorist,” he’s exposing his own ignorance—not all people who live in or are from the Middle East are terrorists, of course. Still, Darius can’t escape that he’s living in a post-9/11 world, where this kind of bigotry is unfortunately common. Both he and Mom, he realizes, have to figure out how to deal with this kind of bigotry, and here, Darius seems to realize that there’s no perfect way to do this. The insult is going to hurt either way, as it makes Darius and Mom acknowledge that there are people in Portland who believe—or at least think it’s okay to joke—that all Middle Eastern people are violent.



INTERMIX RATIO

Darius tosses his homework into the Audi’s backseat and tells Dad his backpack suffered a “Structural integrity field collapse.” The *Star Trek* joke makes Dad laugh, but Dad is shaking his head by the time Darius gets halfway through the story of how it happened. Dad insists that Chip is just picking on Darius because Darius doesn’t stand up for himself, even when Darius says he told Chip to leave him alone. When Dad says that Chip knows he’s getting to Darius and that’s why he continues to be a bully, Darius privately wonders if Dad acts like this because he knows he’s getting to Darius. All this extra time in the car since the bike fiasco is making their fraught relationship even worse.

Dad seems to think he’s helping Darius by coaching him on how to better respond to bullying. But the actual effect of responding to Darius like this is that Darius feels Dad is blaming him for the bullying he experiences, when it’s in no way Darius’s fault that other kids pick on him. Further, Darius starts to see Dad himself as a sort of bully, reasoning that if Dad were to take his own advice and apply it to his relationship with his son, he’d see that he’s just being antagonistic.



Dad says that he made appointments for himself and Darius to get haircuts before the trip, but Darius refuses to go in. After insinuating that Darius would get picked on less if he cut his hair, Dad goes in alone, gnashing his teeth. When they finally get home, Dad storms up to his office and Darius steeps tea (with filtered water, which Dad hates—Dad hates *everything* Darius likes). Soon after, Mom and Laleh get home and Laleh joins Darius for tea. Darius doesn’t work this afternoon; Mr. Apatan gave him the week off to prep for the trip. When Darius told Mr. Apatan about the trip, Mr. Apatan asked if it was Darius’s first time “going home,” even though he knows Darius was born in Portland. But he said it’s important to know where you come from.

It makes it seem even more like Dad doesn’t respect Darius as he is when he reveals that he made Darius a haircut appointment—even when Darius has expressed clearly already that he’s not interested in cutting his hair. This makes Darius feel even more like he can’t do anything right and will never please his dad. Though not on the same level as Trent’s bigotry, Mr. Apatan is unwittingly rude here when he suggests Darius’s trip to Iran is “going home.” Portland is home for Darius; he’s an American citizen. But because he’s ethnically Persian, Mr. Apatan assumes that Iran is “home” for Darius.



Mom orders pizza for dinner. Normally, Darius loves pizza—but he can feel Dad staring at him disapprovingly, since Darius wouldn’t cut his hair and now is eating pizza with no veggies on it. Once Laleh is done talking about her day, Darius gives noncommittal answers about his, leaving out that Trent called him a terrorist. He mentions that Chip broke his backpack. Dad huffs and starts to say that it wouldn’t have happened if Darius had behaved differently, but Mom shoots Dad a look and says that Darius can borrow one of Dad’s bags for the trip.

Darius continues to chafe under Dad’s scrutiny. Interestingly, Mom seems to not appreciate how Dad treats and talks about Darius—she seems to want Darius to know that experiencing bullying isn’t his fault, and he can’t just make it go away by changing his behavior. By deciding not to tell Mom about Trent’s bullying, Darius is trying to protect her in return: he no doubt believes hearing that Darius is suffering that kind of abuse would hurt her.



Because there's so much to pack, Darius and Dad don't watch *Star Trek*—and neither of them feel like acting like “a real father and son.” Before long, Mom yells for Darius; Mamou and Babou are on Skype. As Darius squeezes into the frame, Mom calls him Darioush, the original Persian version of his name. It's pronounced *Darr-yoosh*, and it's Darius's goal to never let Trent learn this version of his name—the rhyming options are endless. Mamou greets Darius happily, but Babou just says that Darius will be here soon. Darius studies his grandfather. He looks the same as he always does, and yet, apparently he's dying. Darius is sad and feels awful, but he doesn't know how to express that. And it feels weird to say he's excited to meet his grandfather, his flesh and blood, for the first time.

On the eve of the family's trip to Iran, Mom suddenly begins treating Darius like he's more Persian, such as by calling him Darioush. While Darius is often proud of his Persian heritage, it's clear here that he doesn't always find it comforting and a point of pride: he knows that Trent would abuse any more insight into Darius's Persian culture than he already has. However, Darius begins to reorient himself away from Trent and toward his family when he considers his grandfather. Darius is clearly very concerned with conventions and how he believes he should feel and act—and it seems as though this concern keeps him from doing or saying anything to express either excitement or grief at meeting his grandparents for the first time.



OLYMPUS MONS

It's bad enough to have to wake up at three in the morning, but Darius's morning gets even worse when he discovers a massive zit between his eyebrows. After popping it, Darius packs the **messenger bag** from Dad. It has the Kellner & Newton logo on it, and it doesn't fit as much as Darius wants it to—and Dad is not in a good mood at this time of the morning, especially when he sees Darius hasn't packed his carryon. Darius chooses to take *The Lord of the Rings* to read, and he also packs a tin of fruity, floral tea from Rose City Teas that he bought for Mamou. Hopefully she likes it; it's hard to buy gifts for someone you've never met.

It adds insult to injury when Darius not only can't take his broken backpack to Iran, but he has to use one of Dad's messenger bags. Since it has Dad's name on it, it signifies that Darius is Dad's son—and right now, Darius doesn't feel much like Dad's son, or like he even wants to be Dad's son. By packing the special tea for Mamou, Darius hopes to be able to connect with her over something he loves. But this, of course, isn't guaranteed, given that Darius doesn't know his grandparents well.



Darius is a little bit grateful for the **messenger bag** at the airport, as he can easily carry both it and Laleh, who's still mostly asleep. He holds onto her until the lady in front of them gets through security and then sets her down gently so she can go through the scanner. Even though Darius doesn't have any liquids in his messenger bag, he's still “randomly selected” for enhanced screening. He tells the security officer that his family is headed to Yazd, Iran to see his grandfather, who has a brain tumor. The security guard wishes Darius a good trip—and says he didn't realize “your people did the dot thing too,” pointing to his own forehead. Darius is mortified and explains it's just a zit..

Given the messenger bag's association with Dad, it's a positive sign that Darius starts to think the bag isn't so bad here—it offers some hope that Dad and Darius will be able to repair their relationship on this trip. However, this positive aside, Darius still finds that traveling by plane while being Middle Eastern is no simple task: it means he's liable to experience bigotry and racial profiling, as he does here when the security seems to mistake Darius's acne for a bindi (a decorative, colored dot worn on the center of the forehead by Hindus, Buddhists, and other religious groups from the Indian subcontinent. Acne, for that matter, affects teenagers everywhere, regardless of ethnicity. The security guard's bigotry, then, seems to stem from his ignorance.



TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT

Darius and his family fly to New York, where they then wait for several hours for their flight to Dubai. Darius has a salad for lunch to appease Dad, while Laleh buys a bag of Sour Patch Kids. The sugar and the jetlag mean that once they're on the flight to Dubai, she's wide awake and peppering Mom with questions about what they're going to do in Yazd and what they'll eat. Darius's anxiety ramps up, as Laleh isn't asking the important questions. What if they have trouble at customs, and what if they can't enter the country at all?

Soon after Laleh finally falls asleep, Mom says she needs to talk to Darius. She explains that people in Iran don't think about mental health the same way they do in the U.S., so Darius shouldn't take any weird comments personally. Darius asks if Mom is nervous, and if she's nervous to take him and Dad to Iran. Mom says she's nervous, but only because she should've visited sooner. Darius admits that he's nervous too.

When the family lands in Dubai, it's night again. Darius isn't convinced when Mom says it's dinnertime, but Laleh is so hungry she's ready to have a tantrum. She perks up when she sees a sign for Subway, her favorite restaurant. The menu is almost the same as it is in Portland. Though Darius is hungry after his subpar plane meals, he doesn't really want Subway. And when Dad suggests Darius choose a sandwich with vegetables rather than the meat one Darius would rather have, Darius says he's not hungry and escapes to the restroom. There, he eats the rest of Laleh's Sour Patch Kids.

Darius is pretty sure he can't hide any longer, so he rejoins Mom, Dad, and Laleh at Subway. Before he reaches the table, he overhears Mom telling Dad to let Darius make his own decisions and to stop making Darius feel ashamed. Dad says Darius would be bullied less if he fit in more and "act[ed] a little more normal." Mom catches sight of Darius then, glares at Dad, and suggests they get Darius something else to eat. He refuses. When Mom takes Laleh to the bathroom, Dad awkwardly tells Darius they should try to get along and that he's sorry. Darius says he's fine; he's not sure what Dad is apologizing for. But they both say, "I love you," which means the conversation is over. They have a short flight to Tehran next. Mom and Laleh cover their hair with headscarves and Mom takes Darius's hand.

Darius notices a major double standard when he feels pressured to have salad for lunch, while Laleh—who seemingly doesn't struggle with her weight—is allowed to have candy. It again makes him feel like Dad doesn't like him, and that Dad may even prefer Laleh. Darius's maturity compared to Laleh's also shines through here, as he seems aware of the issues the family might have entering Iran, while Laleh is blissfully ignorant.



Mom, importantly, doesn't tell Darius to hide his struggles with his mental health—she simply warns him that people in Iran might not be as understanding as they are in the U.S. This reminds Darius that having depression isn't something to be ashamed of. She also makes it clear that she's not at all ashamed of Darius; rather, she's disappointed in herself for not making this trip happen years ago.



Darius has to balance jetlag and family politics during dinner in Dubai. Dad continues to make Darius feel lesser and like a disappointment. While agreeing to eat at Subway—Laleh's choice—Dad again suggests to Darius that he prefers his daughter to his son. It also seems like Darius is getting close to the breaking point if he's willing to boycott any dinner in order to escape Dad's disapproval.



Finally, Darius gets concrete proof that Dad does want him to change: he wants Darius to be "a little more normal." This is difficult for Darius to hear, as it tells him that he's not okay the way he is, and the only way he'll be accepted is to become more like Dad. Then, notice that as Darius tells readers about his conversation with Dad, he presents it as a fact that the conversation is over. This implies that Darius might want to talk more and share with Dad how he's feeling, but he doesn't think he can just change how things work between them right now.



THERE ARE FOUR LIGHTS

The one customs officer on duty looks half asleep. Darius is surprised that he's pale, with green eyes and auburn hair—he doesn't have a turban and a full beard (though lighter hair is more common in northern Iran). The officer checks Mom, Dad, Darius, and Laleh's passports, asks why they're visiting, and then speaks briefly to Mom in Farsi. He then welcomes the family to Iran. Moments after the family starts walking, a second customs officer steps in front of Darius and tells Darius to come with him. Customs Officer II tells Mom he wants just Darius. They argue for a moment in Farsi, and then he leads Darius away.

Darius can't stop thinking about a two-part *Star Trek* episode, where Cardassians kidnap Captain Picard and interrogate him. The interrogator keeps shining four lights in Picard's face and trying to get him to say that there are five—and in the small room where Customs Officer II takes Darius, there are four lights in the ceiling. Darius hands over his passport and explains that Babou has a brain tumor, and that Dad has the plane tickets proving that Darius is going to leave the country. (Hopefully Mom got Dad to stop; Dad is known for not stopping and once didn't realize he'd lost toddler Darius in the grocery store.)

Customs Officer II digs through Darius's **messenger bag**. He puts aside *The Lord of the Rings* and Darius's schoolwork, but he picks up Darius's medicine bottle and asks what it's for. Darius says he's depressed, and as people often do, the officer asks what Darius is depressed about. The answer is nothing, so the officer says Darius probably just eats too much sugar. Then, he asks about the logo on the messenger bag—and lights up when Darius says Dad is an architect. The officer lists several gorgeous buildings Darius should visit. He hands Darius's belongings back and welcomes him to Iran. Mom holds tight to Darius's arm the rest of the way through the airport. Darius wants to tell Dad about his interrogation, the places the customs officer mentioned, and how impressed he was that Dad is an architect, but Dad is too busy keeping exhausted Laleh upright.

Darius is, in some ways, ignorant about Iran, despite being Persian himself. Iran, after all, isn't a single homogenous country: there are men like the first customs officer, who seems barely able to do his job and also look less stereotypically Middle Eastern. This visit will, in this sense, be a learning experience for Darius as he figures out what Iran is actually like. It's very concerning when the second customs officer takes Darius aside: it seems like the family may encounter issues entering the country.



*This is a really scary, traumatic experience for Darius. The only way he knows to make sense of it is to relate it to something he knows really well, which happens to be *Star Trek*. Darius's thought process as he wonders if Mom got Dad to stop shows some of the ill effects of the way Dad treats Darius. Darius doesn't really trust that Dad will be there for him, given that Dad has lost his son before without knowing. Now, the stakes are even higher than they'd be in an American grocery store.*



It seems like things are going downhill as the customs officer shows Darius what Mom meant about Iranian culture not treating mental health the same way American culture does. Here, the answer is for Darius to try harder; it has nothing to do with brain chemistry. Hearing this is, in its own way, traumatizing and invalidating—the officer is blaming Darius for something Darius can't control. It's particularly unsettling when the officer's demeanor changes so suddenly upon learning Dad is an architect. Dad's perfection, Darius finds, might actually be a boon in some contexts.



THE DANCING FAN

To Darius's surprise, Tehran smells like a normal city, not like rice (even "Fractional Persian" households like his usually smell like rice). He almost drops Laleh when he hears Mamou scream and sees her running toward them. Darius has never seen Mom so happy as when she hugs her mom for the first time in 17 years. Dayi Jamsheed drives everyone back to Yazd. Dad and Laleh sit in the back row of the SUV, while Darius and Mamou sit in the middle row. She holds Darius to her the whole time, seemingly trying to make up for missing a lifetime of hugs.

Mamou asks Darius about school and if he has a girlfriend. He doesn't want to explain truck nuts to her, so he gives noncommittal answers. She insists he's so handsome, so she doesn't understand why he doesn't have a girlfriend. Darius shrugs and yawns, so Mamou suggests he nap. She pulls his head to her shoulder and kisses his forehead, her tears running into Darius's hair. They both say, "I love you," and Darius marvels that this kind of affection is "an opportunity, not a burden" for his grandmother. Still, it's not the most comfortable position to sleep in, so Darius only dozes a bit.

Darius thinks about when he was little and Mom would chant to him in Farsi at bedtime. Dad, on the other hand, would help Darius come up with fantastical, exciting stories. This is one of the few things Darius remembers perfectly from life before antidepressants—mostly because he clearly remembers the night Story Time with Dad stopped about six months before Laleh's birth. Dad gave no explanation, he just said Darius wasn't getting a story that night. Mom insisted Darius hadn't done anything wrong, but Darius knows deep inside that Dad didn't want to tell him stories anymore.

Darius wakes up to Mamou saying that they're here. Yazd doesn't look like a scene from *Aladdin*; the asphalt is dull and gray, and the houses are white but otherwise look like those in Portland. (Fatty Bolger has been teasing Darius about camels and cacti, and it turns out he's wrong on both counts.) Dayi Jamsheed pulls up in front of a white house with scrubby grass in front and tells Dad to wake up. Darius gets out and offers to help Dayi Jamsheed with the luggage, but Jamsheed refuses. This is Darius's first *taarof* in Iran. To *taarof* technically means to put others first, but in practice, for example, it means guests refuse food, hosts insist, and one side eventually gives in. It's not an American thing, and Darius has never gotten the hang of it.

From the moment Darius steps out of the airport, Tehran defies his expectations: it smells like any other city, and his family members are shockingly affectionate. Darius isn't entirely used to the kind of physical affection that Mamou shows him, though he doesn't seem to mind it. This may be in part because Mamou doesn't seem to see anything wrong with Darius, like Dad does—her hugs make him feel secure and wanted.



However loved and accepted Mamou might make Darius feel, Darius immediately closes himself off and declines to share with her that he's not the person he thinks she believes he is (that is, a popular, attractive, and good student). Still, notice that Darius doesn't seem to think of himself as less deserving of Mamou's love just because he doesn't see himself the way she does. Rather, he appreciates her unconditional love and dozes happily in her presence.



Dad and Darius's relationship hasn't always been so fraught. Indeed, they used to share really happy times together telling stories. The way that Darius frames the end of "Story Time with Dad" makes it seem like this was a very traumatizing experience for him: it was, perhaps, the first event that made him believe Dad doesn't love him. And Darius seems to have carried that belief through to the present.



*As Darius sees Yazd for himself, he realizes that both he and Trent have been ignorant about what Iran is really like. Cacti are native to the Americas, for one, and many Iranian cities are modern. Introducing readers to the *taarof* of practice helps Darius explain one more way that he feels less Persian, as *taarofing* isn't something Americans really do. However, not being skilled when it comes to a *taarof* doesn't actually make Darius less Persian: it just reflects that he was raised in the United States.*



Mom tells Dayi Jamsheed to let Darius help. The two argue in Farsi while Dad gets out of the SUV and meets Darius's eyes. They shrug at each other, and when Jamsheed finally gives in, Darius takes a few pieces of luggage from him. As Darius follows Mamou up the driveway, he asks where Babou is. Mamou says he's in bed; he's been sleeping a lot lately. It feels weird to meet Mamou and not Babou, and Darius is scared. Entering the house, Darius kicks off his shoes and follows Mamou down a hallway lined with family photos. She shows him his room and asks if he's hungry. Mom isn't here to help Darius taarof, but Mamou listens when Darius says he wants to shower and nap.

The room is small and features more family photos, including one of teenage Mamou that Mom also has framed at home. Darius starts to undress and studies the ensuite bathroom, which has a Mamou toilet: a porcelain bowl set in the floor that you squat over to use. He braves the toilet, showers, and finds a box fan in the corner to move some air around the stuffy room. The fan, though, won't stay still; it dances across the floor toward Darius. No matter how he turns it, it dances around to face him. Clearly, the Dancing Fan is evil. Darius holds it in place with his suitcase and gets in bed, facing the wall.

THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS

Darius wakes up to taps and squeaks, the Dancing Fan face down on the floor. He sees a human shape pass his window outside. Darius gets dressed, finds the kitchen, and then steps out into the backyard. After blinking in the bright sunlight, Darius sees that Babou is climbing a ladder leaned on the house, which is right next to Darius's bedroom window. He's wearing dress clothes and doesn't look sick. Darius tries to say hello, but he can only squeak a little bit—he pictured this meeting going differently. Finally, Babou reaches the roof and shouts for someone named Sohrab. A boy about Darius's age is unknotting a hose near a shed. Babou finally notices Darius, greets him, and tells him to help Sohrab.

Sohrab is short, lean, and has brown eyes that make Darius think brown eyes maybe aren't so boring. Darius greets him with the traditional "salaam," and then says in Farsi he knows little Farsi. Smiling, Sohrab says English is fine. Awkwardly, Darius asks if they're related, which is a normal question to ask a fellow Persian. Sohrab says he lives close, which is revelatory for Darius—he'd never considered that Mamou and Babou have neighbors. Finally, Sohrab finishes untangling the hose, points it at Darius, and squeezes the sprayer handle. Darius shouts, but nothing happens—the hose isn't on. Sohrab apologizes, smiling, and Darius finds he can't glare at him. They both laugh, and Darius decides he likes Sohrab.

Darius and Dad share a moment of connection here, as non-Farsi speakers who don't entirely see the point in this taarof: the luggage has to get inside one way or another. Later, when Mamou takes Darius at his word that he wants to shower and sleep, it suggests that elements of Iranian culture may be more fluid than Darius thought. Part of this may be Mamou trying to make Darius feel more welcome, knowing that he's not accustomed to having to taarof. Either way, this makes Darius feel loved, respected, and more at home.



Squatting toilets like this one are pretty common in the Middle East and Asia, though they're virtually unheard of in the U.S. Along with the taarof custom, Darius is already experiencing some culture shock: he's discovering how things differ in Iran, and it's unsettling for him. The Dancing Fan, of course, doesn't help, as it seems more actively nefarious than the squatting toilet.



Everything about Darius and Babou's first meeting is unsettling, from the ominous shadow passing his window to Babou treating Darius so nonchalantly—to say nothing of elderly, ill Babou tottering around on the roof. Part of Darius's task, then, is to figure out who Babou actually is and how to interact with the grandfather in front of him, not the version of Babou that lives in his mind and may or may not line up with reality.



Darius's interest in Sohrab is palpable from the moment he says that Sohrab's brown eyes are intriguing. Sohrab also makes Darius feel secure and welcome when he doesn't make Darius feel bad for not speaking much Farsi, and then later when he's willing to joke about the hose. At the same time, Darius is learning that Mamou and Babou are more than talking heads on a video chat screen: they're members of their community, with neighbors and friends and possibly enemies.



For readers, Darius explains that every Iranian person knows a Sohrab. It's a very common name that comes from a story in the *Shahnameh*, a book of Persian fables and legends. In the story, Sohrab's father accidentally kills him in battle, which may explain why all Persian boys try so hard to please their fathers. But Darius also wonders if all dads secretly want to kill their sons a little bit—maybe that even explains Dad.

Darius helps Sohrab drag the hose over to Babou and shrugs when Sohrab asks if Darius likes figs (Darius doesn't, unlike all other Persians). Sohrab explains that Babou grows the best figs in Yazd, though they won't be ripe until summer. Darius turns the hose on when Babou asks him to, and then he and Sohrab watch Babou totter across the roof and water his fig trees. Noticing how tense Darius is, Sohrab tells him to relax. He acknowledges that Babou shouldn't be doing this, but he does it every week and they just have to watch.

A HOLODECK VISION

It takes Babou 10 minutes to water his fig trees, and he never falls. Sohrab holds the ladder while Babou climbs down, and then Babou grabs Darius by the shoulders, calling him Darioush, and welcomes him to Yazd. Instead of hugging Darius, as Darius expects, Babou just says that Darius is tall like Dad. Darius awkwardly thanks Babou for hosting, and then Babou introduces Sohrab and says Sohrab and Darius should be friends. Sohrab smiles and shakes his head, and Darius's face burns. In Farsi, Babou says something about Mamou and robe, which is pomegranate molasses. In English, Sohrab invites Darius to come with him to his uncle's store.

As Darius follows Sohrab down the street, he can appreciate that the houses are varying shades of off-white and that all the cars are makes and models he's never seen. Darius wonders what Dad thinks of Iranian cars, but Dad's still asleep. Mostly silently, the boys walk to a part of town with shops. Most of the women just wear headscarves, but some wear black chadors that cover them from head to toe. Darius is hot just with his black hair, so he wonders how they don't overheat. When Sohrab asks if this is Darius's first visit to Iran, Darius says he thinks Mom was a bit afraid to come due to Dad being American. Sohrab says he thinks it's not so bad. Darius thinks of Customs Officer II and agrees, and then they fall into a comfortable silence. Darius is sure he and Sohrab will be friends.

*On one hand, Darius suggests it's a uniquely Persian thing for a son to try to earn his dad's approval. But on the other, Darius sees that the contours of Sohrab's story in the *Shahnameh* may apply to sons and fathers of all ethnicities—even Dad, the "Teutonic Übermensch." Dad and Darius's fraught relationship, in this sense, might not be so unique.*



Once again, Darius presents it as fact that all Persian people like figs, when this almost certainly isn't true. However, Darius uses this belief to seemingly suggest he's less Persian and therefore fits in less than he'd like to. Sohrab then gives Darius an important lesson in letting go and giving people autonomy, something that, interestingly, Dad is unwilling to do when it comes to Darius. Dad should, this suggests, let Darius make his own choices, as Mom suggested in the Dubai airport.



Things continue to proceed awkwardly between Darius and his grandfather—Darius isn't used to adults being so brisk and straightforward with him, as when Babou tells Darius to befriend Sohrab. This is also an anxiety-inducing moment in general, as Darius doesn't really have friends at home. So, it's humiliating to think at first that Sohrab is being serious when he shakes his head. This seems, initially, like more proof that Darius is unlovable and destined to be lonely, even if it does turn out to just be a joke.



It's significant that Darius begins to see Yazd in a new light while out with Sohrab, a new friend—friends, this suggests, can introduce someone to new ways of thinking about things. However, Darius isn't leaping headfirst into his friendship with Sohrab; for instance, he doesn't ask Sohrab how women who wear chadors don't overheat, a question that Darius may fear would expose his ignorance. He also discovers that Sohrab is himself a bit ignorant: Darius's encounter with the customs officer could've gone really badly, but Sohrab seems wholly unaware of the dangers inherent to traveling to Iran as an American.



Finally, Sohrab leads Darius into his uncle's store. To Darius's surprise, it looks exactly like Persian grocery stores back home. Sohrab's uncle is obviously a "True Persian," as thick chest hair sticks out of his shirt collar, but he's taller and bigger than Dad. Sohrab and his uncle greet each other with "Alláh-u-Abhá," the traditional Bahá'í greeting, and then Sohrab introduces Darius to his uncle, Agha Rezaei. Darius blushes when Agha Rezaei asks if Mamou prefers sweeter or sourer robe—he doesn't know—but Agha Rezaei chooses one for Darius. At the counter, he offers Darius faludeh, which is rosewater sorbet with thin noodles in it. Sohrab says he can't have any now, since he's Bahá'í and they fast the last month until Nowruz. Darius suggests they come back after Nowruz, so they can both have some.

Back on the street, Darius suggests that when he and Sohrab come back for faludeh, he could bring Laleh. Sohrab says he'd love to have a brother so he could have someone to play soccer with. He asks if Darius plays. Darius used to play on a team but quit when he was 12 and now only plays in gym class. Sohrab invites Darius to come play tomorrow afternoon, and surprising himself, Darius agrees. Sohrab laughs and observes that Darius doesn't taarof, so Darius asks if Sohrab wants him to come. Throwing an arm over Darius's shoulders, Sohrab says he does.

Back at the house, Darius takes the robe to the kitchen and finds Babou there pouring himself tea. Darius forgets to taarof when Babou offers him tea, but Babou doesn't seem to mind. They sip their tea in silence, Babou holding a sugar cube between his teeth to sweeten his. Darius is extremely uncomfortable. He thought he'd know what to say to his grandfather when they finally met in person, but he doesn't.

Darius falls asleep at the table and only wakes up when Mom rouses him for dinner. Over a noodle soup, Laleh tells Babou about the flight in Farsi. Darius keeps nodding off and finally, Mom and Mamou tell Darius to go to bed. Mamou walks Darius to his room and says she's glad Darius met Sohrab and has made a friend. Darius is glad too, and he's genuinely looking forward to playing soccer tomorrow.

Bahá'ís are a religious minority in Iran. It's significant here that Darius notes that Sohrab's uncle is a "True Persian," as well as Bahá'í—Bahá'ís in Iran are routinely persecuted by the government, so this essentially affirms for readers that Bahá'ís are valid and valuable members of Iranian society. Then, it's mortifying for Darius to have to face that he doesn't know Mamou all that well, if he doesn't know what kind of robe she prefers. They don't yet have that kind of relationship. And finally, Darius shows that he knows how to be a good friend when he insists that he and Sohrab put off their faludeh date until they can both enjoy the treat. Now, Sohrab won't feel left out.



Darius has made it clear to readers that he's not normally the kind of person to easily agree to something like playing soccer with boys he doesn't really know—that's a situation ripe for embarrassment and possible bullying. But Sohrab makes Darius feel secure and as though he can try new things, and so Darius begins to step out of his shell. He also gets a reminder that some people in Iran will expect him to taarof, so Darius will need to adjust to differing cultural norms.



The question of whether or not to taarof becomes even more anxiety inducing here, as Darius gets more evidence that his grandparents don't really expect him to taarof. They essentially accept him as he is—culturally American—and aren't trying to make him change. But while kind in some ways, this also makes Darius feel like he's failing to be the good Persian grandson he'd like to be.



Darius hasn't been dreading the trip to Yazd necessarily, but having befriended Sohrab makes the prospect of being here for a few weeks way more appealing. He now has the opportunity to learn about friendship and relating to his peers, in addition to getting to know Mamou and Babou.



SOCCER/NON-AMERICAN FOOTBALL

When Darius gets up the next morning, Mamou, Mom, Laleh, and Dad are already in town. Babou is in his room with the door closed, so Darius helps himself to the breakfast foods on the table and then gets a glass and his meds. Just as he takes the pill, Babou enters the kitchen and asks Darius what he's doing and if he's sick. When Darius says he has depression, he can sense Babou's disappointment—who knew that Babou and Dad would have this in common. Babou tells Darius the meds won't help; he just has to think positive and try harder. Then he says he's glad Darius met Sohrab, since he knew the two would be friends.

Darius is relieved when Sohrab knocks on the door. Darius explains he doesn't have a "kit" (soccer gear). Sohrab says he has extra for Darius to borrow. They say goodbye to Babou, and Sohrab leads Darius to a park down the street and into the public bathroom, which just has stalls with sitting toilets. Darius wonders if he's not supposed to pee standing up here, but he can't ask Sohrab. Sohrab tosses Darius a T-shirt and shorts and then asks what shoe size Darius wears. But Iranian sizing is different, so Sohrab grabs Darius around the waist so they can compare their feet. Darius's are a bit longer and much wider. He accepts a pair of faded black Adidas. For himself, Sohrab pulls out a pair of faded white cleats that look like they're about to fall apart. Darius tries to taarof but finally agrees to use the black ones.

Darius struggles into the slightly too-small clothes in a stall and pulls on the cleats. He feels very Iranian and ready to play, but Sohrab looks way more athletic in his kit. It makes Darius feel inadequate, but Sohrab's smile makes him feel okay about playing. They join two other boys on the field, Ali-Reza and Hossein. After introductions, Darius thanks the boys for letting him play with them. Ali-Reza elbows Hossein and mutters something in Farsi that makes Sohrab blush, but before Darius can ask what the deal is, Sohrab tells Darius to follow him.

Darius hasn't been on a soccer team since he was 12. Dad had signed Darius up when Darius was seven, and the coach always said Darius was okay but not aggressive enough. But when Darius was diagnosed with depression and started medication, he couldn't focus and started leaving practice in tears because the coach thought he just wasn't trying hard enough. Mom finally let Darius quit, which Dad of course found very disappointing. Dad is used to Darius being a disappointment by now.

Again, Darius learns what Mom meant when she warned him about how differently Persian culture thinks about mental health. In a lot of the world, mental health issues of all sorts aren't attributed to brain chemistry, so Darius taking pills to regulate his brain chemistry is a foreign idea to someone like Babou. Still, the thing that Darius takes away from this interaction is that Babou is disappointed in him, something that makes Darius feel distant from his family as well as inadequate.



Getting ready to play is simultaneously a heartwarming experience, and an anxious one. Darius is learning to navigate a culture that he knows a bit about, but he's missing details—such as how shoe sizing works or how one is supposed to use a toilet here. Sohrab, though, makes Darius feel like it's okay to not know things, since Sohrab is here to guide him through it. Sohrab doesn't make Darius feel bad for not knowing things and not being prepared. Indeed, he seems happy to share, particularly when he won't let Darius taarof and insists on letting Darius use his better cleats. This is how he makes Darius feel welcome.



Again, Darius isn't entirely comfortable with this experience. The clothes are too small, he's nervous anyway, and Sohrab's slight build means that he has an easier time looking athletic. Ali-Reza and Hossein also seem to have a problem with either Darius or Sohrab, but in all of these cases, Sohrab tries to put Darius at ease and show him that things are going to be okay. Darius is, in this sense, learning to trust a friend for the first time.



This anecdote reminds readers of one of the most difficult aspects of mental health problems: being misunderstood. Darius makes it clear that he was trying his hardest, but the medications made it impossible to perform at the level he once could. And note that Darius or his parents didn't tell the coach what was going on, perhaps out of shame or a desire to keep Darius's medical information private. Either way, Darius was made to feel alone and inadequate, and this further damaged his relationship with Dad as well as his belief in his own abilities.



Sohrab is an extremely aggressive player, and Darius finds he remembers a lot of his early soccer training. He also realizes that Sohrab and Ali-Reza aren't friends, like he initially thought: they battle like they're trying to settle a score, and Darius's presence on Sohrab's team seems to be tipping the balance. At one point, Darius saves Ali-Reza's attempted goal with a sliding tackle, and Ali-Reza spits, "Pedar sag" at Sohrab. The two start shoving each other until Hossein shouts at them to stop. The game continues until finally, Sohrab announces that he and Darius won by three goals. It's a bit weird, but Darius puts his arm around Sohrab's sweaty neck when Sohrab throws an arm over Darius's shoulders.

Hossein and Ali-Reza walk ahead in silence, clearly annoyed by their defeat. Darius asks if Sohrab plays with them a lot, and Sohrab says they just don't like to lose. Shrugging, Sohrab continues that Ali-Reza is very prejudiced against Bahá'ís, which Darius finds surprising. At home, Persians of all religions band together, and religion doesn't matter. But here, Sohrab is a target because of his religion. When Darius asks, Sohrab says "pedar sag" is a horrible insult meaning "your father is a dog." But he insists it doesn't bother him much. Darius says he thinks Ali-Reza is mad that Sohrab is a better player, and Sohrab says that Darius is also better than Ali-Reza.

THE AYATOLLAH'S TURBAN

Nobody showers after gym class at home, so Darius is alarmed and tries to refuse when Sohrab pulls out soap and two towels for them. Embarrassed—Sohrab is in great shape—Darius wraps the towel around his waist to take off his shorts and boxers. Sohrab leads him to the showers with his own towel over his shoulder. When Darius sees that the showers don't have stalls, his skin prickles and it feels hard to breathe. Like Sohrab, Hossein and Ali-Reza are both lean and muscular. Darius feels huge in comparison, but he hangs up his towel and steps under a showerhead. He won't let these guys see him have a panic attack.

Darius finds that the language barrier and cultural illiteracy doesn't keep him from realizing that Ali-Reza and Sohrab clearly have issues with each other. Indeed, it seems even like Ali-Reza is bullying Sohrab, since he articulates "Pedar sag" like an insult. Battling a boy who seems like a bully with Sohrab helps Darius feel closer to his new friend, if only because it's nice, for once, to come out on top in any fight with a bully. On the soccer field, Darius is realizing, he can perform and stand up for himself and those he cares about.



Here, Darius learns that American Persian culture and Persian culture here, in Yazd, are very different. It's worth noting that most Persian immigrants in the U.S. are religious minorities, such as Bahá'ís. And this is partly due to the fact that Iran, as an Islamic theocracy, doesn't provide as much religious freedom or protections for any Iranians who aren't Muslim—and the government routinely targets Bahá'ís. This explains Ali-Reza's bigotry and cruelty toward Sohrab.



Since starting antidepressants, Darius has been made to feel bad for gaining weight—despite weight gain being a common side effect of these medications. This contributes to the immense anxiety he feels at the prospect of showering with guys who are all thinner and fitter than he is, highlighting how Darius's depression (and how others respond to it) keeps him from feeling comfortable around others sometimes.



Darius can barely hear the other guys as he scrubs at his grass stains. Finally after a whispered argument with Ali-Reza and Hossein, Sohrab hesitantly asks what's wrong with Darius's penis; it looks different. Darius says he's not circumcised. He thinks he's never been more mortified—until Ali-Reza says Darius's penis looks like the Ayatollah's turban (the Ayatollah is Iran's Supreme Cleric, and he wears a dark turban). The other boys laugh in Farsi, and then Sohrab says, "Ayatollah Darioush." Darius thought Sohrab was different, and he's sure now that Dad is right: Darius will always be a target. Trying to hide his tears, Darius towels off. Dad made it clear that Darius couldn't say it, even as a joke, but Darius wants to die—or at least slip into a black hole forever. As Darius leaves the bathroom, Ali-Reza calls him "Ayatollah."

The already anxiety-inducing shower turns into a humiliating fiasco when Sohrab and his friends make fun of Darius's penis. It's particularly hurtful that Sohrab joins his friends in picking on Darius, since thus far he's gone out of his way to make Darius feel welcome. This suggests that there might be more to Sohrab's choice to join in here than meets the eye—it's very unlikely that Sohrab tricked Darius into coming just so he could pick on him. And being so cruelly teased just confirms Darius's fears that nobody wants or likes him, and that he's destined to be alone and friendless forever.



STANDARD PARENTAL MANEUVER ALPHA

According to Dr. Howell, crying is normal and healthy. Hossein, Ali-Reza, and Sohrab's teasing makes Darius cry. He's not ashamed of his penis, but he's also never showered in front of other guys before (though he's pretty sure he's normal, thanks to the internet). When Darius gets back to the house, he goes in the back door and kicks off Sohrab's black Adidas. Babou is in the kitchen and wants to know all about the game and why Darius didn't invite Sohrab for dinner, but Darius says he's not going to play soccer again. He says the boys didn't like him much as tears well in his eyes. Babou takes Darius by the shoulders and just like Dad would do, says that Darius probably misunderstood and that he shouldn't worry. Darius excuses himself to shower.

The beginning of this passage reads as Darius trying his best to tell himself he's fine—when really, he's never been more embarrassed and upset. The boys' teasing has the power to make Darius feel awful about himself, even if logically, Darius knows there's nothing wrong with his penis. Then, at home, Babou compounds Darius's trauma by essentially scolding Darius for being rude and misunderstanding the boys. This makes Darius feel like he can't trust his grandfather with the truth (that he was bullied about something really personal), so Darius feels even more distanced from his family.



Darius cries in the shower so nobody can hear him. Sniffing, he turns on the Dancing Fan and gets in bed. He decides that Sohrab is another Soulless Minion of Orthodoxy. After a while, Mamou knocks on the door and invites Darius to come out for tea and cookies. He insists he's too tired. Minutes later, though, Dad comes in and says Darius has to come have tea. In the doorway, Laleh agrees with Dad, and Dad tries to pull Darius's covers off. Darius hisses he's naked, so Dad sends Laleh away. Once she's gone, Dad suggests Darius doesn't sleep naked here—but grinning, he admits he slept naked until Darius was born. They both laugh and it's awkward, but it's better than being laughed at. Then, Dad says he's proud of Darius for playing soccer and making a friend.

Keep in mind that nobody but Darius knows why he's so upset. Darius is too embarrassed and doesn't trust people like Dad or Babou enough to feel comfortable telling them what happened. This means that Dad isn't really able to effectively connect with Darius: at first things seem okay between them, but praising Darius for playing soccer and making a friend doesn't land how he intends it to, since playing soccer turned into the most humiliating and hurtful experience of Darius's life.



THE DESSERT CAPITAL OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

Darius dresses and fishes in his **messenger bag** for the tin of tea for Mamou. She's at the sink in the kitchen, which allows her a view of the back garden. This makes Darius wonder if Sohrab will come back and how he can avoid Sohrab, but he focuses and presents Mamou the tin of tea. She thanks Darius and says he's sweet, like Dad (if Darius were drinking tea, he'd shoot some out of his nose, because Dad isn't sweet). Then, she asks if Darius likes *qottab*, which are tiny fried pastries. They're also Darius's favorite.

According to Mom, Yazd is the dessert capital of Iran, so Darius figures it makes sense he has a sweet tooth. Dad, of course, doesn't let Darius eat sweets all the time, since he thinks Darius's weight is due to a lack of discipline. Dr. Howell says it's a side effect of the meds and is totally worth it if it means Darius is emotionally stable. Darius is certain Dad has never struggled with his weight, since *Übermensches* never do.

Darius has eaten only one *qottab* when Sohrab knocks on the door. Mamou sends Darius to go get it, and Darius is shocked to see Sohrab holding an iPhone. Sohrab offers Darius back his shoes and then enters the house, kicking off his shoes to reveal black socks. Darius hates black socks (they make his feet stink) and he's certain Sohrab pulls his socks all the way up, like a good Soulless Minion of Orthodoxy. He watches Mamou hug and kiss Sohrab, feeling jealous, petty, and hateful—toward himself and Sohrab. Sohrab refuses tea and explains to curious Laleh that he's fasting; he can't even have water. Darius momentarily wonders if it's smart to play soccer if you can't hydrate after, but he decides he doesn't care if Sohrab gets dehydrated.

Darius introduces Sohrab to Dad when Dad prompts him to, and then he goes to put his shoes away and fetch Sohrab's. Sohrab follows and Darius tries not to cry as he puts his shoes away. In Darius's bedroom, Sohrab apologizes for earlier and explains that he was out of line, but it was nice for once to not be Ali-Reza's target. Darius can understand that. Sohrab continues that Ali-Reza and Hossein aren't his friends, he's sorry, and he asks for a second chance. Darius accepts, thinking maybe he was right about Sohrab.

*When Mamou calls Dad "sweet," it suggests that there's probably more to Dad than Darius realizes. Mamou's relationship with Dad, after all, is several years older than Darius is. However, Darius brushes past this, a sign of his youth and immaturity, and allows Mamou to win him over with *qottab*. Note that Mamou is able to connect with Darius over food because she doesn't make him feel bad about what he eats or his weight, so for them, food can be a neutral, shared love.*



Again, it's really common for antidepressants to cause people to gain weight, so it reads as somewhat odd that Dad takes such an issue with Darius's body—especially when Darius's doctor says Darius is fine. There may be something more to Dad's fixation on Darius's weight, though, and perhaps this is because Dad has indeed struggled with his own weight.



Though Darius might've forgiven Sohrab for his supposedly questionable sock choices, Darius isn't willing to give Sohrab the benefit of the doubt after Sohrab bullied him earlier. It adds insult to injury when Mamou expresses her love for Sohrab so clearly, as it tells Darius that Mamou has no idea that Sohrab is capable of being cruel. Throughout this passage, Darius fights his naturally kind and generous nature to think badly of Sohrab. This kind of thought process isn't normal for him—but he's capable of it in any case.



Finally, Sohrab explains why he bullied Darius: it made him feel better, since he's usually Ali-Reza's preferred bullying target. Put simply, Sohrab's choice is about himself, not Darius, and it certainly doesn't suggest that Darius is inviting bullying, as Dad usually suggests. And by apologizing, Sohrab also takes responsibility for his actions and tries to make it right, showing Darius what a true friend does in a situation like this.



SINS OF THE FATHER

Darius knows lots of things without anyone having to say them. He knows he and Sohrab will be friends for life, and he knows Dad wishes Darius were more like him. Darius also knows that Laleh wasn't an accident, as most people think: she was a "replacement" and an "upgrade." He's sure it was a relief for Dad to have a second chance at having a kid who isn't disappointing. Darius doesn't blame Laleh, but sometimes he wonders if *he* was the accident.

That night at dinner, Darius learns that Babou doesn't like Dad at all. He's not sure why—maybe it's because Dad is American, or because Mom stayed in the U.S., or because Zoroastrianism is patrilineal, and Mom therefore couldn't pass it to Darius or Laleh. Dad is sitting next to Babou, and Babou says that Dad probably doesn't like the *fesenjoon* since he's American. For readers, Darius says *fesenjoon* is "a hard food to love," as it looks like mud. However, it's delicious, and Dad genuinely loves it. Babou then takes issue with Dad eating with a fork and knife rather than a fork and spoon. Babou begins speaking to Mom in Farsi, and Dad's ears turn pink. It feels wrong to see Dad as embarrassed as Darius usually is.

Sohrab asks Darius to tell him about school in the U.S. Darius lists his classes and admits he's not good at math (Darius knows that this is a disappointment for Dad, as it means Darius will never be an architect). He then admits that he doesn't have many friends since he doesn't fit in. As Darius talks, he glances at Dad, expecting him to say something disapproving. But Dad is engrossed in his *fesenjoon*. Sohrab's smile fades as he asks if Darius doesn't have friends because he's Iranian, and he asks if Darius is the only Iranian at school. Darius says there's one other girl, Javaneh Esfahani, who's Iranian, but they're just friends.

When Darius says Javaneh's grandparents are from Isfahan, Sohrab says that's what her last name means: "From Isfahan." Babou perks up and says that Darius doesn't know that already because Mom didn't teach him Farsi. He accuses Mom of wanting Darius to be American like Dad, not Persian. They argue in Farsi and then Babou asks if Darius doesn't want to learn Farsi. Darius wants to learn, but he can't say so and make Mom feel guilty. Sohrab rescues everyone by asking if anyone wants *tah dig*, the crispy rice at the bottom of the pot. And later, before he leaves, he tells Darius that Mamou invited him to join the family for their trip to Persepolis tomorrow, but he won't come if Darius doesn't want him to. Darius asks him to come.

Note that Darius offers no evidence as to why he thinks Laleh was intended to replace him. This belief may reflect Darius's own poor self-esteem rather than anything true about Mom and Dad's motives in having a second child, planned or otherwise. Not asking for evidence for things like this also means that Darius presents his argument as infallible, and so he closes himself off from reevaluating his worldview.



Note that as Darius lists all the reasons why his grandfather seems to dislike his dad, he subtly acknowledges that Dad can't exactly change any of these things (except, perhaps, his choice in eating utensils). So, Darius is seeing Babou pick on Dad in much the same way that Dad usually torments Darius—Darius can't control his weight, his depression, or the fact that other kids bully him. Interestingly, though, Darius says only that it feels wrong to see Dad embarrassed like he usually is, not that it feels inappropriate for Babou to treat Dad in this way. This kind of behavior is, to some degree, normal for Darius.



It's a sign of how much Darius wants to please Dad (and believes he never will) that he can't have this conversation with Sohrab without expecting Dad to say something. Darius treats the truth like something shameful and inappropriate thanks to how Dad has made him feel. Sohrab, however, picks up on the fact that it's difficult for Darius to be one of two Iranian kids at school, perhaps since he suffers bullying for being part of a religious minority.



Sohrab doesn't make Darius feel unintelligent for not knowing the translation of Javaneh's last name, a sign that he's a good friend who wants to help Darius, not tear him down. Babou, however, turns this into a crime that Mom has committed by not teaching Darius Farsi. The family dynamics get difficult for Darius to navigate here, as his loyalty is to Mom, who's always supported him. But at the same time, it's also true that he wishes she'd taught him Farsi. Darius is learning that he can adore Mom, but this doesn't mean that she doesn't have faults or has made mistakes.



Darius goes in search of Babou's computer so that maybe he and Dad can watch *Star Trek*. In the sunroom, where the TV is, Darius finds more family photos taped up. As Darius is studying the photos, Mom enters the room with two cups of tea. They're the traditional Persian glass kind with no handle, and Darius can't use them without burning his fingers. She says *Star Trek* probably won't be possible with the internet censors and asks what Darius thinks of Yazd. He admits he didn't expect it to be so modern. Then, Mom asks what Darius wants to do for his birthday. It's April 2, the day before they leave Iran. She often says that since she went into labor on April Fools' Day, Darius is her April Fools' joke. Darius knows she has no idea how much that hurts him.

Darius takes his teacup to the kitchen, where Babou asks him to explain the tea he brought for Mamou. Babou insists that's not tea and demands to teach Darius how to make proper Persian tea. To Darius, this is almost as humiliating as having his penis compared to the Ayatollah. Babou won't let Darius sniff the tea, and then he insists they stand in silence while it steeps for 10 minutes. Dad enters the kitchen to take his pills, and he brushes off Babou's comments about him taking "these pills" too. He then asks Darius to bring him a cup to the living room so they can watch *Star Trek*, which he brought on his iPad. Darius is surprised, even more so when he gets to the living room to find Laleh on the couch with Dad. He didn't expect to have to give up this special time with Dad.

THE KOLINahr DISCIPLINE

Before dawn, Darius wakes up to a beautiful chanting voice in the distance. Mom enters Darius's room and confirms that it was the azan, the call to prayer—she missed hearing it. Just then, the Dancing Fan falls over, and Mom marvels that Babou still has the fan. She tells Darius to get up so they can leave soon. Soon after, Darius and Dad are outside waiting while Mom, Mamou, and Laleh are still inside, yelling. Babou pulls the car, a boxy blue minivan that belches black smoke, around. Mamou deposits Laleh in the car and Mom gives Darius snacks. Both women run back inside and Babou follows, all three of them shouting. Darius asks Dad if it's okay for Babou to drive the six hours in his condition, but Dad shushes Darius. Maybe that's why everyone is in a bad mood. Finally, they're ready to go.

Seeing Mom so expertly handle the traditional Persian teacups is another difficult moment for Darius: does it make him less Persian if he can't comfortably use a traditional Persian teacup? Then, it's interesting that when it comes to Mom, Darius is fully aware that it's possible for her to hurt his feelings even if she has no intention to do so. This raises the question of why Darius always assumes ill intent when Dad does things that make Darius feel bad. But also, note that Mom seemingly continues to make the joke because Darius doesn't speak up, when there's little or no evidence that she'd continue hurting Darius on purpose if he told her the truth. Darius's unwillingness or inability to communicate, in other words, continues to make his life difficult.



Tea practices vary by culture and locale, and in bringing Mamou the tea from an artisanal Portland tea shop, Darius is trying to share a different type of tea with Mamou. Babou, however, is clearly very invested in making sure his grandson knows the "proper" way to make tea, erroneously assuming that because Darius is interested in other types of tea, he's not properly educated in Persian tea practices. Babou also suggests again that taking medication for depression is inappropriate, though Dad sets an example by simply brushing Babou off. Dad's behavior implies that it's not worth fighting Babou; he's too stuck in his ways. He and Darius should instead just do what they know they must do to stay healthy.



Babou seemingly has a habit of keeping objects long past when they perhaps need to be fixed or replaced, as evidenced both by the Dancing Fan (which has clearly been around for some time, if Mom remembers the fan being a menace when she last lived in Iran) and the van in poor condition. To Mom, though, this is just one of Babou's quirks. Darius also senses that his family members are perhaps giving Babou more leeway due to his brain tumor than they might otherwise. So, Darius observes that people tiptoe around Babou to try to make him feel better and more useful.



Babou picks Sohrab up in front of his house and the journey begins. Babou's driving is terrible and frightening, though Dad seems right at home. The six-hour journey takes four and a half hours. At Persepolis, Darius discovers that ticket offices are pretty much the same everywhere—though Babou sweats as he haggles over the admission fee. Mom finally shoves money at the cashier, shocking the cashier, while Darius compliments Laleh's headscarf to stop her from fidgeting. Laleh takes Babou's hand to enter the bazaar, and Sohrab tells Darius that he's a great brother. It's nice to hear, though it's not really true.

Laleh escapes Babou's grasp as they reach the ruins, and Sohrab and Darius jog to keep up with her. They stop, awed, when they see the ruins. Dad pulls out his sketchbook to draw some broken pillars, while Sohrab shows Darius a statue of a lamassu (a traditional Persian "mishmash animal"). It's supposed to flank the Gate of All Nations, which is no longer a gate but is still impressive. Through the gate they reach Darius the Great's palace, where Mom and Mamou are waiting. Mom is upset that Dad is sketching and goes back to tell him to stop—someone will think he's planning a drone strike. After Mom scolds him, Dad tells Darius he's glad they're getting to see this. Darius thinks maybe Dad is doing his best to connect.

Later in the day, Sohrab leads Darius through what's left of the Apadana, the main palace. It's a magical place and according to Sohrab, lots of the buildings here were unfinished when Alexander the Great sacked Persepolis. Alexander the Great, Darius decides, was the Trent Bolger of the ancient world. When Dad pulls out his sketchbook again to draw some arches, he explains to Sohrab that he's an architect. Darius wants to say so much to Dad. He wants to know if the ruins remind him of Vulcan and invite Dad to explore, but he doesn't know how. Instead, he leads Sohrab away. Sohrab reveals that he'd like to be an architect or a civil engineer, but that's not easy for a Bahá'í. He doesn't explain what he means.

Mom is only willing to put up with her dad's eccentricities so much—it's absurd, her behavior suggests, to expect to haggle for ticket prices at such a huge attraction as Persepolis. Mom has, in this sense, become more American—the cashier's shock suggests her behavior is unexpected. And keep in mind that Darius isn't a reliable narrator, so readers should take it with a grain of salt when he says he's not a great brother. He's keeping Laleh entertained and on track, which is objectively helpful in this situation.



While Dad drawing buildings would likely attract little or no negative attention in the U.S., here, Mom makes it clear that Dad needs to carefully police his behavior so as to not arouse suspicion. This points to the difficult relationship between Iran and the U.S. more broadly—and it also gives Dad a small taste of the kind of prejudice his family members experience at home. Note that here, Darius is willing to give Dad more of the benefit of the doubt and see his overtures as genuine attempts to connect. This reflects Darius's growing maturity, as well as a potential shift in Dad's thinking with regards to how he relates to his son.



Here, Darius essentially decides that bullying has existed for millennia—Alexander the Great sacked Persepolis in 330 B.C.E. However, the tone here is more of a shrug that this is just the way things always have been and always will be, which further explains Darius's belief that he can't escape bullies like Trent. Once again, Darius's discomfort speaking openly with people prevents him from connecting to Dad. And Sohrab alludes here to the fact that the Iranian government systematically denies Bahá'ís education, so Sohrab has fewer options when it comes to higher education.



Darius and Sohrab find Laleh and Babou in front of an ornate carved wall depicting a bearded man on a throne. Babou says it's Darius—Darius the Great. He was a great man who was smart and brave. Darius doesn't feel smart or brave, but Babou says that Mom and Dad chose a good name. Then, throwing an arm around Darius's shoulders, he says it's important for Darius to know where he comes from. This is confusing: yesterday Darius wasn't Persian enough because of his depression and his fancy teas, but today, Babou is trying to connect. Maybe Babou has Mood Slingshot Maneuvers, too. As Babou walks away, Sohrab says Babou is right. Darius isn't sure what to say. Sohrab grew up here, knowing who he is and without an ancient emperor to measure up to. But Sohrab puts an arm around Darius and says it's okay.

What Darius seems to miss here is that at Persepolis, Babou gets to be the expert. He's introducing his grandson to a historical site that's close to his heart, and for now, he also gets to say what makes sense to him about Darius the Great. When it comes to Darius's depression and his teas, Babou isn't an expert—he understands neither. He is, in a sense, trying to see the Darius he wants to see here, and this is confusing for Darius. But Sohrab's friendship helps Darius feel okay with this strange interaction, as Sohrab makes Darius feel like it's just fine to have complicated, conflicting emotions about all he's experiencing.



BETTE DAVIS EYES

At the outskirts of Yazd, Babou slows the van down and starts to snap at Mom in Farsi. He argues with Mamou until he finally slams on the brakes. When Mom tells Dad she's going to finish the drive, he insists on driving and straps himself into the driver's seat. As Mamou guides Dad home, Sohrab whispers to Darius that Babou got lost. Darius knows Babou won't get to drive again after this. He and Sohrab say nothing when they drop Sohrab off. When they get home, Mamou leads Babou inside. Darius and Laleh go in too, and Darius looks back to see Dad holding Mom while she cries. Darius doesn't know what to do, but he does know where Mamou keeps her tea supplies now. He makes tea and then offers Babou a cup in the sunroom.

The trip to Persepolis ends really sadly: it's impossible for the family to ignore that Babou's health and mental acuity are worsening. For Darius, though, this turns Babou into a more sympathetic figure. And Darius also knows how to connect to Babou, at least superficially: through tea. By making Babou tea, Darius is able to show Babou that he values the things that Babou can teach him (such as how to make proper Persian tea) and wants to do nice things for his grandfather. Also, note that Darius feels compelled to do this in part because it's the only thing he's comfortable doing to help. He doesn't know how to help Mom, for instance—or even if he can help her at all.



Somehow, in the lamplight, Babou looks friendlier as he processes stalks of cilantro. But Babou also looks gray—and Darius thinks he might prefer seeing Babou on a computer screen. Babou points out photos of Mom as a kid and teen, and then he says Mom did well in America—she married Dad and had Darius and Laleh. Laleh runs off with the colander of herbs, and Babou says that Dad is a good man but he's not Zoroastrian, and neither are Darius or Laleh. Darius is used to being a disappointment, but he feels bad that Laleh is disappointing Babou for something she can't change. He wants to tell Babou that he's still his grandson, he's glad to get to know him, and he's sorry about the brain tumor, but instead they sit in silence and sip tea.

Only interacting with Babou over video phone chats created distance between Darius and his grandfather—over video chat, Babou doesn't say things like he does here, about Darius and Laleh being disappointing to him. So, being around Babou in person forces Darius to confront the less savory aspects of Babou's identity and his beliefs. Privately, Darius has a pretty specific idea of how Babou should treat his grandkids, and in his view, Babou should show them unconditional love and respect. But Darius isn't able to advocate for this, as he's not sure how to voice this in a way that would get through to Babou.



Darius finds Mamou in the kitchen with a cup of tea. She confirms that he put cinnamon in the tea and says Babou can't taste that sort of thing anymore, but she likes it. They discuss the trip and Mamou says she wishes Darius lived here, so he'd be close and know his history. But she's happy for him in America, too. Then, Darius asks if Babou is okay. Sadly, Mamou says he is, but Darius knows he isn't. They say they love each other. Then, Mamou changes the subject and asks if Darius wants to eat broccoli tomorrow. While he washes teacups, Mamou says Darius is like Dad: he washes dishes and is very sweet.

Mamou is more of the grandparent Darius wants to have. She's kind, generous, loving, and seems to genuinely appreciate Darius for who he is. Her willingness to be openly affectionate also seems to be really meaningful for Darius, suggesting that this is something he craves and doesn't really get at home. And then again, Mamou drops another clue that Darius isn't an expert on Dad. If so many folks here describe Dad as sweet, they likely know something about Dad that Darius doesn't.



PERSIAN CASUAL

The next morning, Dad shakes Darius awake and wishes him a happy Nowruz. The same special rules for *Star Trek* apply on Nowruz, except on Nowruz, Dad and Darius have an audience. But Dad says Dayi Soheil will be here soon, so Darius should get breakfast before the kitchen gets taken over. Darius's traditional breakfast of feta and *sangak* bread makes him feel very Persian, just like Darius the First. Mom comes into the kitchen a bit later with her hair in curlers. She says she's only dressing up a little bit, but Darius doesn't have to. She and Dad discuss that Laleh is watching soap operas with Babou to improve her Farsi, and they joke that Babou might kidnap her. Darius kind of wants to watch and improve his Farsi.

Nowruz offers Dad and Darius another opportunity to pretend like everything is okay between them. Once again, Darius feels like he's caught between being too American and appropriately Persian: he's eating the right foods to make him Persian, but Babou continues to reject Darius's company in favor of Laleh's due to the language barrier. And despite Babou being offended that Darius doesn't know much Farsi, he's not going out of his way to help his grandson learn. Though this connects Darius to Dad in a way—they're the only non-Farsi speakers here—Nowruz's magic isn't enough to make Darius feel entirely secure in this fact.



Once Mom is out of earshot, Dad and Darius agree that the dress code is Persian Casual. This encompasses anything from nicer than business casual to almost black tie, and the point is to look fancier than anyone else. Darius and Dad are at a disadvantage, as neither of them brought a suit jacket. Mom always insists Persian Casual as Dad and Darius understand it is all in their heads. But still, Darius puts on dress pants and a turquoise button-up that is slimming and makes him feel almost handsome. Dayi Soheil and his wife, Zandayi Simin, arrive around noon. As they hug Darius and exchange the traditional greetings, Dayi Soheil pats Darius's stomach and asks if all the medicines caused it. *Dad* doesn't even point out Darius's stomach. Darius is ashamed.

Persian Casual might not officially exist. But Dad and Darius, as outsiders to Persian culture, nevertheless recognize that it is indeed a thing, no matter what Mom says. This highlights how important perspective is: Darius and Dad have this perspective exactly because they're not entirely Persian. Then, it's mortifying for Darius when Dayi Soheil essentially suggests that Darius is overweight, while also acknowledging that he knows Darius takes medication. He, interestingly, doesn't seem to mean to hurt Darius's feelings, but the effect is the same in any case: Darius feels awful about himself.



Sohrab arrives a bit later, also dressed in Persian Casual in a textured white button-up. Darius uses a greeting reserved for close friends, and then Sohrab introduces his mom, Khanum Rezaei. She kisses Darius and then flies across the room toward Mamou. Darius asks if Sohrab's dad is coming, but Sohrab shifts nervously and says it's just him and his mom.

It's a sign of how close Darius and Sohrab are growing that Darius chooses to use a greeting for close friends. This is Darius's way of telling Sohrab how much he cares about him. Then, Sohrab's behavior is a bit odd when Darius asks about his dad. It suggests that Sohrab's family situation is, perhaps, not as rosy as Darius might assume.



For readers, Darius explains that Persians probably invented the “ancient and noble art of the awkward family photo.” Non-Fractional Persians refuse to smile in photos, so Mom just purses her lips. Dad and Laleh smile, while Darius just looks constipated. The photos go on forever, and Darius is pulled into a lot of them. Eventually, he’s smiling for real. Dayi Jamsheed finally pulls everyone together for a group photo, and Darius starts to tear up. He loves his family and how they’re just like him in so many ways. Dad rubs Darius’s back and says he’s lucky to have this big family.

Just as Sohrab snaps the photo, Babou stands and says something to Mamou in Farsi that causes the entire house to go silent. Then, Babou starts shouting angrily. Other people look shocked, but Mamou keeps smiling, though it doesn’t reach her eyes. Finally, Babou storms away and Mamou starts sobbing into Darius’s shoulder. Mamou excuses herself and Sohrab explains to Darius that Babou sometimes gets mad for no reason now, but he’s not really like that. Babou has always seemed stern and severe to Darius, but it’s nice to believe that some version of Babou doesn’t make Mamou cry. Not knowing what else to do, Darius suggests they make tea.

As Darius and Sohrab wait for the tea, Darius confirms that Sohrab’s fast ends at sunset tonight. Soon, Zandayi Simin comes in and says something to Sohrab in Farsi. It makes Sohrab blush. Then, Zandayi Simin tells Darius she loves him, her English is poor, and Sohrab is going to help translate—she’ll answer any of Darius’s questions. Darius has so many questions. He wants to know his family’s stories and what it’s like to grow up in Iran. This is a huge gift, but he’s too nervous to ask a question. Sohrab tells Zandayi Simin to tell the story about Babou and the *aftabeh*, which makes them both blush and laugh. She asks if Darius knows what an *aftabeh* is.

MY COUSIN, THE RINGWRAITH

Nowruz is kind of the Persian version of Christmas: it’s a family affair, there’s lots of food, and you take the day off school or work (though Darius never told anyone why he was out of school). When Mamou and Babou emerge from their room, they give out gifts, just like Christmas. They give Darius a white shirt like Sohrab’s, and both Darius and Laleh get five million rial (which isn’t nearly as impressive in dollars) from their uncles. As Darius goes to put his gifts in his room, Sohrab follows and gives Darius a gift of his own. Darius refuses, and it’s not just a taarof; he feels selfish and awful for not getting Sohrab a gift. But he unwraps the package to reveal a soccer **jersey** for Iran’s national team.

Initially, the photos are hard for Darius because of his body image issues and because he’s not entirely sold on the value of taking all these photos. However, he can’t ignore that the photos, awkward or not, make him feel connected to his extended family and like he belongs here. Indeed, it seems like a rare moment of agreement and understanding when Dad suggests Darius is lucky. These photos will commemorate that Darius has this family, thereby making it feel more real to him when he’s thousands of miles away, at home in Portland.



The happy, connected moment ends when Babou says something presumably cruel or otherwise inappropriate to Mamou. While it’s nice to hear that Babou isn’t really a mean person, Darius sees again that intentions don’t matter much: Babou can still bring Mamou to tears, even if the brain tumor is to blame. This further complicates Darius’s relationship with Babou, as it’s hard to love someone who makes Mamou so unhappy for seemingly no reason.



*Zandayi Simin seems to pick up on the fact that Darius desperately wants to know everything there is to know about the Iranian contingency of his family. However, Darius remains unable to voice his questions, something the novel attributes to his difficulty trusting that people are going to take what he has to say seriously. Sohrab saves the day by bringing up what seems to be a funny story: an *aftabeh* looks like a watering can, but it’s used like a bidet after using the toilet. This breaks up the tension and, presumably, helps Darius see that Babou is human, just like he is.*



Darius didn’t share with anyone at home that he skipped school on Nowruz to escape the expected bullying. Even though Nowruz is a happy holiday, and one Darius likes, then, Darius’s desire to fit in means he feels compelled to hide elements of Persian culture. Five million rial is about \$100, so as Darius notes, it’s a generous sum but not nearly as impressive as if the exchange rate were one to one. Sohrab’s gift, however, takes his and Darius’s friendship to a new level. It highlights that they’ve bonded over soccer, and wearing a jersey for the Iranian national team also helps Darius feel (and look) more Iranian.



Darius's emotions are all over the place. He thanks Sohrab, sniffles, and pulls on the **jersey**—it makes him feel like he belongs. Just then, Khanum Rezaei appears in the doorway with a camera and takes a picture of Sohrab and Darius, their arms over each other's shoulders. Darius loves how Sohrab isn't afraid to show affection to another guy like that.

The meal starts at sunset so that Sohrab and Khanum Rezaei can eat with everyone else. Darius enjoys the stews, while Laleh eats cucumbers whole. Dayi Jamsheed asks Darius if he doesn't like cucumbers, and when Darius says he doesn't, Jamsheed observes that Darius isn't Persian like Laleh; he's more like Dad. Darius is still wearing the **jersey** from Sohrab and has never felt more Persian—but it's still not enough. Darius goes to the kitchen and finds Dad doing dishes. He insists on helping and shares that Mamou said it was sweet that Dad does dishes. Dad says that Mamou told Mom he was going to spoil her, since Iranian men don't do dishes. But he's happy to help.

Dad asks how Darius is getting along with his uncles, so Darius shares that Dayi Jamsheed said he wasn't Persian enough because he doesn't like cucumbers and Dayi Soheil called him fat. Dad is aghast at first, but then says the belly pat was probably just affection. Mom enters the kitchen and tells Darius and Dad to join the party. Dad tries to refuse, which makes Darius wonder if Dad is trying to avoid all the Bahramis. But Dad never avoids anything, so that can't be it. Finally, Dad steers Darius back to the living room.

After dinner, people push back furniture so they can dance. The ladies start, while Darius and Sohrab stand in the corner and dance in place. Darius has never had more fun, but then Sohrab drags Darius onto the floor. It hurts that Sohrab and Mamou have celebrated Nowruz like this before, and Darius is jealous when Mamou kisses Sohrab on the cheek. But Sohrab smiles at Darius like he understands, and everything is okay. Soon after, Darius finds Dad, Dayi Jamsheed, Dayi Soheil, and Babou playing Rook in the kitchen. It's a very Iranian game and you play in pairs, so it's shocking to see Dad playing, partnered with Babou. He even looks like he's having fun and fits in—he's truly the Übermensch. Darius sneaks a qottab and slips out the door.

Immediately, Darius picks up on the significance of the jersey. It's not just a token of his and Sohrab's friendship; it also makes Darius look like he belongs in Iran. That Darius so appreciates Sohrab's physical affection again suggests that Darius misses this kind of connection at home in Portland.



Darius is on an emotional roller coaster. Sohrab made Darius feel wanted and like he fits in by giving him the jersey—while Dayi Jamsheed manages to make Darius feel the exact opposite. This suggests, pessimistically, that Darius might never feel entirely like he fits in. There will always be someone whom Darius perceives as more Persian who will thus have the ability to tear Darius down. As Darius and Dad chat, Dad suggests there are things about Persian culture that he dislikes: he'd rather be more helpful in the kitchen than traditional Persian culture would prefer, for instance. Culture, Dad suggests, is up for interpretation—and Darius also has the ability to pick and choose which elements of Persian or American culture he wants to follow.



Though Dad and Darius seemed to be connecting well, Dad (perhaps unwittingly) alienates Darius by not validating Darius's negative experiences with his uncles. Still, Darius generously tries to put himself in Dad's shoes and wonder if Dad isn't as comfortable as he seems surrounded by Mom's extended family. However, Darius continues to see Dad as perfect, so he ultimately rejects the possibility that Dad might be uncomfortable.



Like so many of Darius's other experiences in Iran, dancing is emotionally difficult. It's fun, but Darius can't ignore that he's here dancing for the first time. He implies that he feels on the outs, especially since Sohrab has been here for years and has, perhaps, played the role of a grandson for Mamou and Babou. Then, it makes Darius feel even more alienated to find Dad seemingly fitting in and playing Rook. It's especially surprising since Dad is playing with Babou, who doesn't much like Dad. But rather than wonder if Dad is actually having fun and fitting in (or if he's just pretending), Darius assumes Dad is perfect and, by extension, that he never will be.



MAIN SEQUENCE

Darius likes jasmine in tea, but he's never smelled fresh blooming jasmine before now. He sinks down next to a planter, thinking about how everyone but him belongs here—even Dad. Sohrab appears and sits down next to Darius and asks why Darius is crying. After a minute, Darius says it's hard to not understand Farsi, Dayi Soheil called him fat, and everyone is disappointed in him. Nobody wants him here. Sohrab introduces Darius to a Farsi phrase, "your place was empty," which is what they say when they miss someone. Darius's place was empty before, but he belongs here, with his family.

When Darius stops crying, he asks Sohrab to not tell Babou or Dad that he was crying. Sohrab asks about Dad, and Darius says Dad is just unhappy with everything Darius says and does and keeps trying to change Darius to make him more like Dad. Dad blames Darius for the bullying. Then, Darius admits he has depression and Dad does too. Sohrab asks if something bad happened, but he's not judgmental. Darius says he and Dad don't talk about it, in part because Darius feels like Dad doesn't really love him. He tells Sohrab about all the times he's disappointed Dad, and Sohrab is a good listener.

Finally, Darius asks about Sohrab's dad. Looking away, Sohrab says everyone else already knows, but his dad is in jail. He was arrested years ago during some protests, but he was just on his way to work, not protesting. He was arrested because he's Bahá'í, and Sohrab patiently explains that the government hates Bahá'ís. Darius apologizes. The boys sit outside talking until late, and Darius does feel better after talking.

But when Darius and Sohrab enter the kitchen, Dad is talking to Babou—and he's saying that Darius makes things hard for himself. Babou reminds Dad that he can't control Darius and that Darius is going to be fine—he made friends with Sohrab, after all. Dad says that Sohrab might be Darius's first real friend. Darius's chest feels like it's collapsing. Dad is right, but Darius hates that and hates that Sohrab heard. Finally, Dad notices Darius and turns red, but Sohrab saves the day by telling Babou goodbye. The boys walk through the living room and Sohrab reminds Darius that his place was empty—but Sohrab says *his* place was also empty. He's never had a real friend before. They agree to see each other tomorrow.

As Darius sees it, he'll never fit in. He doesn't speak the language and he's implied that the ideal body type in Iran is small and athletic (where Darius is tall and overweight). So, Darius takes this all a step further: he doesn't fit in, and so it must be true that nobody wants him. Sohrab, however, asks Darius to look past these outward markers that Darius doesn't fit in and, essentially, remember how good it felt taking photos earlier. Darius's family does love him and want him here, and Darius's size and the language barrier doesn't actually change that.



For seemingly the first time in his life, Darius opens up to a peer about his depression and how Dad's behavior makes him feel. Darius makes it really clear that he just wants to hear that he's loved unconditionally, which Dad doesn't convey well when he seems constantly disappointed in Darius. Sohrab also takes a much less judgmental view of Darius's depression than other Iranian people have, suggesting that perhaps the perception of mental health issues like this is changing among Iranian youth.



In some ways, it seems as though Mom has introduced Darius to the happier parts of Iranian culture, while omitting mention of uncomfortable things like how the Iranian government systematically targets Bahá'ís. The oppression that Sohrab and his family experience mirror, to some degree, the bullying Darius suffers: they're both targeted for being different, though it is, of course, very different when one's aggressor is the government.



Sohrab's kind, understanding demeanor helped Darius feel better, but all it takes to make Darius feel terrible is hearing Dad blame Darius for essentially being overly insecure and lonely. Interestingly, though, Babou suggests that Dad doesn't have anything to worry about. Sohrab's friendship aside, Darius is, according to Babou, going to be okay. And though Babou seems to struggle to connect with Darius, he nevertheless suggests Dad do exactly what Darius wants him to do: accept, appreciate, and support the son he has, not the one he wishes he had.



THE BORG OF HERBS

Darius wakes up to clanking in the middle of the night and finds Mom in the kitchen, doing dishes in her robe. Darius picks up a towel to dry and remarks on a platter that his family sent Mamou and Babou last year. Mom says it was for their anniversary—and Darius thinks of how they might not reach their 52nd anniversary. He apologizes to Mom about Babou, but Mom apologizes for not bringing Darius and Laleh to meet him until now. She shares an anecdote about when she and Mahvash, Sohrab's mom, were kids, and they went to the park in the morning. They were barefoot, and it was too hot to walk home by midday. Babou came to find them and carried Mahvash back, leaving Mom to find her own way home as punishment. But he forgot to bring Mom shoes, so he had to carry her home, too.

Mom snuffles as she says Babou was so strong, and she apologizes for not teaching Darius Farsi. She says she's failed at teaching Darius where he came from because she wanted him to be American and feel like he belonged. Darius understands, and Mom apologizes again. She says Babou is more comfortable speaking Farsi, and she says Babou does love Darius. Darius says he loves Babou too, but he thinks that might be an exaggeration: he likes Babou as an idea.

Laleh is up early the next morning, and Darius gets up to help her get breakfast. She asks for what she wants in Farsi and when they're done, they go to the living room. Darius reads *The Lord of the Rings*, while Laleh turns on a soap opera and switches to English to tell Darius what's going on. Mamou wakes up a bit later and asks if Darius would make her the tea he brought. She also pulls out a bowl of qottab and winks. When she tries the tea, she says it's perfect and thanks him.

Mom emerges around 10:00 a.m., dressed nicely, and says she and Mamou are going to visit friends. It's a Nowruz tradition that Darius has never heard of. She suggests Darius go visit Sohrab and draws a map for Darius. Mahvash Rezaei answers and shows Darius in. She offers Darius food, but Darius says he's eaten and gives her a container of Mamou's qottab, which Khanum Rezaei insists is the best. She then returns to her bread and asks Darius to take the romaine lettuce leaves in the sink to the table outside. They're Sohrab's favorite food—and Sohrab's dad's, too. Darius is confused and feels awful for Sohrab.

Darius is an empathetic person. He can tell it's painful for Mom to see her father in such poor health, and he wants to show her he's here for her. Mom, though, brushes off Darius's concern and suggests that the real tragedy here is that Darius is only meeting his grandfather for the first time when Babou is so volatile thanks to the tumor. He isn't, for instance, ever going to get to meet the Babou that Sohrab has talked about, or the one Mom describes in this story from her childhood. It's perhaps not surprising, in this context, that Darius struggles to connect to Babou: these days, Babou's identity is in flux, and this can make him hard to be around.



Mom also has to confront that she made choices in how to raise Darius, and those choices might not be serving him as well as she hoped they would. She's essentially made it harder for Darius to fit in in Yazd by not teaching him Farsi, and it seems to pain her that this choice she made is hurting her son. Darius, though, doesn't hold it against Mom. He loves her and knows she's trying her best, and in return, he's figuring out how he feels about Babou.



Throughout this passage, Darius is able to blend his Persian identity with his American one. He understands enough food vocabulary in Farsi to help Laleh, and Mamou is more than willing to give Darius his favorite Persian sweets while also trying the tea from Portland. After Darius's intense feelings of both fitting in and being unwanted, this is a much-needed reprieve.



In Portland, it might not have been as important to Mom to observe the post-Nowruz visiting tradition as it is here. As she explains it to Darius, she lets him in on a new element of Persian culture and helps him understand more where his family comes from. At the Rezaeis' house, Darius is again confused and lost. It's beyond him why romaine lettuce is such a delicacy, and it's also hard to fully grasp how much pain Sohrab must be in due to his dad's imprisonment.



Outside, Darius observes overgrown mint and finds only a Ping-Pong table. Khanum Rezaei appears behind him with a tablecloth and asks him to lay the lettuce out to dry. Just then, Sohrab appears and grabs Darius from behind. He's still in pajamas, and when he sees the lettuce, he races inside. Somehow, Sohrab looks younger, and Darius can tell he's missing Sohrab's dad. But when Sohrab reappears and asks if Darius likes *sekanjabin*, he looks wildly happy. He explains that it's mint syrup and shows Darius how to dip lettuce leaves in the jar. It's very tasty. But it's surprising when Sohrab says Babou made it, and that Sohrab's dad used to grow extra mint for Babou. The mint in the garden is overgrown now because Babou hasn't made it in a while. When they're done eating, Sohrab gets dressed and leads Darius out the door.

*Just as Darius experiences intense ups and downs as he tries to fit in in Yazd, Sohrab also demonstrates that he can feel multiple conflicting emotions at once: grief for his dad, happiness that Darius is here, and excitement to introduce Darius to his favorite food. As Sohrab explains more about the *sekanjabin*, though, Darius realizes again how little he knows about Babou. Mamou and Babou, Sohrab explains, are very integrated in their community and have close relationships with their neighbors. Now though, with Sohrab's dad in prison and Babou unwell, those ties are beginning to unravel.*



THE KHAKI KINGDOM

Sohrab points in the direction of his school and says he attends with Ali-Reza and Hossein. He says he has friends, some of whom are Bahá'í, but most people aren't as prejudiced as Ali-Reza. Then, he asks why Darius doesn't have a girlfriend. Darius doesn't know how to answer—people always assume so much—but Sohrab accepts Darius's silence and says he doesn't have one, either. Sohrab changes the subject by pointing to the park ahead. There's a small public bathroom in the corner with a chain-link fence around it. Sohrab explains that people come here for *Sizdeh Bedar*, the big picnic that happens 13 days after Nowruz. This year, it falls on Darius's birthday, so Sohrab says they can celebrate *Sizdeh Bedar* and Darius.

Sohrab continues to help Darius develop a more nuanced understanding of Iranian society. Yes, the government targets Bahá'ís and there are plenty of bigoted laypeople like Ali-Reza running around, but Sohrab nevertheless suggests that he has an okay time at school socially. Darius then seems to imply that people tend to assume he's gay when they hear he doesn't have a girlfriend, a possibility that Darius's narration suggests he doesn't much want to acknowledge at this point. Still, it's uncomfortable for him, and Sohrab's friendship makes Darius feel like he doesn't have to address this directly. It can instead stay private, if Darius wants.



Then, Sohrab leads Darius to the bathroom, climbs the fence onto the roof, and tells Darius to follow. It's a struggle, but Darius follows and Sohrab hauls him onto the roof. Throwing an arm over Darius's shoulder, Sohrab nods ahead and tells Darius to look. He points out the huge, turquoise minarets of a mosque, which towers over Yazd. Sohrab points out other attractions as they sit on the roof.

From the bathroom roof, Sohrab can better introduce Darius to Yazd—but from a distance. This mirrors the way that both boys are, in a sense, outsiders (since Sohrab is Bahá'í and Darius is American). Still, the city's beauty is compelling: they can both appreciate it, despite being a bit on the outs.



Remembering the taste of the *sekanjabin*, Darius asks what Sohrab meant yesterday when he said that Babou wasn't acting like himself. Sohrab says that Babou does strange things now because of the tumor. Darius asks what Babou was like, and Sohrab says that he and Mamou helped a lot when Sohrab's dad went to prison. Once he came over and asked Sohrab to help him set up a new phone and set a picture of Darius as the background image. He'd always talk about Darius and Laleh and how proud he was of them. This is why Sohrab knew he and Darius would be friends: he'd heard so much about Darius. Babou's behavior makes no sense to Darius; Sohrab seems like way more of a grandson.

The picture Sohrab paints of Babou before the brain tumor developed is so far outside Darius's lived experience—remember that Darius has said that on video chat, Babou has always seemed stern and disappointed. However, Sohrab makes it clear that Babou was wildly proud of his American grandkids and even thinks they're great enough to put on his phone's background. Note that although Babou's behavior confuses Darius, he doesn't push back on Sohrab's assertion that Babou made befriending Darius seem like a great idea. In this sense, Babou has given Darius a great gift: his first real friend.



Just then, the azan sounds. Darius can hear it better from the roof and even though he's not Muslim and can't understand it, it moves Darius to tears. There's nothing like it at home, except maybe the Super Bowl. He's not nervous crying in front of Sohrab. Sohrab explains that he only prays twice per day, but sometimes he wishes Bahá'ís prayed to the azan. It'd make him feel connected. Then, he asks if Darius believes in God. Darius admits he doesn't, and he can tell that bothers Sohrab. But Sohrab just asks where Darius turns when he needs "succor," and Darius can tell Sohrab is thinking about Sohrab's dad. Ignoring how awkward he feels, Darius puts an arm around Sohrab's shoulder and says that's what friends are for. They agree that they'll always be friends.

The azan calls Muslims to prayer five times per day, so it's not something that Darius or Sohrab necessarily have to pay attention to. Still, Darius recognizes that it's a unifying fact of life in a Muslim country like Iran—and for all the country's faults, he finds it touching that there's this major unifying event to everyone's day. As Darius and Sohrab discuss religion, Darius learns how to navigate a slightly trickier subject with a new friend. He suggests that at least for him, religion isn't wholly necessary when one has friends (or supportive family), highlighting how much Darius is getting out of his friendship with Sohrab.



A TACTICAL WITHDRAWAL

That evening, Dad gets out his iPad to watch *Star Trek*. Darius asks Dad to wait for him while he makes tea, but Dad says Laleh gets impatient and Darius has already seen the episode. When Darius finally enters the living room, he feels awful. Laleh is so clearly his replacement, and he resents that she's stolen *Star Trek* with Dad from him. He takes his tea into the garden and wonders if anyone would be sad if he died. Later, Dad comes to find Darius and accuses Darius of being selfish: Laleh just wanted to spend time with him, since he was out all day with Sohrab.

*Dad and Darius have been watching *Star Trek* together for years now, and Darius shows here that he's not great with change. This is in part because he appreciates that *Star Trek* time is the only time that he and Dad can act like a "real father and son," something that Darius seems to crave—even if he's not willing to admit that outright. Dad's behavior suggests to Darius that Dad doesn't crave that connection, which hurts Darius even more.*



Darius asks why he and Dad can't watch without Laleh. *Star Trek* is their thing, and her presence ruins it. Dad says he enjoys watching it with Laleh, which feels like a slap to Darius. How can Dad toss Darius aside so easily? Darius tells Dad to watch with Laleh and insists he's not upset, since Dad doesn't like it when Darius has feelings. Darius excuses himself to go to bed. He and Dad don't say "I love you," which they continued to do even after Dad stopped telling Darius stories—until tonight.

This incident marks another important moment in Darius and Dad's deteriorating relationship: Darius takes it as proof that Dad truly prefers Laleh and perhaps doesn't really love him. Noting to readers that Dad doesn't like it when Darius has feelings may also offer a clue as to why Darius struggles so much to voice his thoughts: Dad has trained him not to.



THE TOWERS OF SILENCE

The next morning, Mom wakes Darius up before the azan so they can go see the Towers of Silence. Dad pulls the van around and Darius and Laleh climb into the back. Laleh angrily pouts that she doesn't want to go and then collapses into Darius. Darius loves Laleh like this: he's her favorite person. Still, he feels selfish for not wanting to share *Star Trek* with her.

*Even as Darius resents Laleh for ruining his *Star Trek* time with Dad, he goes out of his way to love and support his sister. It's nice, he suggests, to be loved and trusted, highlighting again that Darius really just craves connections with his family members.*



Dad navigates up the mountain outside of Yazd until Mom tells him where to pull over. He and Mom walk ahead with Mamou, while Darius decides to walk in the back so he can keep an eye on Babou in case he needs help. Laleh is still angry and insists she doesn't want to hike, so Darius kneels down and offers to take her to get faludeh when they get back. She leaps ahead to walk with Mamou, and Babou says Darius is a great brother. Darius is shocked by the compliment.

Darius continues to offer support to Laleh—and receive positive attention from Babou. Recall that Darius doesn't think he's that great of a brother, which is why the compliment is a bit shocking. But as with family members calling Dad "sweet," this suggests that other people see both Dad and Darius differently than Darius sees them—and perhaps, they're more correct than Darius is.



The Towers of Silence used to be where Zoroastrians buried their dead in a process called sky burial. Babou tells Darius that his grandfather, another Darioosh, was buried here, as was his grandmother. Darius follows Babou across the top of the tower, which is empty—sky burial has been illegal for decades, and it's early in the morning for tourists. Darius wonders if technically, he's a tourist. But how can he be when this is his own past? Babou sighs that people are buried in cement now, and it's not the same.

Sky burial entails leaving bodies on these dedicated towers for carrion birds to eat. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Islamic government made the burials illegal. This highlights that while Zoroastrians might have more rights and protections than Bahá'ís in Iran, they still don't have total freedom to practice their religion—they are, after all, a religious minority. In any case, Babou's grief at how things have changed is palpable, which gives the impression that he's stuck in times past as he approaches the end of his own life.



Babou points across the valley to another tower where Mamou's ancestors were buried and says that their family has been in Yazd for generations—but now, everyone has moved away. Babou seems small and sad, and Darius doesn't know what to say. But he realizes that Babou is just as sad as he is. Babou puts a hand on Darius's neck. It feels almost like a hug as they study the landscape.

Darius maturely recognizes that he and Babou are sad for different reasons. But they're both sad, and it's possible to connect over this fact. It's also worth noting that it's not Darius's fault Mom and Dad chose to raise their family in Portland, and Darius doesn't seem to blame himself for being raised outside of Iran. In this way, he lets Babou take responsibility for his own emotions.



YESTERDAY'S ENTERPRISE

When they get back, Darius takes Laleh for faludeh. They pick up Sohrab on the way and enter Agha Rezaei's store. Agha Rezaei greets Laleh, who's suddenly very shy. Sohrab talks to his uncle in Farsi and seems way more relaxed, something Darius likes to see. He wonders if Sohrab feels like he has to be the man of the house around Khanum Rezaei. Then, Darius, Sohrab, and Laleh accept their desserts and begin the walk home. On the walk, Laleh speaks to Sohrab in Farsi. It makes Darius angry. First she takes *Star Trek*, and now she's going to take Sohrab? He tries to engage her in English, but she switches back to Farsi until Sohrab tells her to speak English so Darius can understand. No one, not even Mom, has made people speak English for Darius before.

Darius considers another consequence of Sohrab's dad being in prison: maybe Sohrab has had to grow up much faster than he might've otherwise. In this sense, Sohrab may be functionally on his own—a feeling Darius shares, since he doesn't believe he can rely on Dad for support. Then, Darius again struggles with the knowledge that he doesn't fit in as well in Iran as he wants to. He can't follow Laleh and Sohrab's conversation, which puts him on the outs. But Sohrab demonstrates how to be a good friend by insisting Laleh speak English—it makes sure Darius feels included and valuable.



At Mamou's house, Sohrab asks Darius if he can stay out. They turn down Mamou's offer of food and head for the park. On the roof of the bathroom, Sohrab asks what's wrong. Darius tries to insist he's fine, but finally tells Sohrab about *Star Trek* and how Dad wants to watch it with Laleh now. It seems like everyone likes Laleh better. Sohrab tells Darius that Laleh can't take his place, but Darius explains that he sometimes he can't stop thinking sad things. Sohrab asks if it's the depression, puts an arm around Darius and says that Laleh isn't his best friend—*Darius* is. Darius has never been anyone's best friend, and he doesn't have to say that Sohrab is his best friend, too.

Even with Sohrab's pep talk, it's hard for Darius not to think about Laleh replacing him as she and Dad snuggle to watch *Star Trek*. He almost goes to watch tonight's episode, which is one of his favorites, but he tries to ignore Laleh laughing at the special effects instead. Later, Dad gets Darius his medicine when he takes his own and kisses Darius's forehead. Dad tells Darius he loves him. Darius isn't sure what Dad wants or expects, but it's nice to hear that Dad loves him. Darius says it back.

FATHER ISSUES

Sohrab and Khanum Rezaei come for breakfast the next morning. While Laleh chatters at Sohrab about *Star Trek*, Darius takes his pills—he doesn't want Sohrab to see him do it, since it somehow feels more intimate than being naked in front of him. Then, everyone gets ready to go to Dowlatabad. There's a Dowlatabad everywhere (it's like Springfield in the United States), but in Yazd, it's just a garden and mansion. Darius and Sohrab follow the adults and Laleh in comfortable silence. Darius is chilly, but he's glad he's wearing the soccer **jersey**—it makes him feel very Persian. Sohrab asks when they're going to play soccer again and says they don't have to play with Ali-Reza and Hossein. Darius says they can play and agrees to go out later. Sohrab tells Darius he's good, and he should play on his school's team when he gets home.

In another show of kindness and care, Sohrab encourages Darius to voice his feelings and open up. And Sohrab demonstrates how to make a friend feel heard and supported: he listens without judgment, affirms that he loves Darius, and lets Darius know that it's okay to suffer from depression symptoms sometimes. It doesn't make Darius a lesser person; in Sohrab's estimation, it seems to suggest that Darius is just even more in need of a best friend than he might be otherwise.



With Sohrab's encouragement, Darius begins to rethink his relationship to Dad. Perhaps, Darius seems to reason, it's okay that they simply say, "I love you" and do nice things for each other, like get the other's medications out every night. And though Darius doesn't really acknowledge it throughout the novel, it's worth noting that by making taking the meds a communal activity, Dad shows Darius that it's okay to need the meds and that they're not something shameful or worth hiding.



Though Dad goes out of his way to make Darius feel like his depression is nothing to be ashamed of (and, for that matter, Sohrab has never made Darius feel bad for having depression), this passage suggests that Darius nevertheless feels some degree of shame. Still, Darius is able to move past this and feel like he fits in thanks to the soccer jersey from Sohrab. The jersey, then, comes to represent Darius's changing identity: he's trying out a version of himself who is very Persian and who plays soccer. This is then why Darius agrees to play with Sohrab again. Further, he trusts Sohrab to stand up for him against Ali-Reza and Hossein, should the boys try to tease him again.



As they reach a fountain, Sohrab says Sohrab's dad used to love coming here. Darius asks if Sohrab gets to visit his dad much. They sit and after some time, Sohrab explains that they used to get to see his dad once a month. He was in the Yazd prison, but four years ago, he was transferred to an awful prison in Tehran. Now he's in solitary confinement. Darius feels awful. He can't make it better, and he wonders if all Persian boys have "Father Issues." He apologizes, and Sohrab asks in a whisper what will happen if he never sees his dad again. A few tears fall from his eyes. Darius feels helpless. All he can do is be Sohrab's friend, but maybe that's enough. After a minute, Sohrab gets up and says he wants to show Darius more of Dowlatabad.

Darius has no idea what the Iranian prison system is like—and from Sohrab, he learns that it's extremely dehumanizing and punishes both the imprisoned and prisoners' families on the outside. That Sohrab is willing to confide in Darius and even cry in front of him, though, speaks to the growing strength of their friendship: Sohrab, like Darius, is opening up and enjoying another person's support. And Darius begins to think that friendship itself is enough to make horrible things (like one's dad's imprisonment) easier to bear.



MAKE IT SO

The trees end abruptly and Sohrab tells Darius to look up. Darius finds himself looking at a wind tower behind the mansion, which is about 100 feet tall. Sohrab says they can go inside the mansion, which is the hugest, most colorful thing Darius has seen. A stained glass window casts rainbows everywhere, and white lines on the ceiling converge to form a 24-sided star. It feels like something out of *The Lord of the Rings*, and Darius says they have nothing like this at home.

When all Darius can do is liken this mansion to something out of The Lord of the Rings, it shows how he's starting to put his multicultural identity together. The Lord of the Rings wasn't at all inspired by Middle Eastern culture or architecture, and yet, Darius finds similarities between the two. Similarly, Darius begins to see that he can be both Persian and American—and the result, judging by this building, is beautiful.



That afternoon, Darius packs a kit for himself to play soccer, though he'll borrow Sohrab's cleats again. He's worried about being naked, but he trusts Sohrab to stand up for him. At the locker room, Darius successfully taarofs and gets Sohrab to wear the nicer cleats, and Sohrab says Darius looks like a soccer star. On the field, Ali-Reza and Hossein are already playing against eight younger boys, and they're being needlessly aggressive. Sohrab throws himself onto the kids' team and scores a goal. Darius hangs back to defend the goal with another boy who doesn't speak much English.

Darius continues to feel increasingly Persian—and less alone. With Sohrab's encouragement, Darius tries something new and is even able to taarof successfully for the first time, which is one way he shows Sohrab he's thankful for his friend's help and support. And happily for Darius, the younger boys seem to accept him without question, even though he doesn't speak much Farsi. It's his soccer skills that matter in this context, as well as his desire to be a team player.



After a bit, Hossein calls everyone to a huddle. He and Sohrab argue in rapid Farsi, and Darius feels like Frodo—invisible. But Sohrab insists on English so Darius can understand. He and Hossein explain that they're playing six-on-six, and Hossein calls Darius "Ayatollah." Despite the nickname, Darius has a great time—and Sohrab tells the younger boys Darius's nickname is because he's in charge. Sohrab agrees to return and play tomorrow, and Darius infers that Sohrab has given up regular games to hang out with him. He doesn't have to do that.

The bullying doesn't stop entirely. But with Sohrab's support, Darius has a fantastic time—the younger boys seem to buy Sohrab's explanation of the nickname, and he again appreciates that Sohrab ensures Darius understands what's going on. Generally speaking, Sohrab's behavior shows Darius that it's totally okay to be who and what he is. He doesn't have to change to impress Sohrab.



While Ali-Reza, Hossein, and the younger boys shower, Sohrab and Darius kick a ball around. Darius appreciates what Sohrab is doing. Still, it's awkward when they go into the locker room to shower, and Darius is uncomfortable when he realizes that all his soccer gear is from Sohrab. He decides he'd like to get Sohrab a pair of cleats as a gift. To Darius's surprise, they manage to carry on a conversation about the social dynamics while they shower—maybe he's relaxing a bit. Darius thanks Sohrab for inviting him to play on the walk home. Sohrab reminds Darius that his place was empty—but it's not empty anymore.

Darius finds Mamou in the kitchen and tells her about wanting to get Sohrab cleats. She accepts his offer to pay for them and says Dayi Soheil will pick some up. Then Darius offers to help Mamou rinse dishes. Mamou is humming along to the radio and suddenly, Darius realizes what she's listening to: "Dancing Queen" by ABBA. She says they're her favorite band. Suddenly, Darius wants to know everything about his grandmother. She asks him to steep some of his special tea for them, and Darius feels his walls coming down. He asks when she started listening to ABBA.

CHELO KABOB

Darius spends every day the next week playing soccer with Sohrab, except for Friday. This is the day Mamou is making chelo kabob, which is a huge treat. At home, Darius and Laleh only get it on birthdays and holidays, and on report card days if Darius gets a B average. Dad, as a Teutonic Übermensch, is perfect at packing the ground beef onto skewers, and even Mamou lets him help. Darius washes dishes when he's allowed to, but Babou asks for his help setting up tables in the garden. Noticing how Babou shuffles, Darius remembers Mom's story of Babou carrying her. Did he carry Mom home from the same park Darius and Sohrab have been visiting? What else has Darius missed? He doesn't understand Babou, but he doesn't want him to die.

Babou then sends Darius to Khanum Rezaei to bring *sabzi* (herbs) when she comes. When Khanum Rezaei opens the door, Darius returns her Bahá'í greeting, which makes her smile. She says Mamou makes the best chelo kabob and sends Darius to the backyard to find Sohrab, who's kicking a soccer ball around. He says he's also doing push-ups and other drills. They discuss the chelo kabob later, and then Sohrab invites Darius to play soccer for a while.

Waiting until the other boys are finished in the locker room ensures that the younger boys won't have any opportunity to learn where the Ayatollah nickname came from, which is another way that Sohrab protects Darius from further bullying and humiliation. And thanks to Sohrab's kindness and support, Darius begins to relax and become more comfortable being himself (and being naked) around his friend.



ABBA is a Swedish band that became popular in the 1970s, and even today is still wildly popular—but it's not something Darius expects to encounter his Iranian grandmother listening to. In fact, learning that Mamou likes ABBA is surprising enough that Darius finally finds his voice and is able to ask Mamou about her life. It's significant too that this comes after Darius begins to relax around Sohrab: Sohrab's friendship is showing Darius that being open, curious, and caring isn't going to end in pain or humiliation.



Humorously, Darius implies that being really into meat and grilling is part of being a perfect man. So, even though chelo kabob is Mamou's thing, Dad is so good with kabobs that he's even able to infiltrate Mamou's kitchen and help. Darius's eye roll is palpable; it's annoying to him that Dad is so wildly perfect. Darius, on the other hand, is preoccupied with thinking about Babou and how little Darius knows about how his family has lived their day-to-day lives in Yazd. He suggests that this kind of intimate knowledge is what will make him feel like he really belongs—and so pessimistically, the novel suggests that if Darius isn't willing to ask his family members questions and learn this information, Darius will continue to feel like an outsider.



It's subtle, but Darius is once again reminded that his grandparents are a beloved part of their community. Khanum Rezaei, for instance, knows that Mamou is an exceptional cook, while Babou knows which neighbor to ask for more herbs. This continues to develop them as real people in Darius's mind, not just floating heads on a video chat.



Mamou's chelo kabob is indeed the best chelo kabob in the world. Everyone overeats, and Nazgul tries to push a radish flower into Darius's mouth. Sohrab tells her to leave Darius alone, so she gives the flower to Laleh, who gags. Darius takes his and Sohrab's plates to get more in the kitchen. Dad is there, and he says nothing when Darius serves himself more rice instead of vegetables. This is maybe because Dad is engrossed in arguments about proper kabob prep with Dayi Jamsheed, Dayi Soheil, and Babou. Darius almost feels bad for him, but Dad seems to be holding his own and enjoying himself. Maybe Dad's place used to be empty, too.

Dad is, perhaps, beginning to relax and give Darius the freedom to make his own choices. And as Dad loosens up, Darius finds that it's easier to give Dad the benefit of the doubt and wonder if Dad might struggle with some of the same lonely feelings Darius does. It's possible, after all, that Dad feels just as lost and like an outsider here in Yazd as Darius does. However, just as Darius is befriending Sohrab and feeling more at home, Dad seems to be finding his place among Darius's male relatives just fine—his circle is also expanding.



THE VIRGO SUPERCLUSTER

Of course, after the meal, men break out cards to play Rook. Darius sits in a corner and watches Dad play with Dayi Jamsheed, Dayi Soheil, and Babou. How is Dad able to just join in like that? Sohrab interrupts Darius's thoughts to ask if he's stuck thinking about something sad. Darius shrugs, but Sohrab drags Darius back outside; he won't "let [Darius] be stuck anymore." They join Darius's male cousins, Parviz and Navid, at a table, and Parviz asks why Darius never said he played soccer. They smirk at how angry Ali-Reza was that he lost earlier, and Navid said he thought Ali-Reza's family moved. Sohrab explains that the family couldn't when Ali-Reza's dad lost his job. Darius feels bad for Ali-Reza, even if he is a Soulless Minion of Orthodoxy.

Recall how in gym class, Darius was taunted when he tried to participate in the volleyball game. He's had awful experiences trying to join in, so it's unreal to him that Dad can just step in and play Rook. Still, though all three of these men have been casually mean to either Dad or Darius, they're not bullies on the same level as Trent Bolger—they're family, and they don't really want to alienate Dad or Darius. Further, Darius is discovering that bullies have issues too. He can sympathize with Ali-Reza—he knows it's hard when your dad loses their job—while still maintaining that Ali-Reza isn't someone he wants to befriend.



Sohrab gives Parviz and Navid a play-by-play of his and Darius's soccer game earlier, and he says lots of nice things about Darius—including that he's Persian. Hearing this, Navid and Parviz decide it's time for Darius to learn to play Rook. (Hopefully Darius won't have to play with Dad when they get home.) Darius knows the basics already, but it turns out he's terrible at the game. Still, his cousins give him pointers after each round, and Darius has fun. Finally, Sohrab and Khanum Rezaei leave, and Mamou pulls Darius into a big hug. He wishes he could somehow take her hugs home with him.

It's significant that in Darius's mind, one of the nicest things Sohrab can say is that Darius is Persian. This makes Darius feel like he fits and belongs here. His cousins, though, take this as a reason to make Darius even more Persian by teaching him a classic Persian card game. Importantly, nobody makes Darius feel bad for not being great at the game off the bat. The point, this suggests, is that Darius spend time with his friend and cousins; that they're playing Rook (and therefore are being stereotypically Persian) is kind of beside the point.



When Darius passes Laleh's bedroom door and sees that she's asleep, he wishes Dad wasn't playing Rook. They could maybe watch some *Star Trek*. But it seems like both Darius and Dad have found their places, and they're pretty far apart. In his room, Darius finds the new cleats that Dayi Soheil picked up for Sohrab. They're green Adidas, and they're perfect. He wants to give them to Sohrab now, but Sohrab said he liked sharing his cleats. So, maybe Darius will save them as a going-away gift. Mom enters and says she loves to see Darius and Sohrab together. As she hugs Darius, Darius wishes he could stay here and go to school with Sohrab and play soccer. He's never had a friend like Sohrab, who understands what it's like to be ostracized for being different. Maybe Sohrab's place used to be empty, too.

Darius has had several positive experiences with friends and family members over the last few days, so possibly working on his relationship with Dad begins to sound more desirable to Darius. However, for now, Darius sees letting Dad have his fun with Babou and Darius's uncles as the most respectful course of action. Then, Darius acknowledges how powerful and meaningful it is for him to have finally made a friend. Sohrab makes it seem like it'd be fine to pick up and move to a country where Darius doesn't speak the language, if it means that Darius will have daily contact with someone who understands and loves him.



THE AGE OF BAHRAMIS

Babou yells for Mamou to get him some hairpins, and she pins Darius's hair up so the white cap fits over his curls. Babou then tells Darius he looks nice, but Darius doesn't believe it—he feels like an imposter or a tourist, just pretending to be a good Zoroastrian grandson. But then, Babou looks Darius in the eye and says he's glad Darius is here to see this. Darius wonders if maybe, this is something he and Babou can share—it could be their *Star Trek*. The family is going to Yazd's Zoroastrian Fire Temple, the Atashkadeh. It's only used for special celebrations, but there's a fire burning in it all the time. It's been burning for 1,500 years. Everyone is dressed in light-colored clothes, and even Dad, who's a secular humanist, dressed up.

Darius still wants to connect with Babou and come up with something to share with his grandfather. That, he seems to believe, will strengthen their relationship and help Darius learn to love Babou more. Visiting the Atashkadeh in general will also connect Darius more to his heritage and to his family, both those still alive and his deceased ancestors. Still, Darius continues to feel like he doesn't entirely fit in. He isn't, after all, Zoroastrian, and he doesn't fully understand the religion.



When they get to the Atashkadeh, Mamou lets Darius and Laleh out of the car and then gets back in, explaining that Babou isn't feeling well so she's staying behind with him. Darius knows it must be bad if Babou isn't going to go in, since Babou was so excited to come. But Mom leads the family into the temple and shows them where to take their shoes off. Inside, tinted glass separates people from a bronze chalice holding the fire. How many times has Babou seen the flames, and how many other Bahramis have stood where Darius stands now? Darius feels his family's ghosts swirling around him. Soon, Babou will be a ghost, too.

Babou sitting behind in the car lets the rest of the family emotionally prepare for the day when Babou is gone for good and won't accompany them again—they'll all have to move forward without him. This is a sobering experience for Darius, and despite his earlier reservations, it does seem to connect him emotionally to his family and his history. He's learning that it perhaps doesn't matter so much that he's American and doesn't speak much Farsi. He can still feel connected to his family and culture.



When they get home, Babou goes to bed. Darius finds Mom in the sunroom, flipping through photo albums. She invites Darius to sit with her. The album is open to photos of her in the U.S.—and Darius is shocked to see pictures of Dad, looking like a stereotypical hippie with a ponytail and scruffy beard. Smirking, Mom says Dad cut it to please Babou, but it'd be so funny if he had long hair in their wedding pictures—Dad wouldn't be able to live it down.

Seeing the photos of Dad with long hair and a scruffy beard adds more credence to the possibility that Darius doesn't know everything there is to know about Dad. It's also significant that Dad had long hair, just as Darius does now—so Dad's insistence that Darius cut his hair likely has more to do with Dad himself than it does with Darius.



A few pages later, Darius studies a photo of Dad on the couch holding tiny baby Laleh. Darius comments that Laleh was so little, but Mom says the baby is actually Darius. This is hard to believe, as Dad looks so content. Darius wishes they could go back to that time, when they could be a father and son all the time, instead of just for the length of a *Star Trek* episode. They can't even do that these days. Mom says that she loves this photo and that Dad could always get Darius to fall asleep. Her voice wavering, she says it's clear Dad loved being a dad. Darius hugs her and apologizes.

Given how fraught Darius and Dad's relationship is in the present, it's inconceivable to Darius that Dad once loved him unconditionally. This speaks to just how distanced from Dad Darius feels at present: it seems like they'll never get back to this happy time, when it was nice just to be in each other's company. Darius also gets a look here at what his difficult relationship with Dad is doing to Mom. It pains her, even if it's not her fault or anything she can fix.



MAGNETIC CONTAINMENT

Darius wraps Sohrab's cleats in newspaper, feeling angry and upset that they have to say goodbye soon. He heads to Sohrab's house a bit early, but there's a strange vehicle in front. Nobody answers the door, so he heads around the back. There's nobody there either. Finally, Darius notices Agha Rezaei pacing in the kitchen. He lets Darius in sadly and leaves Darius to the living room, where Khanum Rezaei is sobbing wildly. Sohrab is holding his mom and sobbing too. Darius is wildly uncomfortable and doesn't know what to do, so he asks if he can make tea. He knows he said the wrong thing immediately.

Immediately, Darius recognizes that something is off—and then it becomes clear that whatever's going on is very bad. Darius is a good friend, but he hasn't had a lot of practice comforting others when they're grieving. The only thing he knows for certain that he can do is make tea, something that in his experience, people do appreciate. This highlights that Darius is still learning how to be a good friend and support person—and he's naturally going to make mistakes along the way.



Sohrab locks eyes with Darius and tells him sharply to go away. Agha Rezaei tries to reason with Sohrab in Farsi, but he finally just leads Darius into the kitchen and fills the kettle. Darius asks what's wrong in a whisper, and Sohrab appears in the doorway and snaps that Sohrab's dad is dead. He says something to his uncle in Farsi, and Agha Rezaei returns to the living room. In English, Sohrab says that apparently someone stabbed his dad in prison. Then he asks what Darius's box is.

Readers are well aware that Darius just means to help and doesn't intend to be rude or cause Sohrab further pain. Knowing this, it seems pretty clear that Sohrab is lashing out at Darius and at Agha Rezaei out of grief: Darius hasn't done anything objectively wrong or rude. That Sohrab's dad was stabbed, meanwhile, leaves the possibility open that he was murdered for being Bahá'í, highlighting again that Sohrab and his family are regularly targeted in Iran.



Darius explains that they're new shoes for Sohrab, but Sohrab smacks the box out of Darius's hands and shoves Darius. He tells Darius to go away and that he's selfish: Sohrab's dad is dead, and Darius just wants to play soccer. When Darius starts to cry, Sohrab tells Darius to stop crying and complaining. He has nothing to be sad about, and nobody wants him here. Sohrab stumbles back into the living room, where he screams. Darius knows Sohrab is right. Nobody wants Darius.

Darius, readers know, is trying to do a nice thing for Sohrab by giving him the shoes—and he had no idea he was walking into this situation when he arrived. Again, Sohrab is lashing out to deal with his own grief (which is particularly evident when he screams). Still, his words matter and are capable of tearing Darius down and destroying the confidence Darius has developed over the last few weeks.



FIRST, BEST DESTINY

Darius left his shoes at Sohrab's, but he can't go back for them or go to Mamou's. He runs, certain Sohrab is right. He's a coward. Darius wants to go home to Portland, and he hates himself for wanting to see less of Dad when Sohrab will never get to see Sohrab's dad again. When he climbs on top of the bathroom at the park, he slices his heel. The sound of the afternoon azan makes Darius cry, and he wipes his face on the **jersey** from Sohrab. Nobody's ever made him feel understood and like he belonged, but Sohrab is right about Darius. Darius wishes he was invisible or could disappear forever.

Sometime later, Dad shocks Darius by climbing up on top of the bathroom. He says Agha Rezaei told them what happened, and Darius starts to cry again. Dad tries to hug Darius and tells him not to cry—but Darius is angry. He stands, pushes Dad away, and says he can't help crying. Sometimes people are mean to him, and he's sorry for crying and being so disappointing. Dad says he's not disappointed and just wants to make sure Darius is healthy. But Darius says Dad just wants Darius to be like him, emotionless and normal—and Dad won't even watch *Star Trek* with Darius anymore, so clearly, Darius will never be good enough.

His face blotchy, Dad stands and says Darius has always been good enough, and he's loved Darius from the first time he saw Darius on an ultrasound. He loves being Darius's dad. This doesn't seem possible, so Darius asks if Dad remembers the stories they used to tell—and why Dad stopped telling them. Dad sits down and pats the spot next to him. After a moment, Dad says he wants Darius to feel things, but it's terrifying to consider that Darius's depression might get bad enough to convince him to hurt himself. Darius assures Dad he doesn't want to hurt himself—but Dad says that *he* almost hurt himself. Darius is shocked.

Dad explains that when Darius was seven, his meds stopped working and he spent all his time thinking that Darius and Mom would be better without him. Dr. Howell eventually put him on a tranquilizer, which made him a zombie. He couldn't tell stories because he could barely tell what time it was. But, Dad continues, those pills saved his life. When he finally stopped taking them, though, Laleh was born, and he didn't know if Darius wanted stories anymore. Suicide, he says, isn't the only way to lose someone to depression—and he hates that he gave depression to Darius.

Again, though Sohrab said cruel things, that reflects more on Sohrab's own pain. Darius has seen firsthand that people want him around and love him: Mamou feeds him qottab, and his cousins taught him to play Rook. But because Darius loves and trusted Sohrab so much, Sohrab has outstanding power to tear Darius down. It's significant that Darius is wearing the jersey right now: while it made him feel like he fit in earlier, now, it seems to have lost that magic power.



It's only now, when Darius is in such a low state, that he's finally willing to speak up and tell Dad how he really feels about Dad's behavior. But as Darius and Dad argue, it starts to look like there is a misunderstanding between them. Dad doesn't want Darius to be emotionless—he wants Darius to be healthy. However noble this might be, though, the fact remains that Dad hasn't been able to get his point across, and so he's been unwittingly hurting Darius.



For much of this passage, Darius remains convinced that he's right: that Dad doesn't love him, and that he'll never be good enough. As far as he's concerned, the fact that Dad stopped telling him stories—something Darius loved—almost a decade ago is proof of that. However, Dad ultimately opens up to Darius and, it seems, will go on to explain why he's so concerned with "protecting" Darius. Again, Dad's actions might leave a lot to be desired, but based on his own experiences, he thinks he's doing something important for Darius.



With this story, Dad asks Darius to recognize that lots of different things can be true at once. It can be true that the tranquilizers saved Dad's life and so were an objectively good thing. But it's also true that they damaged Dad's relationship with Darius and started them on the path to where they are now. But, as Dad opens up to Darius, he also gives his son the information he needs to see that Dad has never stopped loving him—and that Dad has been working hard to stay alive, healthy, and present for his family for years.



Dad is crying. Darius has never seen him cry before, and he starts crying, too. He lets Dad pull him down (somehow, he's taller than Dad now) and hold him. It's nice to be held like baby Darius in the photo album. Dad tells Darius he loves him, and that it's okay to not be okay. They sit and watch the sunset, and Dad listens to Darius tell him about Sohrab and what Sohrab said. Darius says that Sohrab is the best friend he's had—and Dad seems to know there's more, but he doesn't ask.

It's significant that Darius likens the experience of Dad holding him here to the photo of Dad holding baby Darius. Finally, Darius feels like he can relax into his dad and let his dad care for him; a wall has come down between them. This is particularly evident when Darius tells Dad about Sohrab, and Dad seems to infer that Darius might like Sohrab as more than a friend. This is left ambiguous for now, though, which helps Dad show Darius that he respects him and what he chooses to share.



THROUGH A WORMHOLE

Sizdeh Bedar is canceled. Everyone goes to the Rezaeis' house with the food Mamou made for the picnic on Sizdeh Bedar/Darius's birthday. As Mom wishes Darius a happy birthday, Darius thinks about how Mom has dealt with Dad's depression and then Darius's for years. That must be painful, especially since she can't really help. Mamou hugs Darius next, and then Laleh does. Laleh whispers that she made Darius birthday tea, and she didn't even sweeten it—but Darius can add sugar if he wants.

Things have changed for Darius now that he's spoken to Dad. Suddenly, Dad seems like way more of a real person to Darius—he's no longer the stoic Teutonic Übermensch Darius used to see him as. Realizing that Dad and Darius's depression has likely been hard for Mom also represents a shift in how Darius sees his parents: Dad's depression has likely had an impact on their marriage. Realizing this helps Darius mature and see both his parents as fully-fledged people, not just parent figures.



It's weird (but not bad) to walk Yazd's streets with Dad and not Sohrab. Dad even left his sketchbook at home so he could spend time with Darius. The attention is a lot, but Darius kind of likes it. They walk to the Jameh Mosque, where Dad is clearly in love with the spindly minarets and the huge archway. They wander the mosque, and Darius notices how relaxed Dad's face is. He realizes Dad has never hidden his depression, even if Darius had no idea how close he came to losing Dad. Dad fought so hard to stay with his family, and Darius knows he and Dad don't want to lose each other. But Dad doesn't know how to say it aloud. Darius has never understood Dad so well.

On this outing, Dad becomes even more human and relatable to Darius. Though Darius doesn't say it outright, he recognizes that Dad has likely been very purposeful about taking his pills in front of Darius. By doing this, he's conveyed that taking meds isn't something to be ashamed of, while also acknowledging that he needs help. But Darius also realizes that he and Dad are a lot alike in how they struggle to voice their true thoughts and feelings. Darius decides that this is okay—what matters is how they show their support for each other.



Birthdays aren't a big deal in Iran, but Mamou still makes Darius's favorite dish for dinner. She and Babou also give Darius an antique copper teapot and a pair of cleats that are just like Sohrab's, but blue. Darius hugs and kisses them in thanks, and to his surprise, Babou kisses him back. Quietly, Babou says that Sohrab is hurting, but it's not Darius's fault—and Darius is a good friend.

Mamou acknowledges that her grandson has been raised with different customs than she has, so she makes a point to celebrate Darius's birthday. Then, it's significant that Babou tells Darius this about Sohrab. It suggests that Babou can tell Darius is hurting, and he wants to make things better. Further, Babou confirms that Darius did nothing wrong; Sohrab is lashing out because he's grieving.



Then, Mom helps Darius pack by folding his shirts. The **jersey** from Sohrab is clean after Darius cried and got snot on it. It's been Darius's "Persian camouflage," but Darius doesn't need it anymore now that he's going home. And maybe he shouldn't have tried to be something he isn't. Still, Darius tucks the jersey into his suitcase under his boxers, just in case. He and Mom discuss that Darius is ready to go home, but he's going to miss Mamou and Babou.

Later, Darius reads *The Lord of the Rings* in the kitchen and drinks tea with Babou and Laleh. Babou is reading to Laleh in Farsi. Mamou comes in and tells Darius that Sohrab is here to say goodbye. Sohrab is standing outside the front door, looking small and guarded. He says he was worried when Darius didn't come over today, but Darius says he wasn't sure Sohrab wanted him to come. Sohrab then thanks Darius for the cleats, which are his favorite color.

Darius offers his condolences about Sohrab's dad. He wants to touch Sohrab and encourage him to cry or scream, but he's not sure how to breach the wall that's risen up between them. Sohrab apologizes for his behavior and says he's ashamed—friends don't act like he did. Darius says friends forgive, but Sohrab says seriously that he's glad to have met Darius and that Darius is his best friend. He invites Darius to come out for a little bit, and Darius agrees.

THE CRACKS OF DOOM

Sohrab leads Darius to the park. Somehow, he doesn't drop the box in his hands as they climb to the top of the bathroom. Finally, Darius offers condolences for Sohrab's dad, but Sohrab says he doesn't want to talk about it. Maybe someday, though, he will. Then, Sohrab hands over the box, a birthday present. Inside is a framed photo of Darius and Sohrab from Nowruz. It makes Darius tear up, and he says he's never had a friend like Sohrab. Sohrab says he's never had a friend like Darius, and he admires that Darius knows who he is and doesn't try to change himself. Darius says that's not true; Sohrab is the first person who hasn't wanted him to change. The azan rings out, and Sohrab's face relaxes. The boys put their arms over each other's shoulders and sit in companionable silence.

Referring to the jersey as his "Persian camouflage" is an interesting choice. It suggests that still Darius doesn't see himself as Persian. The jersey has helped him to blend in. This view sells Darius a bit short—he is Persian, even if just on Mom's side—but it suggests that he's once again struggling with his multicultural identity.



As Sohrab and Darius begin to renavigate their relationship, they're both guarded—neither wants to offend the other more than they already have. But as awkward as this meeting is, both Darius and Sohrab are trying. They don't want their friendship to end, and so they're both willing to give the other the benefit of the doubt and try to move forward.



Darius takes giving Sohrab the benefit of the doubt a step further here when he not only accepts Sohrab's apology without question but also says that friends forgive. They both, in other words, have responsibilities: Sohrab should apologize, but it's also up to Darius to accept Sohrab's apology, thereby allowing them both to move forward in their friendship.



Darius has never been in a position to comfort a grieving friend, so he's not sure what to do here. But he lets Sohrab take the lead and show him what he wants: for them to focus on each other and their friendship, not on Sohrab's dad. Sohrab's gift of the photograph commemorates their friendship and gives Darius another tangible reminder of his time in Iran. Additionally, Darius hits on something the novel suggests is essential to true friendship: not trying to change a friend. This has allowed Darius and Sohrab to connect and explains why Darius hasn't been able to connect with kids at home (kids like Trent want him to change, and for his part, Darius wants *Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy* to not be *Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy*).



Everything is quiet when Darius and Sohrab get back to Mamou's house—except for Dad and Babou playing Rook in the kitchen. Darius isn't sure how to say goodbye, but Sohrab pulls him into a hug. He doesn't kiss Darius on the cheek like a Persian or slap Darius's back like a Soulless Minion of Orthodoxy. They just hold each other, and when they pull apart, Sohrab gives Darius a sad smile. They don't say anything, but Darius knows he loves Sohrab. He loves being Sohrab's Darioush, but he's ready to go home and be Darius.

Dayi Jamsheed arrives early in the morning to drive Darius's family to the airport. Darius is the first one ready, so he sits on the couch to read for his econ class. Laleh snuggles in next to him, and Darius marvels at how much he loves his sister. Dad comes in a bit later and tells Darius he's proud of Darius for doing his homework. This is odd, but Darius wants to accept Dad's attempts to make things better.

When Mamou tells Darius goodbye, she kisses his cheeks until his cheeks are hot enough to boil her tears off of them. Darius tells himself he's going to call Mamou weekly and always say hi when she and Mom talk, but he knows he'll fail—he'll have to say goodbye each time. He's not sure he'll survive his emotions, now that he's found them. Mamou embraces Laleh next, but Darius can't watch. He throws his **messenger bag** over his shoulder and approaches Babou. Babou kisses Darius's cheeks and tells Darius to take care of Dad. (Maybe it's true that Dad needs Darius to take care of him.) Then, Darius hugs Babou and tells Babou he loves him. To his surprise, Babou hugs him back.

The worst part is watching Mom and Babou say goodbye, since they know they won't see each other again. Darius knows Mom is saying goodbye to this Babou, as well as the strong, happy Babou she knew years ago. Mom sobs. Finally, the family loads into Dayi Jamsheed's SUV. Laleh falls asleep immediately on Darius's shoulder, and Dad smiles back at Darius.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Surprisingly, Darius doesn't feel different when he gets home. Mom takes him to get new wheels and a seat for his bike, and he, Dad, and Laleh watch *Star Trek* every night. When Laleh gets scared and runs off during one episode, Dad says it's nice to just watch with Darius. When Darius tells Dad that he doesn't mind if Laleh joins them, Darius wonders if something did change in him.

Darius has never had to say goodbye to a friend before, so this moment is particularly bittersweet. The hug—which Darius suggests is neither really Persian nor American—simply reflects Darius and Sohrab's feelings for each other. And having made up with Sohrab, Darius finally feels ready to go home. Noting that he's ready to be Darius again suggests that this is who Darius really is: he identifies with the American version of his name, which is nevertheless Persian.



The Kellner family's final minutes in Yazd are about family. Darius and Laleh reaffirm their love for each other, and Darius is now even more willing to give Dad the benefit of the doubt and accept his overtures. This reflects Darius's maturity. It also shows that Dad is now going out of his way to make Darius feel loved and appreciated.



Darius makes it clear here that the trip to Yazd has been many things, but it's mostly been a time for Darius to discover how to feel his feelings and be emotional around his family members. Now, Darius puts this into practice when he doesn't just accept Babou's kisses—he actively hugs Babou and says "I love you" of his own volition. In their parting moments, Darius is doing his best to show his grandfather that he loves and cares for him, something that Darius seems to hope will make them both feel good and valued.



Darius remains very empathetic: he realizes that this parting is hardest on Mom, and he feels for her. But he also knows that the best thing he can do right now is to be here for Laleh so that Mom can have her time to say goodbye to her dad without having to worry about her young daughter.



*Darius has changed, even if he's not entirely aware of it. In addition to finding his emotions, he also feels way more secure in his relationship with Dad and his place in the family. He understands now that Laleh isn't replacing him. Rather, she adds to the experience when she joins them for *Star Trek*—and when she doesn't, Dad and Darius get to relive the past, in a way.*



Darius takes the Kellner & Newton **messenger bag** to school when he goes back. He still hates messenger bags, but it feels like he and this bag have gone to Mordor and back. Darius spends the day answering questions from classmates—Fatty Bolger asks if Darius went to join ISIS. At lunch, he throws himself down across from Javaneh and gives her the bag of Iranian candies, herbs, and a tablecloth that Mom sent for Javaneh’s mom. Darius finds he can’t explain his experience in Iran to her, though. He tells Javaneh he hopes she gets to go visit someday.

Darius’s new feelings about the messenger bag symbolize how exactly his relationship with Dad has changed. There are likely still parts of Dad that Darius finds frustrating and annoying. But in general, Darius trusts Dad way more now than he did—and he also trusts the messenger bag to get his school supplies safely to and from school. At school, not much has changed, but Trent’s bullying also doesn’t seem to hit home anymore. Darius now knows that Trent bullies him because of Trent’s own insecurities, not because there’s anything wrong with Darius.



In gym class, Coach Fortes leads the boys to the South Field to play soccer. It feels strange to wear a school T-shirt and shorts and normal tennis shoes, and it’s strange to play on a full team of kids who call him Darius instead of Darioush or Ayatollah. Still, it’s nice when Darius realizes he’s better than many of his classmates, including Trent Bolger. Darius even blocks an attempted goal from Trent; Trent and his cronies are nothing after the Iranian Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy. Chip gives Darius a fist bump—maybe he has a soul after all. After class, Coach Fortes catches Darius just as Darius steps in dog poop. He suggests Darius try out for the school soccer team in the fall. Darius almost says no—but Darioush would try out. Thinking about telling Sohrab he made the team, Darius says he might.

Things are looking up for Darius, and he’s able to take some of the things he learned in Iran and apply them in Portland. Here, as Darius realizes that he’s actually a better player than some of the Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy, he gains more confidence—and Trent’s bullying may be even easier for Darius to brush off going forward. Then, it’s nice when Coach Fortes confirms that Darius is much better at soccer than he initially thought. That Darius reminds himself that Darioush would try out for the team suggests that Darius is still working to merge his American and Persian identities, but he’s well on his way to figuring something out.



DARIUS THE GREAT

After school, Darius tenses up when he sees Chip waiting by the bike rack. Darius’s bike seems fine, though. Chip asks what happened to Darius after gym and says he wanted to check on Darius’s bike, since he still feels bad. Then, Chip shocks Darius by asking about his trip and Babou. They both walk their bikes toward the road, and Chip says Darius seems different—like he brought some of his ancestor, Darioush the Great, back from Iran with him. This is unbelievable: Chip knows how to pronounce Darioush and hasn’t once teased Darius about it. Darius says he doesn’t think he’s actually related to Darius the Great, but Chip says it’s still cool and it’s nice to have Darius back.

Chip’s behavior here continues to suggest that he’s not the Soulless Minion of Orthodoxy that Darius has long thought him to be. In fact, he’s pretty worldly and is even kind: he apologizes for past cruel behavior and shows that he thinks Darius’s Persian heritage is cool and something to be proud of. Hearing this from Chip may, perhaps, further convince Darius that he doesn’t need to be ashamed of or hide parts of his Persian culture or identity—and ideally, it’ll result in Chip standing up for Darius if Trent tries to bully him.



Chip is going the same direction as Darius, so after they say goodbye, Chip awkwardly follows Darius for a mile before turning off. Darius has no idea what prompted Chip’s attitude change, but he wonders if he is indeed different. He decides to ask Sohrab, whom he emails every day.

Again, Darius is different, if only because he’s now more comfortable in his own skin than he’s ever been. Noting that he and Sohrab email every day indicates that they’re working hard to keep their friendship alive from afar and continue to provide each other support.



That evening, Dad and Darius settle in for *Star Trek*. Tonight they're watching an episode where Captain Picard visits family in France, which they decide is very weird timing. Mom even joins them for the episode and runs her fingers through Darius's hair. When it's over, Darius steeps some new tea he got for his birthday while Dad fetches cups. This is their tradition now: they have tea, and Darius tells Dad about his day. Darius is nervous to tell Dad about what Coach Fortes said, but Dad shocks Darius. He tells Darius to not let Coach pressure him, but he'd come cheer for Darius if Darius wants to play. Darius reveals he's not sure he'll have time for soccer, since he's planning to apply for an unpaid internship at Rose City Teas. Surprisingly, Dad says that'd be great for Darius.

When Darius and Dad finish their pot of tea, Darius pulls out their medication, and Dad puts the kettle on for something with less caffeine. Mom and Laleh join them for some Dragon Pearl Jasmine, which even Laleh will drink without an ice cube (it's not brewed at a full boil). Mom says it smells like Babou's garden, and the family falls into a nice silence. Dad asks Darius if he's okay, and Darius says he's great.

Star Trek has, at least in some special circumstances, become a family event. This represents how integrated Darius now feels in his family—it's no longer a threat when someone other than Dad and Darius watch an episode. Then, Darius and Dad's new tea ritual highlights how Dad and Darius are trying hard to move forward and forge a better relationship with each other. With this new ritual, they can start fresh and practice speaking openly. This doesn't mean that Darius doesn't still come in with expectations (that he's shocked by Dad's reaction to the news of the internship suggests Darius expected Dad to disapprove), but Darius is getting better at not letting his expectations get in the way of what's actually happening in front of him.



Tea is also now becoming something that ties the entire family together. Over a cup of tea that they all enjoy, they can appreciate one another's company and reminisce about their time in Iran. And it's significant that Darius says he's great—he finally feels like he belongs and is accepted in his family.





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