When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

Lahiri was born in London and raised in a small town in Rhode Island; her parents emigrated from Calcutta, and they frequently brought Lahiri and her younger sister to visit relatives back in India. After moving to New York City to college, Lahiri returned to New England, completing three simultaneous master's degrees—and a PhD—at Boston University. While in Boston, she began to write the short stories (including when "Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine") that would be compiled as her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*. Published in 1999 to critical acclaim, *Interpreter* won the Pulitzer Prize and was heralded for its intimate, precise depiction of South Asian lives. Lahiri went on to publish another short story collection (*Unaccustomed Earth*) and two more English-language novels (*The Namesake* and *The Lowland*). After marrying and having children, Lahiri intensified her lifelong study of Italian and now writes primarily in that language.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The backdrop of "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence (also known as the Bangladesh Liberation War), which began in March of 1971. The story is set from September to early December of that year. Decades before this, in 1947, the Partition of India occurred: British India underwent a tumultuous, violent split along religious lines. The region was split into two Dominions (self-governing nations within the British Empire): the majority-Hindu India and the majority-Muslim Pakistan, which was split into East Pakistan and West Pakistan. However, many East Pakistanis were ethnically and linguistically Bengali, and they did not feel represented by the Urdu-speaking government in West Pakistan. In 1971, in an attempt to quash a growing Bengali independence movement, West Pakistan's army invaded East Pakistan and committed genocide against the East Pakistani people, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths. This genocidal invasion was led by General Yahya Khan, whom Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's father heatedly discuss in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine." On December 4th, 1971, after months of violence and destruction, the Bangladesh War of Independence was officially declared, and India joined the war on the side of East Pakistan. On December 16th, West Pakistan surrendered. West Pakistan became Pakistan, and East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Lahiri has said that her biggest literary influences are Alice Munro (famous for short stories like "Boys and Girls") and William Trevor (who writes darkly comic contemporary novels such as *Felicia's Journey*). Both are realist writers, renowned for using simple language to articulate complex emotions and characters—qualities that critics have also attributed to Lahiri's writings. As an Indian American, Lahiri is also part of a rich tradition of South Asian American writers, many of whom similarly focus on the theme of navigating a dual cultural identity. Examples of South Asian American literature include the play *Disgraced* by Ayad Akhtar, the novel *Gold Diggers* by Sanjena Anshu Sathian, and the comedic memoir *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)* by Mindy Kahling.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine
- **When Written:** 1990s
- **Where Written:** Boston, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1999
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** A suburb of Boston, Massachusetts in 1971
- **Climax:** When the Bangladesh Liberation War is officially declared, Mr. Pirzada fears that his wife and daughters will not survive.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Food Writing. "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" depicts food as an important source of connection for Lilia and Mr. Pirzada, but Lahiri has also written nonfiction about the importance of food in her own life. In a 2004 essay for the New Yorker entitled "The Long Way Home," Lahiri recalls the family bonding that occurred when she and her sister first started to cook Indian food for their parents.

Intrigued by Italy. Lahiri's first language was Bengali, but for much of her adult life she could only read and write in English. Then, after decades of fascination with Italy, Lahiri and her family moved to Italy in 2012 so she could become fluent in Italian. Since then, she works exclusively in Italian—writing in Italian, she wrote in her book *In altre parole* (*In Other Words*), makes her a "tougher, freer writer."

PLOT SUMMARY

Lilia reflects on the autumn of 1971, when she was 10 years old and living with her parents in a small suburb of Boston. During this time, a man named Mr. Pirzada would come to her family's home every night for dinner. Mr. Pirzada, a botany professor, came to New England for work, but he was originally from Dacca, the capital city of Bangladesh. At the time, however, Bangladesh was not yet its own country but was under Pakistani rule (where it was known as East Pakistan). Lilia explains that in 1971, East Pakistanis in Dacca were fighting an increasingly brutal conflict for their independence from the Pakistani government.

Around the time Mr. Pirzada starts to come over, the Pakistani army violently invades Dacca—rendering him unable to contact his wife and seven daughters back at home. Because Mr. Pirzada's rental place does not have a **TV**, Lilia's parents invite him over to eat and watch the news; her parents are also grateful to have another South Asian friend, as they often miss Calcutta. One night, however, Lilia learns that even though Mr. Pirzada shares the same language, taste in food and sense of humor as her parents, he is not technically considered "Indian." Lilia's father explains Partition: in 1947, soon after India gained independence from the British, the nation split into two countries, India and Pakistan, along religious lines. Even decades later, many Muslims and Hindus still find sharing a meal together "unthinkable"—but Lilia's Hindu parents continue to dine with Muslim Mr. Pirzada.

Lilia's father realizes that Lilia has not learned anything about the conflict in East Pakistan, and he worries that her school is failing her; in fact, Lilia explains, all she ever seems to learn about is the American Revolution. Lilia's mother, however, is haunted by her own memories of a violent childhood in Calcutta, so she's happy that Lilia has been born and educated in the U.S., where they can live free from conflict.

The next evening, Mr. Pirzada comes over as usual—and as is their "ritual," he presents Lilia with an extravagant **candy**. Lilia loves these gifts of candy, but sometimes they make her feel strangely alienated too. Still, she saves every piece of candy Mr. Pirzada brings her in a box that once belonged her grandmother.

As Lilia's mother serves a variety of homecooked South Asian dishes, Mr. Pirzada takes out a **watch** that is set to Dacca time, 11 hours ahead, and sets it next to him as he eats. Lilia realizes that even when he is with her family, Mr. Pirzada is imagining his own daughters' lives—their lives in Boston are "only a shadow of what had already happened" in Dacca. Lilia watches the news from Dacca with her family, and she sees children her own age on the screen, struggling to survive. Before she goes to bed, Lilia eats a piece of candy and says a prayer for Mr. Pirzada's family.

At school, Lilia and her friend Dora are assigned a project about the American Revolution. When they go to the library for research, Lilia gets distracted by a book on Pakistan, but her teacher Mrs. Kenyon takes the book from her and scolds her.

The violence escalates in Dacca, but Mr. Pirzada continues to share "long, leisurely meals" with Lilia's parents. Just before Halloween, Mr. Pirzada comes over to help Lilia carve a jack-o'-lantern. As he is cutting out the mouth, he sees on the news that India is threatening to enter the conflict. He drops the knife, ruining the jack-o'-lantern.

On Halloween, Lilia and Dora dress as witches. Mr. Pirzada is terrified that trick-or-treating is dangerous, and he tries to come with the girls. Lilia tells him not to worry, but she is ashamed that she can only assure him of her own safety, and not of the safety of his daughters back home. Lilia and Dora collect candy from their neighbors, and several people tell Lilia that they have "never seen an Indian witch before." Lilia returns home to find that the jack-o'-lantern Mr. Pirzada carved has been smashed. But her parents barely notice, too distraught about the news they have seen on TV. The Bangladesh Liberation War is officially declared on December 4th, with India joining on the side of East Pakistan. For the next 12 days, Lilia's mother refuses to cook, and Mr. Pirzada stays at their house. Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada lean on one another for emotional support and glean whatever news they can from Lilia's relatives in Calcutta.

The war ends on December 16th: West Pakistan surrenders, and Bangladesh becomes an independent nation. Soon after, Mr. Pirzada returns home and finds that his wife and daughters survived. Months later, Lilia's family receives a card from Mr. Pirzada, in which he tries to express his deep gratitude for their meals together. Lilia realizes she will never see Mr. Pirzada again and struggles to accept his absence. For the first time, she does not eat a piece of candy at night; eventually, she throws all the candy away.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lilia – Lilia is the story's narrator; she is 10 years old during the main events of the story. Though Lilia's mother and father emigrated from Calcutta, Lilia was born and raised in a small suburb of Boston. Lilia spends much of her childhood eagerly taking in the American history she has been taught at school, but she becomes more interested in her family's South Asian roots when she meets Mr. Pirzada, a family friend from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). As the Bangladesh Liberation War breaks out in East Pakistan, threatening Mr. Pirzada's family—and then when Mr. Pirzada goes back home, never to return again—Lilia is forced to grapple with both the joys and challenges of living in diaspora. For instance, her dual cultural

identity means that she has more knowledge of the world (and a more adventurous diet) than her classmates do, but living in the U.S. also means being separated from her family, her cultural heritage, and ultimately Mr. Pirzada. The story marks a kind of coming of age for Lilia, as her exposure to the horrors of war and her new feelings of empathy and responsibility toward Mr. Pirzada leave her with a more mature worldview. This tension between youth and adulthood is evident throughout her narration, as Lilia's carefree projects (making collages for school, carving jack-o'-lanterns) are often altered or interrupted by news of the violence abroad. Moreover, grown-up Lillia will sometimes interject with an explanation or a qualification of something her younger counterpart does not yet understand. Importantly, Lilia's particular attachment to Mr. Pirzada is also a product of her young age. Her initial delight at the **candies** he gives her—and the prayers she says for his family as she eats them—reflect her optimism and innocence. His departure at the end of the story, which marks the first great loss of Lilia's life, leaves her with both newfound knowledge and a kind of newfound cynicism.

Mr. Pirzada – The titular Mr. Pirzada is a professor of botany from the city of Dacca in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). When the story takes place, he is spending a year in New England to study a certain kind of tree, while his wife and seven daughters remain in East Pakistan. While he is living in a suburb outside Boston, the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War breaks out, endangering his beloved family and making it impossible for him to get home. For the duration of the war, he eats dinner and watches **TV** news almost every night with Lilia and her mother and father. And though he and Lilia form a special bond, he is overjoyed when he learns that his family is safe and he can return home. Lilia is often struck by Mr. Pirzada's elegance and generosity. He is always well-dressed, as if "in preparation to attend a funeral at a moment's notice." He is also extremely polite and charming, as evidenced by the **candies** he gives Lilia with "superb ease." At the same time, however, Mr. Pirzada is caught between two worlds, longing to be with his own daughters even as he creates new rituals with Lilia. He even keeps a **watch** set to Dacca's time zone to feel more connected to his family. Though Lilia will not fully grasp the fully difficulty of Mr. Pirzada's position until the end of the story, she instinctively describes him as someone "balancing in either hand two suitcases of equal weight." In other words, even as Mr. Pirzada is being pulled in opposite directions, he handles himself with supreme grace.

Lilia's Father – Lilia's father is a university professor. Having immigrated to the United States from Calcutta, he often misses Indian food and culture. He is also concerned that Lilia's education is too focused on the U.S., and he wants to expose her to other people and places. He and Lilia's mother therefore seek to make with friends with people, like Mr. Pirzada, who are from "their part of the world." The story also portrays Lilia's father as a tolerant and accepting person. He is Hindu, and Mr. Pirzada is Muslim, and (as he explains to Lilia) these religious differences have been the source of great conflict on the Indian subcontinent. For many Hindus and Muslims, "eating in the other's company [is] still unthinkable." Lilia's father, however, merely seeks to welcome and care for Mr. Pirzada, revealing both the extent of his alienation in the U.S. (as he is eager to connect with other South Asian people) and his generous spirit.

Lilia's Mother – Lilia's mother—who, like Lilia's father, is originally from Calcutta—now works at a bank in Boston. While Lilia's father fears that his daughter does not know enough about the world, Lilia's mother is grateful for Lilia's particularly American kind of innocence. She remains troubled by her own memories of childhood in India during Partition (the division of British India into India and Pakistan), when she ate "rationed food," "watched riots from [her] rooftop," and hid "neighbors in water tanks to prevent them from being shot." Lilia's mother is also an excellent cook, and she is almost always preparing or serving traditional South Asian dishes to her husband and daughter—as well as Mr. Pirzada—throughout the story.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Dora – Ten-year-old Dora is Lilia's best friend and classmate. They go trick-or-treating or together, and they collaborate on their school project about the American Revolution. Dora has no idea that there is any conflict in East Pakistan, and she often seems confused by Mr. Pirzada and his relationship to Lilia.

Mrs. Kenyon – Mrs. Kenyon is Lilia and Dora's teacher. She emphasizes American history (and particularly the American Revolution) in her lessons and prohibits Lilia from trying to research other parts of the world.

TERMS

Bangladesh Liberation War – The Bangladesh Liberation War (also called the Bangladesh War of Independence) was a 1971 revolution that resulted in the independence of Bangladesh. The war was the result of ongoing cultural and political conflict between the ruling establishment in West Pakistan and the rising Bengali nationalist movement in East Pakistan. In March 1971, the West Pakistan military invaded East Pakistan and committed genocide against the East Pakistani people, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths. Fighting continued throughout 1971, and war was formally declared on December 4th, 1971. India joined on the side of East Pakistan, and on December 16, 1971, West Pakistan surrendered. West Pakistan became Pakistan, and East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh.

Partition of India – Partition was the 1947 division of British India into two Dominions (self-governing nations within the British Empire) along religious lines: the majority-Hindu India

and the majority-Muslim Pakistan. Pakistan encompassed West Pakistan on one side of the Indian subcontinent and East Pakistan on the other side. The Partition of India was a chaotic and violent split, resulting in genocide, mass displacement, a refugee crisis, and conflict between Hindus and Muslims that's still ongoing today.

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.

FAMILY, RITUAL, AND SHARED TIME

In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," the adult narrator, Lilia, looks back on her childhood and remembers being fascinated by her parents' dinner guest, the kindly Mr. Pirzada. Back in East Pakistan (what is now known as Bangladesh), Mr. Pirzada has a wife and seven daughters of his own—but he has been separated from them, first by moving to the U.S. for work and then by the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War that prevents him from communicating with his family. As the situation in East Pakistan gets more and more dangerous, Lilia and Mr. Pirzada become increasingly attached to each other, with Mr. Pirzada giving Lilia delicious **candy** and Lilia praying for him in secret. At the same time, however, Mr. Pirzada's mind is always with his wife and daughters; during meals, he even sets a **watch** to his family's time zone, picturing their morning rituals as he goes about his evening one. It is only after the war, when Mr. Pirzada leaves the U.S. to return to his family, that Lilia realizes how important he is to her—suggesting that in sharing so many dinners with Mr. Pirzada, he has also become a kind of family member. Throughout the story, then, family is created through shared time and traditions; communal rituals both unite blood relatives across vast distances (as with Mr. Pirzada and his daughters) and turn strangers into loved ones (as with Mr. Pirzada and Lilia).

Through a series of shared rituals, Lilia and Mr. Pirzada develop an almost familial bond. As soon as Mr. Pirzada enters the house, he and Lilia have a routine: she takes his coat for him, and once he's "relieved of his trappings," he gently touches her throat as though "feeling for solidity behind a wall before driving in a nail." The repetition and reliability of this ritual allows Mr. Pirzada to find a sense of "solidity" or stability in Lilia, as each night she helps him feel comforted and temporarily "relieved" from his worries about his wife and daughters. Even more importantly, Mr. Pirzada gives Lilia candy each night, doing so with great flair in order to make the routine special: "it had become our ritual," Lilia reflects. This "ritual"—and the process that follows it, in which Lilia stores the candy in a wooden box she inherited from her grandmother—allows Lilia and Mr. Pirzada, separated by age and background, to become "comfortable" with each other in only a few months' time. It is also worth noting that Mr. Pirzada asks Lilia not to thank him for these gifts, because strangers constantly thank him for things, an American custom that he seems to find insincere. Unlike his interactions at the bank or the grocery store, therefore, Mr. Pirzada seems to view this ritual as an expected, familial kindness, not one Lilia needs to say "thank you" for.

At the same time, however, Mr. Pirzada works to continue rituals with his family back in East Pakistan, even across thousands of miles and in a different time zone. Though the conflict in East Pakistan has made it impossible for people there to receive mail, Mr. Pirzada continues to send comic books to his seven daughters. It is telling that although Mr. Pirzada knows that his children will not receive these gifts, he continues to send them—suggesting that to Mr. Pirzada, continued rituals are essential to maintaining family relationships, even when they have little practical impact. Every night at dinner with Lilia, Mr. Pirzada takes out a watch set to the current time in Dacca (the city in East Pakistan where his family lives). "Life," Lilia realizes, is "being lived in Dacca first"—she understands that Mr. Pirzada is picturing "his daughters rising from sleep, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school." Even as Mr. Pirzada engages in his rituals with Lilia and her family, then, he is also trying to envision his daughters' routines, 11 hours ahead. In doing so, he is able to feel that his mind is with his wife and daughter in Dacca, even as his body remains in suburban Boston. This suggests that shared time can create a sense of closeness even from thousands of miles away, and that rituals (even ones as ordinary as "rising from sleep") are powerful in their ability to preserve family connections.

Just as ritual helps to create and maintain family relationships, the loss of ritual marks the end of these relationships—which is what ultimately happens between Lilia and Mr. Pirzada. After the Bangladesh Liberation War ends, Mr. Pirzada returns home to the newly independent Bangladesh and finds that his wife and daughters survived the conflict. When he writes to Lilia's family, he tries to express his gratitude: "at the end of the letter he thanked us for our hospitality," Lilia recalls, "adding that although he now understood the meaning of the words 'thank you' they were still not adequate." Though Lilia's parents celebrate Mr. Pirzada's happiness, Lilia "[does] not feel like celebrating"—perhaps because in saying "thank you," which he never did before, Mr. Pirzada is breaking with a crucial part of their shared ritual and therefore disrupting an essential part of their relationship. Lilia throws away all the of the candy he gave her after this, ceasing her own private ritual of eating a piece of candy "each night before bed" and further signaling the end of their close bond. In Mr. Pirzada's absence, Lilia now knows "what it mean[s] to miss someone who [is] so many miles and

hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters." In addition to affirming that her love for Mr. Pirzada is deeply familial—she feels about him as he feels about his own "wife and daughters"—Lilia laments their physical and emotional distance. Mr. Pirzada is "hours away" in addition to "miles away," no longer sharing time with Lilia and her parents. Since time and ritual have been the building blocks of Lilia's familial bond with Mr. Pirzada, that bond collapses in the absence of those two things.

DIASPORA, ALIENATION, AND LOSS

Lilia, the narrator of "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," grows up in a suburb of Boston. At school, she is taught exclusively American history and traditions, but at home, Lilia's parents—who emigrated from Calcutta—try to educate her about the food, neighborly traditions, and family members they left behind in India. Lilia's curiosity about her cultural roots increases when she meets Mr. Pirzada, a man from East Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh) who begins coming to Lilia's home most nights for dinner. And when the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 breaks out, causing Mr. Pirzada to fear for his wife and daughters' lives, Lilia starts to realize how painful it is to be disconnected from one's homeland and to be caught between two cultures. As Lilia and Mr. Pirzada each struggle with the distance between the U.S. and South Asia, the story suggests that although living in diaspora might bring new opportunities and exciting cultural exchange, it also means accepting feelings of alienation as well as a certain measure of cultural and personal loss.

Unlike most of the people she knows, Lilia has dual cultural knowledge: at school she learns about the country she lives in, and at home she learns about the region her parents left behind. At school, Lilia is given map quizzes on the Thirteen Colonies that would become the first U.S. states. At home, on the other hand, she has "a map of the world taped to the wall," with lines drawn on it to mark her parents' travels in South Asia. These two types of maps signify the difference between Lilia's two worlds: her world at school focuses on only a narrow sliver of the U.S., while her world at home is more global, with a focus on the Indian subcontinent. The difference between these two maps emphasizes the fact that Lilia inhabits two distinct cultures, giving her a more diverse perspective of the world than her peers. And because of her dual worlds, Lilia understands things that the other people in her life do not. For example, when Mr. Pirzada sees pumpkins on stoops around Halloween, he does not know what to make of it. So, Lilia explains jack-o'-lanterns to him, and she even shows him how to carve one, "like others [she] had noticed in the neighborhood." Because she has been raised in this American suburb, Lilia is able to pick up on "neighborhood" knowledge and customs that her parents and Mr. Pirzada sometimes struggle to make sense of. Similarly, while the **TV** news is always on at Lilia's house, Lilia is surprised to find that this is not the case for many of her classmates—her friend Dora's family, for instance, keeps their television turned off. Since TV is how Lilia and her family learn about what is happening in other parts of the world, the lack of TV playing at Dora's house signals that Lilia has a deeper understanding of global events than her peers do.

However, as Lilia becomes increasingly close to Mr. Pirzada—and as the violence in East Pakistan escalates—she begins to feel that she does not fully belong either among white Americans or among South Asian immigrants. One example of Lilia feeling alienated in her predominately white community is when she and Dora go trick-or-treating, and they both dress as witches—prompting many of Lilia's neighbors to comment that "they had never seen an Indian witch before." Lilia is excited to participate in Halloween traditions, but the people in her suburb make her feel that she is somehow abnormal because of her ethnicity, even though she and Dora are dressed the same and doing the exact same thing. Lilia sometimes feels alienated in her family, too. Though Lilia adores Mr. Pirzada, his "ease" with her parents makes her feel like "a stranger in [her] own home." Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada have a firsthand understanding of South Asian culture, geography, and politics that Lilia, by virtue of growing up in the United States, does not possess. In fact, Lilia's father often worries that she is not getting the education she needs. "What does she learn about the world?" he presses. And as the conflict in East Pakistan worsens, Lilia increasingly feels her lack of knowledge, as she is unable to participate in the adults' conversations—or to understand the "single fear" that they all seem to share for their loved ones on the other side of the world.

Even more painfully, Lilia comes to realize that living in diaspora often means being separated from loved ones and cultural heritage. Lilia sees that Mr. Pirzada, though he comes over every night, is never fully present with her family: "our meals, our actions, [are] only a shadow of what had already happened [in Dacca], a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged." Separated from his wife and daughters—and unable even to contact them—his real life is happening thousands of miles away, without him. Just as Lilia feels caught between worlds, then, Mr. Pirzada also struggles to "belong"—suggesting that there is a measure of isolation inherent in the experience of diaspora. When Mr. Pirzada leaves, Lilia is then forced to experience the pain of separation firsthand—only then does she know "what it mean[s] to miss someone who [is] so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months." Lilia realizes here that her feelings of loss are not unique, as they are shared by anyone who has loved ones a great "many miles" away. Moreover, Lilia's use of the phrase "hours away" suggests that the challenge of diaspora is not just spatial but temporal—she is also separated from her family's ancestors and history (she mentions, for example, a

grandmother she never knew). Thus, even as Lilia's experience of diaspora is largely an exciting and educational one, she comes to understand that living between two worlds also entails feelings of isolation and loss.

FOOD, CULTURE, AND CONNECTION

Descriptions of food are everywhere in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine"—though the backdrop of the story is the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, the main action consists of a series of dinners in suburban Boston. Lilia, the story's narrator, is looking back on her childhood as the daughter of Indian immigrants. The family's frequent dinner guest, Mr. Pirzada, on the other hand, hails from the city of Dacca in East Pakistan (what is now known as Bangladesh). Yet despite their differences in nationality, all of the characters bond over a shared cuisine: Lilia's mother delights Mr. Pirzada with a rotation of traditional South Asian dishes, and Mr. Pirzada never fails to give Lilia a delicious **candy**. Moreover, as the political situation abroad worsens—and as Mr. Pirzada begins to fear for the family he has left back in East Pakistan—South Asian food allows both Lilia and Mr. Pirzada to feel close to people and places on the other side of the world. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," therefore, the titular dining is not only a necessary routine but also an important source of cultural belonging and interpersonal connection.

Though initially Mr. Pirzada is a stranger to both Lilia and her parents, sharing food allows them to quickly grow close with one another. Lilia, upon learning that Mr. Pirzada is of a different nationality and religion than her family, draws her readers' focus to how similar her parents' eating habits are to Mr. Pirzada's. All of them eat "pickled mangoes with their meals" and "rice every night with their hands." Then, all three of them "chew[] fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, dr[ink] no alcohol, and for dessert dip[] austere biscuits into successive cups of tea." To 10-year-old Lilia, this unity in eating habits suggests a deeper commonality than shared citizenship or religious belief—especially because, as she mentions earlier in the story, most other families in their small suburb have very different eating habits from her and her parents. Furthermore, Lilia and Mr. Pirzada's bond begins with food: he gives her a fancy candy every night, and at first, this ritual is the only time Mr. Pirzada speaks directly to her. Here, food is even more useful than language in creating a connection—Lilia might not know what to say to this strange adult, but she is able to savor the edible gifts he gives her, suggesting an understanding that is based on taste instead of on talking.

Perhaps because food is such a sensory experience, it also allows Lilia and Mr. Pirzada to connect with India and East Pakistan, thousands of miles away. When Lilia's mother serves Mr. Pirzada a mincemeat kebab, his first thought is that "one can only hope […] that Dacca's refugees are as heartily fed." The tastes of home—kebab is a classic Bangladeshi dish—brings his mind instantly to Dacca, and to the wife and children he has left behind there. Similarly, while Lilia struggles to watch the carnage in Dacca on the **TV** news, Mr. Pirzada is "calmly creating a well in his rice to make room for a second helping of lentils." Rather than giving in to despair as he watches his country in disarray, food offers Mr. Pirzada a moment of "calm"—and perhaps memories of happier times at home, where he united with his family over meals similar to the one he is eating now. Food also proves connective for Lilia, even though she has only visited India once. She keeps Mr. Pirzada's candies in a "box made of carved sandalwood […], in which, long ago in India, [her] father's mother used to store the ground areca nuts she had after her morning bath." This is all Lilia has of her grandmother, whom she has never met. Here, the food Mr. Pirzada gives her allows Lilia to bond—across both space and time—with her grandmother, as they both keep their treats in the same box.

Most tellingly, moments when connections are broken—either culturally or interpersonally—are associated with the *absence* of food. Often, Lilia's parents associate great moments of conflict with a refusal to eat or cook. Lilia's father, explaining Partition (1947 the division of British India into India and Pakistan) to her, says that it has left such deep wounds for Hindus and Muslims that many finding eating together "unthinkable" even decades later. Later, when India commits to joining the Bangladesh Liberation War, Lilia's mother refuses "to serve anything other than boiled eggs with rice." In each case, the absence of a family-style meal suggests a situation in which connection is impossible. Along the same lines, after Mr. Pirzada returns to Bangladesh, Lilia realizes she will never see him again, and she copes with her grief by throwing away the candy he gave her. She feels that there is "no need to" continue eating the candy if she will never again see the man who gave it to her. In no longer eating the candy, Lilia is resigning herself to the impossibility of continuing a relationship with Mr. Pirzada—suggesting that even though they have been apart for months, being able to eat the sweets Mr. Pirzada gave her is what has kept their bond alive for Lilia.

In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," food connects people to one another, to family history, and to countries on the other side of the world; conversely, the absence of food marks the loss of homelands or loved ones. But by providing such sensory detail about the various dishes in the story—and in doing so, conjuring the reader's own memories of taste and texture—the story also allows the reader to deeply connect and empathize with Lilia, her parents, and Mr. Pirzada. Just as eating food connects Lilia and Mr. Pirzada, reading about food links readers to the story's characters.

INDEPENDENCE, REVOLUTION, AND VIOLENCE

Lilia, the narrator of "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," reflects on her childhood, much of which she spent learning the history of American independence by heart at school. Her school's proximity to Boston means a steady stream of field trips to Revolutionary War memorials, and the curriculum focuses heavily on George Washington and the other Founding Fathers. But while Lilia's schooling tells a celebratory tale of historical revolution, her own family is wrapped up in a much darker, more contemporary independence movement—the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, in which East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh only after great suffering and loss. This war—completely ignored by Lilia's school—becomes even more personal to Lilia when Mr. Pirzada, her parents' frequent dinner guest, starts to fear that his family in East Pakistan might not survive the conflict. "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" thus reveals that fights for independence aren't bloodless or purely victorious, as Lilia's textbooks make them out to be. Rather, the story suggests that Americans' mythic view of their own country's revolution obscures the reality of war and excludes other historical and current events.

The history that Lilia learns in her classes tells a simplified, cheerful version of the American battle for independence, glossing over the true costs of revolution. For her class projects on the American Revolution, Lilia is asked to make puppets and "dioramas out of colored construction paper." Boys at Lilia's school reenact Revolutionary War battles on the playground, suggesting that they view the war for independence as a kind of game. These activities are specifically designed to be kid-friendly, colorful, and fun. Thus, they turn attention away from the violence and destruction that come with conflict. Mrs. Kenyon, Lilia's teacher, teaches her class about the *Mayflower* (the ship that transported Pilgrim settlers to the Massachusetts Bay Colony), the Declaration of Independence, and the Battle of Yorktown (the final battle of the Revolutionary War)—all moments of victory for the burgeoning United States. Mrs. Kenyon's focus on these victories, as well the focus on the distant past, presents the narrative of American independence as a simple, positive, neatly contained story arc. In addition, Lilia's primary assessments in her history classes are map quizzes, in which she is given "blank maps of the thirteen colonies and asked to fill in names, dates, capitals." These quizzes emphasize factual knowledge, but they do not take into account the human lives—and the human suffering—that are involved in any revolution.

Through her relationship with Mr. Pirzada, however, Lilia is able to see the human costs of revolution firsthand. When Mr. Pirzada, helping Lilia carve her jack-o'-lantern, learns that India will be entering the Bangladesh Liberation War, he drops the knife and raises "a hand to one side of his face, as if someone had slapped him there." Even though Mr. Pirzada is thousands of miles away from the actual revolutionary fighting, it has a visceral, almost violent effect on him because he understands that his wife and daughters could be killed in the conflict. Lilia's father, commenting on the news, reminds her that people just like her are living through this conflict. "See, children your age," he says, "what they do to survive." Unlike in her history classes, which focus mostly on famous leaders' victories, Lilia's experience of this contemporary revolution is always focused on the everyday people affected by war. When Lilia explains the key dates of the Bangladesh Liberation War, she is clear that these facts come "from any history book, in any library." What she actually remembers of the war is that "my father no longer asked me to watch the news with them, and that Mr. Pirzada stopped bringing me candy, and that my mother refused to serve anything other than boiled eggs with rice for dinner." The "history book" version of war has little to do with the personal experience of war, which for Lilia is marked not by any date or battle, but by the stress and despair that the conflict caused Mr. Pirzada and her parents.

Ultimately, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" suggests that Americans' emphasis on a sanitized narrative of their own independence makes it difficult for them to see those in other countries—or even those on U.S. soil—who are struggling. "No one at school talked about the war followed so faithfully in my living room," Lilia explains. Later, she is shocked to find that while her parents are constantly watching the **TV** news, the TV is not even on at her friend Dora's house. Though the American Revolution, a centuries-old conflict, is still relevant at Lilia's school, none of her classmates are aware of the Bengali independence movement that is happening in their present moment. In fact, in the story, this focus on U.S. independence directly blocks out awareness of other conflicts. Lilia learns about the American Revolution "every year," leaving no room in the curriculum for anything else. And most tellingly, when Lilia tries to read about Dacca (the city in East Pakistan where Mr. Pirzada is from), her teacher forbids her from doing so, saying there is "no reason" to consult a book if it is not about the American Revolution. While Lilia is forced to re-learn the history of an old conflict, she is not allowed to learn the history behind a current one. Lilia and Mr. Pirzada are thousands of miles away from Dacca, but their personal investment in the Bangladeshi independence movement affords them a completely different lens than the historical one Lilia gets in school. In showing how complex and painful the lived experience of revolution is, the story implicitly calls for a more expansive view of history and current events—one that acknowledges the human costs of past revolutions and of ongoing conflicts around the world.

YOUTH AND INNOCENCE VS. MATURITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Though "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" is about decidedly adult subject matter—the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, which was a time of mass death and displacement for Bangladeshis (then known as East Pakistanis)—it is told through the context of the narrator, Lilia's, childhood. Each night, Lilia, who lives in a quiet suburb of Boston, watches the news on **TV** and sees children her own age in East Pakistan trying to survive the violent conflict. Her previously sheltered worldview is further complicated as she gets to know Mr. Pirzada, an East Pakistani family friend whose wife and daughters back home are among those most affected by the war. While at first Mr. Pirzada babies Lilia, presenting her with **candies** and worrying over her safety, their roles gradually reverse, as Lilia starts trying to take care of Mr. Pirzada, praying for him and trying to lighten his stress about his family. The more Lilia begins to assume responsibility for Mr. Pirzada's well-being, the more she comes to terms with the war's brutality, and the less she is able to maintain her innocent, youthful perspective. These shifting roles suggest that outside circumstances can sometimes force young people to come of age before they're necessarily ready, and that facing difficult truths and taking care of others are cornerstones of maturation.

At the beginning of "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," Lilia is youthful and innocent, shielded from the world by the adults in her life. Though Lilia's father is frustrated that Lilia does not know about the conflict in East Pakistan, Lilia's mother is "genuinely proud" that Lilia has not had to endure the instability and violence that her parents did in their own youths. Lilia's lack of knowledge about hardship is therefore the result of an intentional effort by her parents to raise her in relative safety and peace. Indeed, from the comfort of her suburb, Lilia is free to delight in various childish pleasures: construction-paper dioramas, field trips, and trick-or-treating. Most of all, she looks forward to the candy Mr. Pirzada brings her: "the steady stream of honey-filled lozenges, the raspberry truffles, the slender rolls of sour pastilles." Lilia's focus on and love of these candies speaks to her innocence, while Mr. Pirzada's self-professed desire to "spoil" her demonstrates the extent to which the adults in her life care for her and want to preserve her innocence.

However, Lilia's exposure—through her parents, Mr. Pirzada, and the TV news—to the conflict in East Pakistan forces her to learn more about the world and her place in it. On the news, Lilia sees "tanks rolling through dusty streets, and fallen buildings, and forests of unfamiliar trees into which Pakistani refugees had fled." More importantly, she watches Mr. Pirzada as "the images flashed in miniature across his eyes." Here, Lilia is not only exposed to massive carnage and destruction for the first time, but through Mr. Pirzada, she becomes aware that such pain can directly affect the people in her life. After Lilia's father tells her to pay attention to what's happening on the news—what "children her age" have to "do to survive"— Lilia finds herself unable to eat her dinner. Confronted with the degree of pain that children just like herself have to deal with—and aware, for the first time, that her own innocence is a privilege—Lilia loses her appetite. Perhaps motivated by her newfound understanding of hardship, Lilia begins to grow more curious about the world around her. Even after she is sent to bed, she listens to her parents' conversations with Mr. Pirzada. At school, she begins to read a book about Pakistan in the library. Lilia's curiosity shows that she's no longer comfortable with her sheltered ignorance of the world beyond her small suburb. Even though her parents still shield her from the worst of the conflict, Lilia is now determined to find out information on her own, reflecting her growing maturity.

By the end of the story, Lilia has seen that life can be painful and difficult—and where she once was protected from these unpleasant truths, her new awareness now makes her want to confront reality and protect others. "I prayed that Mr. Pirzada's family was safe and sound," Lilia explains, "I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught to, but I decided, given the circumstances, that it was something I should do." For the first time, then, Lilia is motivated not what by the adults in her life have "taught" her, but by "circumstance." Lilia has shed her former innocence and wants to take action and have an impact in any way she can. Later, when Mr. Pirzada frets about Lilia's safety before she goes trick-or-treating, Lilia tells him "don't worry"—words she "had tried but failed to tell him for weeks." Where once she took Mr. Pirzada's candies and let him baby her, now Lilia begins to feel that she wants to take care of him and comfort him—even though he is an adult and she is only 10 years old. Finally, after Mr. Pirzada returns to the newly independent Bangladesh the end of the story, Lilia learns "what it mean[s] to miss someone who [is] so many miles and hours away." Now that she has lived through both this conflict and Mr. Pirzada's departure, Lilia has a more mature understanding not only of current events but of human relationships. Interestingly, she compares her loss of Mr. Pirzada to Mr. Pirzada's loss of his daughters—again suggesting that she saw herself as having adult responsibility in her relationship with Mr. Pirzada. For Lilia, then, coming of age means not only a newfound knowledge of the world but also a newfound responsibility to the people in it.

SYMBOLS

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

CANDY

The candy that Mr. Pirzada gives Lilia represents the possibility for human connection despite people's differences, even across vast distances or stretches of time. Every time Mr. Pirzada comes to Lilia's house for dinner, he presents her with an extravagant candy: "honey-filled lozenges," "raspberry truffles," "an especially spectacular peppermint lollipop." These candies signal Mr. Pirzada's almost fatherly fondness for Lilia, who is still young enough to see each new piece as precious "jewel." Although Lilia is a 10-year-old girl whose family is from India, and Mr. Pirzada is a middle-aged man from East Pakistan, this simple gesture of kindness bridges the personal and cultural gaps between them and helps foster a close bond.

It's also important that Lilia keeps the candy in the same sandalwood box that her Indian grandmother, whom she never met, used to store areca nuts (fruit seeds that are chewed like tobacco). The box is her "only memento" of her grandmother, and Lilia mimics her grandmother's habit of storing treats in it. In this way, the candy, and the ritual Lilia creates around it, also symbolize a connection to her family history across space and time. She even refers to each piece as a "coin from a buried kingdom," again emphasizing the candy's ability to connect her to a different time and place.

Over time, every time Lilia eats a candy, she begins to say a prayer for Mr. Pirzada's wife and daughters. His family is still in East Pakistan, which is embroiled in a violent revolution. As she eats the sweets, she pictures Mr. Pirzada's daughters back in East Pakistan, and she begins to feel invested in both the people and the place. In this way, the candy represents her close connection to Mr. Pirzada and, by extension, her connection to his daughters—girls around her same age who live across the world and whose experiences are so different from her own. It is telling that when Mr. Pirzada leaves the U.S. to reunite with his family, Lilia throws all the candy away because there is "no need" for it anymore. To Lilia, the candy is meaningful not because it tastes good, but because it's a symbolic link to Mr. Pirzada—and now that she knows she will never see him again, disposing of the candy is perhaps Lilia's way of grieving and moving on from the loss of her friend.

TV

TV represents the violent reality of revolution and war. The TV is almost always on in Lilia's family home—as political conflict in East Pakistan intensifies, Lilia's parents and their regular dinner guest Mr. Pirzada (whose family still lives in East Pakistan) are glued to the television news. The four of them even eat dinner at the coffee table each night instead of at the dining room table, so that they can watch the news while they eat. The TV thus becomes a kind of houseguest in its own right, its unceasing presence reflecting how immediate and personal the costs of independence are for Bangladeshis and their loved ones.

By contrast, when Lilia visits her friend Dora's home, she realizes "that the television wasn't on at Dora's house at all"—Dora's living room can be a place of relaxation precisely because she does not have loved ones in a conflict zone. (Indeed, none of Lilia's classmates are aware of the situation in Bangladesh, and the only war the students ever learn about is the American Revolution.) In this way, the *lack* of TV news in Dora's symbolizes Americans' tendency to overlook conflicts in other parts of the world.

While Lilia's father at first encourages her to watch the conflict unfold on TV so that she's aware of what's going on, he later prohibits her from watching when the Bangladeshi Liberation War officially begins and the violence ramps up. So, even as television is the means by which Lilia confronts difficult truths and gains more understanding of the world beyond her small town, the ability to turn it off is a reminder that she leads a sheltered life compared to the violence that Bangladeshis are experiencing. Lilia and her parents tune in by choice, whereas the people embroiled in the conflict (or those, like Mr. Pirzada, whose loved ones are at risk) have no means of escaping their suffering.

WATCHES

Watches represent the idea that rituals and shared time allow loved ones to connect with one another, even from a distance. While Mr. Pirzada, an East Pakistani man, eats dinner with Lilia and her family, he takes out a silver pocket watch that's set to the time zone in Dacca (the East Pakistan city where his wife and daughters still live). As Lilia tries to understand this ritual, she realizes that life "was being lived in Dacca first. I imagined Mr. Pirzada's daughters rising from sleep, tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, getting ready for school. Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there." By allowing Mr. Pirzada to imagine his way into his family's time-zone—and therefore into their lives—this watch represents the importance of shared time and rituals in keeping family connections alive.

In addition, watches help Lilia and her father connect to stay connected, no matter where they are. Just as Mr. Pirzada looks at a watch in Dacca time in order to imagine his daughters' routines, Lilia's father, despite living in the same place and time zone as his daughter, asks her to synchronize her watch with his whenever she leaves the house without a parent. Even when these two fathers are not in the same physical place as their daughters, then, a sense of unified time allows them to feel close to their girls.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner Books edition of *Interpreter of Maladies* published in 1999.

When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine Quotes

In the autumn of 1971 a man used to come to our house, bearing confections in his pocket and hopes of ascertaining the life or death of his family.

Related Characters: Lilia (speaker), Mr. Pirzada

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this line, the very first of the story, Lilia gives the reader several key pieces of information. She makes clear the time period of her story—the fall of 1971, which is the height of the Bangladesh Liberation War—and simultaneously reveals that she is now looking back on this story with some distance (the man "used" to come to her house, meaning he no longer does). More important, however, is this opening description of Mr. Pirzada (though he is not yet named), an East Pakistani man who was a frequent dinner guest at her family's home and whose family was still in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during the war.

Given that the story to come is about Lilia's almost familial closeness with Mr. Pirzada, it is surprising that she initially keeps him anonymous, describing him as she would a stranger. In this line, the relationship seems primarily transactional, as if Mr. Pirzada brought "confections" to Lilia solely to gain access to her parents' TV (which is what he uses to watch the news in order to "ascertain" his family's status as they weathered the conflict in East Pakistan). In this opening, then, Lilia foreshadows the story's ending: though Mr. Pirzada was immensely special to her for a brief period, he came into her life as a stranger, and his absence since that crucial autumn has made him a stranger again.

Lastly, this first line provides a clue to the story's structure: here, Lilia sets a precedent for juxtaposing high-stakes events (Mr. Pirzada's TV-watching is literally a matter of "life or death") with small-scale, childlike memories (of delicious "confections," for example). Thus, even though Lilia is now much older than she was during the main events of the story, her understanding of Mr. Pirzada's crisis remains colored by her youth and innocence at the time.

It was a small campus, with narrow brick walkways and white pillared buildings, located on the fringes of what seemed to be an even smaller town. The supermarket did not carry mustard oil, doctors did not make house calls, neighbors never dropped by without an invitation, and of these things, every so often, my parents complained. In search of compatriots, they used to trail their fingers, at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world.

Related Characters: Lilia (speaker), Lilia's Mother, Lilia's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Having moved to a suburb of Boston so her father can teach at a university there, Lilia's parents find their new home isolating and confining. The language used to describe Lilia's suburb also suggests a kind of captivity: the walkways are "narrow," the campus (featuring typical New England architecture with is pillars and brick) is "small," and the town is "even smaller." Though the family has lived here for many years now, it is telling that Lilia's parents do not feel this suburb belongs to them—"their part of the world" is still South Asia, now thousands of miles away.

Two other things are worth noting in this passage: first, Lilia begins her list of the Indian traditions her parents miss with a reference to "mustard oil," a key ingredient in many South Asian dishes. This the first of many instances in the story that food provides a link to another place and culture. Second, though Lilia tells readers that her parents sometimes "complained," she does not include herself in their dissatisfaction—suggesting that, as someone born and raised in the U.S., she feels distance from the very "part of the world" that her parents feel most connected to.

> [My father] led me to a map of the world taped to the wall over his desk […] his finger trailed across the Atlantic, through Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and finally to the sprawling orange diamond that my mother once told me resembled a woman wearing a sari with her left arm extended. Various cities had been circled with lines drawn between them to indicate my parents' travels, and the place of their birth, Calcutta, was signified by a small silver star. I had been there only once and had no memory of the trip.

Related Characters: Lilia, Lilia's Father (speaker), Lilia's Mother, Mr. Pirzada

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

To explain why Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian, Lilia's father brings her to the family's map of the world. As she looks at this map, Lilia begins to think about South Asia and her relationship to it in several different ways. First, she takes in the literal geography of the map: the vast regions of "Europe," "the Mediterranean" and the "Middle East" that separate her from her parents' homeland, and the distant star that signifies where her parents are from.

But that geography is then personified, as Lilia recalls her mother's statement that the Indian subcontinent looks like "a woman wearing a sari with her left arm extended." This personification suggests that for Lilia's family, this world map is not merely a series of shapes and outlines. Rather, it represents treasured relationships and memories that they left behind when they immigrated to the U.S. This is made even more clear by the way Lilia's parents have annotated the map to reflect their own travels and experiences.

And finally, it is important that while Lilia sees the "small silver star" that signifies her parents' birthplace in Calcutta, she herself has "no memory" of that city. A place that holds great meaning for her parents is a place Lilia has been "only once"—so while the map is deeply personal for Lilia's parents, for Lilia (at least in this point in the story) India is more of a vague geographic concept than something personal and familiar. Lilia's lack of connection to the map thus demonstrates some of the gaps between her experience of being a first-generation American and her parents' experience as immigrants.

> We learned American history, of course, and American geography. That year, and every year, it seemed, we began by studying the Revolutionary War. We were taken in school buses on field trips to visit Plymouth Rock, and to walk the Freedom Trail, and to climb to the top of the Bunker Hill Monument. We made dioramas out of colored construction paper depicting George Washington crossing the choppy waters of the Delaware River, and we made puppets of King George wearing white tights and a black bow in his hair. During tests we were given blank maps of the thirteen colonies, and asked to fill in names, dates, capitals. I could do it with my eyes closed.

Related Characters: Lilia (speaker), Lilia's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

When Lilia's father learns of his daughter's ignorance about the conflict in East Pakistan (which will eventually become the Bangladesh Liberation War), he demands to know what she actually learns in school. Here, Lilia reflects on her school's narrow curriculum. "Every year" they learn about the American Revolution, hinting that her teachers would rather repeat information about long-ago battles than turn their attention to other parts of the world. Lilia can fill out maps of the colonies with her "eyes closed" because she has done it so many times, but she has never been taught about the (much more recent) 1947 Partition of India (when British India was divided into India and Pakistan along religious lines).

Moreover, the way Lilia is taught about the American Revolution is especially revealing. Rather than learning about the violence and real human costs inherent in any conflict, Lilia's classes turn the Revolution into a kind of childish game: Lilia's knowledge of the war comes through field trips, silly puppets, and "colored construction paper." At home, Lilia sees the pain of the Bengali independence movement first-hand, but at school, that pain is smoothed over, and the story of American independence is presented as purely victorious.

> It was an awkward moment for me, one which I awaited in part with dread, in part with delight. I was charmed by the presence of Mr. Pirzada's rotund elegance, and flattered by the faint theatricality of his attentions, yet unsettled by the superb ease of his gestures, which made me feel, for an instant, like a stranger in my own home. It had become our ritual, and for several weeks, before we grew more comfortable with one another, it was the only time he spoke to me directly.

Related Characters: Lilia (speaker), Mr. Pirzada

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lilia remembers the "awkward moment" in which Mr. Pirzada would present her with his nightly gift of candy. This passage gives readers important information about Mr. Pirzada: even though he is under a great deal of stress because his family in East Pakistan is in the middle of a war zone, he is still very generous to Lilia, and he still carries himself with "elegance" and grace. Interestingly, however, Mr. Pirzada's comfort in Lilia's space and with her parents sometimes makes her feel like "a stranger in [her] own home." Perhaps Lilia's sense of estrangement comes from the fact that Mr. Pirzada and her parents share a set of experiences that Lilia herself has never had. Unlike her, all of the adults have lived in South Asia, and as people raised in another country, all of them have had to navigate unfamiliar American customs.

Lilia's reflection here also shows the importance of "ritual" in creating intimate, familial relationships. Even when she and Mr. Pirzada struggle to talk to each other, the ritual of gift-giving allows them to grow "comfortable" with each other and to express care for each other.

Finally, it is telling that Lilia spends a whole paragraph describing the candy and the routine surrounding it. On one level, her degree of detail about the candy reflects her youthful fascination with the sweets. More importantly, though, her entire bond with Mr. Pirzada begins because they repeat this process over "weeks," and so her "dread" and "delight" about the candy ritual can also be seen as a reflection of her feelings about Mr. Pirzada's visits more broadly. Lilia loves Mr. Pirzada and looks forward to way he babies her, but his visits also cause Lilia to experience new feelings of confusion and alienation.

> I coveted each evening's treasure as I would a jewel, or a coin from a buried kingdom, and I would place it in a small keepsake box made of carved sandalwood beside my bed, in which, long ago in India, my father's mother used to store the ground areca nuts she ate after her morning bath. It was my only memento of a grandmother I had never known, and until Mr. Pirzada came to our lives I could find nothing to put inside it.

Related Characters: Lilia (speaker), Mr. Pirzada, Lilia's Father

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Lilia never eats Mr. Pirzada's gifts of candy right away; here, she explains the ritual she has established to properly store and savor the elaborate treats. This passage shows how food (in this case, the various candies) allows Lilia to connect not only with Mr. Pirzada but with people like her grandmother, whom Lilia never actually met. Lilia and her grandmother are separated by space (since her grandmother lived in India) but also by time, since it's implied that she died before Lilia could get to know her. Yet through this box—which Lilia's grandmother used to store areca nuts, themselves a kind of edible fruit seed—Lilia is able to overcome that distance and feel a new kind of connection to her family history, one she could not imagine "until Mr. Pirzada came to our lives."

The way Lilia stores her candy is also another one of the story's most important rituals—and just as ritual bonds Lilia with Mr. Pirzada, here it bonds her with the grandmother she "had never known." This passage therefore emphasizes that in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," rituals help to create and maintain family relationships, even when those rituals are asynchronous.

> Unlike the watch on his wrist, the pocket watch, he had explained to me, was set to the local time in Dacca, 11 hours ahead. For the duration of the meal the watch rested on his folded paper napkin on the coffee table [...] Life, I realized, was being lived in Dacca first. I imagined Mr. Pirzada's daughters rising from sleep, tying ribbons in their hair, anticipating breakfast, preparing for school. Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada really belonged.

Related Characters: Lilia (speaker), Mr. Pirzada

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

After learning that Mr. Pirzada is not considered Indian, Lilia starts to study him with new interest. Her focus on his two watches—the one on his wrist, which is set to Boston time, and the one on the table, set "eleven hours ahead" to Dacca time—is particularly revealing. While the watch on Mr. Pirzada's wrist serves a practical purpose, allowing him to show up on time for his nightly dinner ritual with Lilia's family, the pocket watch is his attempt to remain connected to his daughters even across continents and crisis. By setting the watch 11 hours ahead, Mr. Pirzada quite literally tries to share time with his daughters, picturing their morning even as he goes about his night.

On the one hand, then, this passage demonstrates the difficulty of living in diaspora: Mr. Pirzada struggles to "belong" in the U.S., separated from his wife and daughters not only by miles and conflict but by that 11-hour time "lag." On the other hand, these two watches once again point to the story's emphasis on ritual. Here, rituals allow a family to persist through even the hardest conditions: by imagining himself into his daughters' routines ("tying ribbons," "anticipating breakfast"), Mr. Pirzada is able to live life "in Dacca first," remaining connected to his own family even as he builds a new bond with Lilia's.

"See, children your age, what they do to survive," my father said as he served me another piece of fish. But I could no longer eat. I could only steal glances at Mr. Pirzada, sitting beside me in his olive green jacket, calmly creating a well in his rice to make room for a second helping of lentils. He was not my notion of a man burdened by such grave concerns.

Related Characters: Lilia's Father, Lilia (speaker), Mr. Pirzada

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

After Lilia sees images from the conflict in East Pakistan on the TV news, she is forced to reckon with the terrors that "children [her] age" must endure. This passage therefore marks a critical moment in Lilia's coming of age—faced for the first time with the hardships of life, and with her own degree of relative privilege, Lilia is so overwhelmed that she loses her appetite. Here, Lilia also realizes that grief and fear do not always express themselves clearly—Mr. Pirzada does not fit her idea of "a man burdened by such grave concerns," yet she knows he worries for his wife and daughters every day. Lilia thus begins to recognize not only the extent of suffering in the world but also the nuanced ways that people can process pain.

Moreover, this scene is notable for its description of Mr. Pirzada's eating. While graphic images of his city scroll across the screen, he is "calmly creating a well in his rice to make room for a second helping of lentils." This dish—and the ritual surrounding it—perhaps allows Mr. Pirzada to connect with a different version of Dacca, one defined not by falling buildings but by shared meals. In this sense, food is not only sustenance but a source of comfort, helping Mr. Pirzada to "survive" his own anxiety at the events on TV.

Eventually I took a square of white chocolate out of the box, and unwrapped it, and then I did something I had never done before. I put the chocolate in my mouth, letting it soften until the last possible moment, and then as I chewed it slowly, I prayed that Mr. Pirzada's family was safe and sound. I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but I decided, given the circumstances, that it was something I should do. That night when I went to the bathroom I only pretended to brush my teeth, for I feared that I would somehow rinse the prayer out as well. I wet the brush and rearranged the tube of paste to prevent my parents from asking any questions, and fell asleep with sugar on my tongue.

Related Characters: Lilia (speaker), Mr. Pirzada

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Alone in her room, Lilia begins to panic at the thought that Mr. Pirzada's family has perished in the conflict in East

Pakistani, and she feels a need to take action in some way. This passage marks the contrast between the very adult, tragic circumstances that Lilia witnesses and her still-youthful way of processing things: even as she makes the mature decision to pray for Mr. Pirzada (something she had "never been taught or told to do"), her superstition that she will "somehow rinse out the prayer" by brushing her teeth is clearly childish.

It is also worth noting the degree of sensory detail in Lilia's description of the candy: she recalls the chocolate "softening" and the taste of "sugar on [her] tongue." This specificity suggests that food not only connects the characters to one another but also connect the characters to *readers*—such sensory detail allows the story's audience to imagine themselves into Lilia's mind in the same way that Lilia uses the ritual of the candy to connect with her deceased grandmother.

> "Don't worry," I said. It was the first time I had uttered those words to Mr. Pirzada, two simple words I had tried but failed to tell him for weeks, had said only in my prayers. It shamed me now that I had said them for my own sake.

Related Characters: Lilia (speaker), Mr. Pirzada

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

When Lilia leaves to go trick-or-treating, Mr. Pirzada is overcome with anxiety that she will end up hurt somehow. In this exchange, Lilia directly draws a parallel between her relationship with Mr. Pirzada and his relationship with his daughters—when she tells him not to worry, she is ashamed it is for her "own sake" and not for that of his family, who are in much more real and constant danger. This scene is therefore an interesting testament to familial relationships in times of conflict: Mr. Pirzada finds a surrogate American daughter in Lilia, but his longing for his flesh-and-blood family is never far from the surface.

This is also another important moment in Lilia's coming of age: here, she is struggling to comfort Mr. Pirzada in his time of need. Her sense of "shame" and insufficiency is a hallmark of her newfound maturity—though she wants to understand Mr. Pirzada's pain and help him, she is realistic about her inability to do so beyond her "prayers."

> It was only then that I felt Mr. Pirzada's absence. It was only then, raising my water glass in his name, that I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months.

Related Characters: Lilia (speaker), Mr. Pirzada

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

When Lilia realizes that Mr. Pirzada is happily resettled with his family in Dacca, months after his initial departure, she at last begins to process his "absence." Here, Lilia understands for the first time that Mr. Pirzada is family to her—she misses him "just as he had missed his wife and daughters."

But in making the comparison between Mr. Pirzada's sadness and her own, Lilia also realizes that her feelings of loss are not unique to her but are rather an inherent part of living in diaspora. Of particular note is Lilia's recognition that she is separated from Mr. Pirzada not only miles but by "hours." He is 11 hours ahead of her, on Dacca time, living a completely different life with a completely different set of routines. In this line, one of the last in the story, Lilia must therefore come to terms with the reality of living between countries: she will always be separated by "miles and hours" from people and places she loves, and so she must come to terms with a permanent sense of "absence."

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.

WHEN MR. PIRZADA CAME TO DINE

The narrator (whose name is later revealed to be Lilia) recalls the fall of 1971, when she was 10 years old. For a few months, a man named Mr. Pirzada would routinely come to her childhood home for dinner, "bearing **confections** in his pocket and hopes of ascertaining the life or death of his family."

Though Lilia's story is set in 1971, this opening paragraph makes it clear that Lilia herself is now looking back on this time with some distance. The statement that Mr. Pirzada had hopes of "ascertaining the life or death of his family" suggests that there is some sort of conflict going on, and that Mr. Pirzada's family is caught in the middle of it. But because Lilia was so young at this time, her adult understanding of the high stakes of this period contrasts with her 10-year-old self's fixation on the "confections" in Mr. Pirzada's pocket. This early emphasis on sweets also suggests that candy is an important part of how Lilia understands Mr. Pirzada and her relationship with him.

Mr. Pirzada is from Dacca, the capital city of Bangladesh. In the fall of 1971, however, Bangladesh isn't its own country yet—it's under Pakistani rule and is known known as East Pakistan. The people in East Pakistan are fighting an increasingly brutal fight for their independence from the rulers in West Pakistan. In the spring of 1971, the Pakistani Army violently invaded Dacca, shot teachers, assaulted women, and killed over 300,000 people.

The Bangladesh War of Independence (also known as the Bangladesh Liberation War) provides the background for most of the action in the story; here, Lilia gives a brief history of that conflict. In the fall, when Mr. Pirzada first starts coming over, war hasn't been formally declared yet, but the violent conflict leading up to the war has been going on for about six months. By this point, West Pakistan was widely considered to have waged a genocidal campaign against East Pakistani people.

Before this conflict, Mr. Pirzada lived a cozy life in Dacca: he had a nice house, a good job as a botany professor, a wife, and seven daughters whose names all start with "A." Now, he carries a picture of his daughters in his wallet to show Lilia. He writes to his wife and sends comic books to his daughters, but the conflict has disrupted the postal system in Dacca, so he has not heard from any of his family members in six months.

Immediately after providing historical context, Lilia returns to the human side of the revolution, suggesting that she remembers this war not as distant history but through the eyes of a close family friend. Though Mr. Pirzada has not heard from his family for the duration of the war, he continues to maintain his rituals with them (writing letters to his wife and sending his daughters comic books). This shows that Mr. Pirzada is a devoted husband and father, but it also demonstrates the great emphasis he places on ritual as a way of maintaining family ties.

Mr. Pirzada is here—in the suburb of Boston where Lilia's family lives—for work: the Pakistani government has given him a grant to study trees and leaves in New England. However, the grant does not provide Mr. Pirzada with enough money to eat well or buy a **TV**, so he comes over to Lilia's house to eat dinner and watch the news.

Mr. Pirzada counts on Lilia's family for two things: homecooked meals and the TV news. Given the conflict happening in Mr. Pirzada's home city, it seems that food is more than just a necessary routine for him—it's also a source of comfort and interpersonal connection, things that Mr. Pirzada is no doubt lacking in the absence of his wife and daughters. But while food connects Mr. Pirzada to Lilia's family, joining them in a shared ritual, the TV is a link to Dacca and to Mr. Pirzada's own family. Right away, then, it is clear that Mr. Pirzada is living a kind of double life—part of him is at Lilia's house, and part of him is always back home.

Initially, Lilia doesn't know why Mr. Pirzada spends so much more time at her house than the rest of her family friends do. All she understands is that her parents, emigrants from India, often miss their homeland's foods and traditions. In their small suburb, for example, "the supermarket d[oes] not carry mustard oil," and "neighbors never drop[] by without an invitation." Lilia's parents therefore try to make Indian friends at the university where her father teaches, checking the phonebook for other South Asian last names—which is what leads them to call Mr. Pirzada.

Lilia's parents, having been born and raised in Calcutta, seem to feel isolated in this small American suburb. Tellingly, one of the ways they feel this isolation is through food—specifically, they feel the absence of mustard oil, a staple in South Asian cooking, in the nearby grocery stores. Here, for the first time of many in the story, specific foods provide links to (or mark the absence of) far-away places and cultures.

Though Lilia cannot recall when Mr. Pirzada started coming over, by the end of September, she's so used to his presence that she assumes he will come over every night. One evening, while her mother cooks fried spinach and radishes, Lilia asks her father for "a glass for the Indian man." Her father informs her that Mr. Pirzada will not be coming over that night—and that "more importantly, Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian."

Even before Lilia and Mr. Pirzada are close, Lilia views him in terms of routines and rituals: he visits the house every night, and so Lilia comes to expect his presence. But just as she assumes Mr. Pirzada will come over, Lilia makes the assumption that he is Indian—indeed, she knows her parents have sought him out because he reminds them of home. Therefore, when Lilia's father explains that Mr. Pirzada is "no longer" Indian, it is one of the first moments where Lilia's youthful, simplistic view of her family's culture is altered by new knowledge of political history.

When Lilia is confused by this new information, her father explains Partition. In 1947, soon after India gained independence from Britain, India and Pakistan split along religious lines. "One moment we were free," Lilia's father recalls, "and then we were sliced up […] Hindus here, Muslims here." As Lilia's father tells her, Partition was a time of great violence between Hindus (like her family) and Muslims (like Mr. Pirzada). Given this conflict, to many people who survived Partition, "the idea of eating in each other's company [i]s still unthinkable."

As Lilia's father explains here, the religious conflict of Partition has made their family's interfaith bond with Mr. Pirzada unusual. It is especially telling that he sees a refusal to "eat[] in each other's company" as the ultimate marker of conflict—to Lilia's father, sharing a meal is the most basic act of kindness and courtesy, and so an inability to do so can only signify the deepest rift. Since Lilia's family does eat with Mr. Pirzada almost every night, this exchange also shows that Lilia's parents—perhaps because they are so far from the Indian subcontinent itself—are unusually tolerant of people's differences.

Lilia does not understand this division, because Mr. Pirzada and her parents speak the same language, look similar, and eat the same foods. But Lilia's father insists that Mr. Pirzada is a Bengali Muslim, and that he might be offended by being called "Indian." To illustrate his point, her father takes Lilia to the family's map and directs her attention to the triangle that is South Asia. Lilia is surprised to see that the two parts of Pakistan are separated from each other by so much land. "It was as if California and Connecticut constituted a nation apart from the U.S," she reflects.

Here, Lilia reckons with the difference between hard facts and personal experience. On the map, India and Pakistan are different countries (as Lilia observes, India is orange and Pakistan is yellow). But if Lilia sees difference on the map, she sees only similarity in her living room—Mr. Pirzada and her parents seem to have all the most important things in common, including shared language and tastes. Also worth noting is the fact that Lilia makes sense of the geography South Asia with a comparison to the U.S. ("it was if California and Connecticut constituted a nation apart"). That Lilia makes this comparison suggests that her knowledge of the world is extremely U.S.-centric, which begins to hint that her school may have a narrow curriculum.

Lilia's father assumes she is aware of the conflict in East Pakistan; Lilia is not, but she does not want her to father to know this. As Lilia's mother drains the rice, her father asks Lilia what she's learning at school, as she is clearly not being taught about East Pakistan's fight for independence. Lilia's mother, however, believes Lilia is being taught "plenty." Her mother thinks that because they live in the U.S. now, it is good for Lilia to have a real American education.

In this passage, Lilia is made self-conscious—perhaps for the first time—about her lack of knowledge about the world. Moreover, this exchange reveals an important difference between Lilia's parents. While her father seems regretful that Lilia is so sheltered, her mother is grateful that Lilia is being given an authentically American childhood. To Lilia's mother, a lack of awareness about current events is part of being an American child.

Lilia's mother reflects on her own childhood, which was filled with violence, food rations, and educational pressure. She is glad her daughter will not have to experience the same thing. She thinks it is unreasonable to expect that Lilia will be taught about Partition, but Lilia's father continues to worry, asking, "what does she learn about the world?"

Lilia's parents grew up in India during the tumultuous, violent years around Indian independence and Partition. Though Lilia's father still laments his daughter's ignorance, Lilia's mother reveals here that she is still haunted by her own war-torn childhood. Lilia's mother's firsthand experience of conflict (which Lilia's father shares) also likely impacts her emotional response to the fighting in Dacca. While Lilia's only knowledge of war comes from TV, her parents are better able to empathize with the people in danger.

Lilia learns exclusively U.S. history and geography, with a special emphasis on the American Revolution. She is taken on field trips to important sites of U.S. history, like the Freedom Trail and Bunker Hill, and she makes colorful dioramas of George Washington. Lilia can find the Thirteen Colonies on a map effortlessly, because she has been tested on them so often.

Lilia, realizing the gaps in her knowledge, reflects on the limited history she is taught at school. Lilia learns about the American Revolution every year, hinting that her teachers would rather dwell on long-ago battles than turn their attention to more relevant conflicts. For example, she has never been taught about the (much more recent) Partition of South Asia. Moreover, Lilia's teachers present a kid-friendly version of the Revolutionary War: Lilia and her classmates go on field trips and makes puppets rather than learning about the human costs of war. At home, Lilia sees the pain of the Bengali independence movement firsthand, but at school, she learns to see revolution as something cheerful and simplistic.

The next evening, Mr. Pirzada arrives at six, having walked over from the dormitory where he lives. He shakes hands with Lilia's father and, as always, Lilia takes his coat. Mr. Pirzada is always well-dressed, and he stands very straight, "as if balancing in either hand two suitcases of equal weight." He has thick lashes, a mustache, and ear hair that Lilia thinks helps him "block out the unpleasant traffic of life." He also wears a black wool fez that Lilia never sees him without.

Here, Lilia explains the first ritual she shares with Mr. Pirzada: she always takes his coat when he arrives at her house. More importantly, however, this passage reveals Mr. Pirzada's elegance and his sense of propriety. In addition to his ear hair (which Lilia childishly guesses helps him "block out" the bad news from East Pakistan), Lilia notices Mr. Pirzada's fez, a hat typically associated with Islam. Lilia's assessment that Mr. Pirzada is holding "two suitcases of equal weight" is especially telling. Mr. Pirzada is indeed always "balancing," trying to live his life in the U.S. while remaining focused on his wife and daughters back in Dacca.

When Mr. Pirzada arrives, he jokes that he is "'another refugee [...] on Indian territory.'" Lilia's father responds that there are currently nine million refugees from Dacca in India. Lilia notes that Mr. Pirzada's coat, which always "carries the faint smell of limes," has a hand-stitched label that reads "Z. Sayeed, Suitors."

This exchange between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's father demonstrates how much their lives in the U.S. are tied to their lives back in South Asia, where the conflict is escalating every day. Furthermore, Mr. Pirzada is a refugee in some sense—though he came to the U.S. for work, he is no longer able to return to his home country safely. Lilia's observation that Mr. Pirzada's coat is hand-tailored is also notable. Although Mr. Pirzada can't afford a TV or good food in the U.S., his handmade (and probably expensive) coat is a hint that he occupied a higher class status in Dacca. The coat's "faint smell of limes" also gives the sense that Mr. Pirzada is carrying a piece of East Pakistan with him, since limes are a staple crop and a common ingredient in South Asia.

Mr. Pirzada takes off his shoes, which are muddy—he likes to stop and study the trees on his walk to Lilia's family's house. Once he has taken off his coat and shoes, he grazes Lilia's throat, "the way a person feels for solidity behind a wall." Then, Mr. Pirzada follows Lilia's father into the living room, where the **TV** is playing local news. Lilia's mother offers Mr. Pirzada a kebab, and as Mr. Pirzada eats, he wonders if the refugees in Dacca are well-fed.

Mr. Pirzada's love of trees suggests that he is a gentle man, one fascinated by the world around him. On another note, their coat ritual allows Mr. Pirzada to feel some measure of "solidity" even as his country is in chaos, and Mr. Pirzada responds to Lilia's help with an almost fatherly touch. This connection between Lilia's family and Mr. Pirzada's own is underscored when he eats Lilia's mother's kebab—the South Asian dish instantly makes him think of people back in Dacca, including his wife and daughters.

As is his tradition, Mr. Pirzada presents Lilia with a **candy**: this time, it is a plastic egg filled with cinnamon hearts. Lilia awaits this "ritual" with both dread and delight—she is impressed with Mr. Pirzada's elegance, but sometimes his ease makes her feel "like a stranger in [her] own home." Lilia struggles to express her gratitude for these desserts; whenever she tries to thank Mr. Pirzada, he complains that he is thanked for everything in the U.S., and jokes that "if I am buried in this country, I will be thanked, no doubt, at my funeral."

This is Lilia and Mr. Pirzada's most important ritual, the one that allows them to create an almost familial bond. Even when she and Mr. Pirzada struggle to talk to each other, the ritual of gift-giving allows them to grow comfortable with each other and to express care for each other. Interestingly, however, Mr. Pirzada's comfort in Lilia's space and with her parents sometimes makes her feel like "a stranger in [her] own home." Perhaps Lilia's newfound sense of estrangement comes from the fact that Mr. Pirzada and her parents, having grown up on the Indian subcontinent, share a cultural background that Lilia herself does not. Lilia, for example, automatically thanks Mr. Pirzada, because that is the custom in the U.S. He, however, finds such constant gratitude strange and perhaps insincere.

Lilia recalls that she could never eat the **candy** Mr. Pirzada gave her right away, because it seemed too special. Rather, Lilia stores these treats like they are jewels, placing each one in the sandalwood box that her grandmother used to use for ground Areca nuts. This box is the "only memento" Lilia has of her grandmother, whom she never met. Some nights, before she brushes her teeth, Lilia will open the box and eat one of Mr. Pirzada's gifts.

This passage shows how the candy allows Lilia to connect not only with Mr. Pirzada but with people like her grandmother, whom Lilia has never actually met. By storing candy in this box—which Lilia's grandmother used to store areca nuts, themselves a kind of edible fruit seed—Lilia is able to connect with people and places she has never known. Just as food connects Mr. Pirzada to his wife and daughters, then, food also helps Lilia connect with her family and cultural heritage across space and times.

Tonight, Mr. Pirzada eats with the family—as usual—in the living room, to have an unobstructed view of the **TV** news. As they watch, Lilia's mother brings out a variety of traditional Indian dishes. Lilia helps with water, lemon wedges, and chili peppers; her parents buy these peppers in bulk in Chinatown, and Mr. Pirzada and her parents like to crush the chilis into their food.

Here, Lilia's family dynamic is quite literally reconfigured by the conflict in East Pakistan: rather than eating their meals at the dining table, they eat in front of the TV so as not to miss any updates on the war. While the TV links the characters to Dacca in one way, the food links them in another. The chili peppers (which, like mustard oil, are unavailable in Lilia's small town) and Indian dishes remind the adults of happier times in Calcutta and Dacca.

Lilia studies Mr. Pirzada to figure out "what makes him different"—"not an Indian." She notes that Mr. Pirzada always takes out a **watch** and puts it on the coffee table while they eat. The watch is set to Dacca time, and Lilia becomes "uneasy" when she realizes that for Mr. Pirzada, "life [is] being lived in Dacca first." While her family eats dinner, he is imagining his daughters waking up and getting ready for school. "Our meals, our actions," Lilia reflects, "were only a shadow of what had already happened there, a lagging ghost of where Mr. Pirzada belonged."

While the watch on Mr. Pirzada's watch serves a practical purpose, allowing him to show up on time for his nightly dinner ritual with Lilia's family, the watch is also his attempt to remain connected to his wife and daughters. By setting the watch 11 hours ahead, Mr. Pirzada tries to share time with his daughters, picturing their morning even as he goes about his night. On the one hand, then, this passage demonstrates the difficulty of living in diaspora: Mr. Pirzada struggles to "belong" in the U.S., separated from his wife and daughters not only by miles and conflict but by that 11-hour time lag. His life in the U.S. is only a "lagging ghost" of his life in East Pakistan, where "life is being lived first"—in this sense, Mr. Pirzada probably feels left out of what his family is experiencing. On the other hand, these two watches once again point to the story's emphasis on ritual, as rituals allow Mr. Pirzada's sense of connection with his family to persist through even the most difficult conditions.

Usually, Lilia reads during the evening news, but tonight her father makes her watch it. On **TV**, she sees military tanks, burning buildings, and people fleeing. Lilia watches Mr. Pirzada watch the TV, but he betrays little emotion.

Lilia's father, perhaps still concerned that his daughter does not know enough about the world, wants her to see what is happening in Dacca—even though it is graphic and upsetting. Interestingly, though, Lilia watches Mr. Pirzada more than she watches the television; she knows that what they see on TV is deeply personal to him, and so she tries to make sense of the conflict by watching her beloved friend for a reaction. The fact that Mr. Pirzada shows no emotion again emphasizes his grace under pressure and suggests that he is a very stoic person.

At the commercial break, Lilia's mother goes to get more rice, and her father and Mr. Pirzada discuss politics. As Lilia's father gives her more fish, he tells her to watch what "children your age […] do to survive." Lilia has lost her appetite, and instead she watches Mr. Pirzada calmly eat his rice and lentils. She wonders if Mr. Pirzada is always so well-dressed so that he can "endure with dignity" whatever new atrocity appears on the screen. She also imagines his relief at seeing his wife and daughters safe on **TV**, but that never happens.

This exchange marks a critical moment in Lilia's coming of age: faced for the first time with the suffering happening in another part of the world, Lilia reflects on her own relative privilege and safety compared to what children in East Pakistan must "do to survive." But while Lilia, overcome with this new awareness of hardship, is unable to eat, Mr. Pirzada "calmly" continues with his meal. This lentil dish—and the ritual surrounding it—perhaps allows Mr. Pirzada to connect with a different version of Dacca, one defined not by falling buildings but by the meals he used to share with his family. Since Mr. Pirzada never gets reassurance from the TV news (his wife and daughters never show up onscreen), he must look for solace elsewhere.

Later that night, Lilia struggles to feel the "ceremonial satisfaction" she normally does when she puts Mr. Pirzada's **candies** away. She has trouble reconciling Mr. Pirzada with the "unruly, sweltering world" she has just seen on **TV**. Lilia begins to picture Mr. Pirzada's wife and daughters in the violence, and she panics. She tries to distract herself from these thoughts by looking around her room at the familiar yellow curtains and the place on the wall where her father marks her height. But she is unable to banish the gory images from her mind.

Lilia struggles to make sense of the fact that Mr. Pirzada, someone she cares about, is intimately connected to the "sweltering" conflict she has seen on TV. Faced with this very adult subject matter, Lilia tries to find comfort in the familiarity of her room—the yellow curtains and the markings of her height both signify youth and innocence. But Lilia, no longer so innocent after what she has seen on TV, is unable to find comfort.

Lilia begins to suspect that Mr. Pirzada's family is dead. To ward off this feeling, she eats a **candy** Mr. Pirzada has given her, and as she chews, she prays that his family is safe and sound—this is the first time Lilia has ever prayed in her life. That night, she does not brush her teeth, because she fears that if she rinses the candy taste out of her mouth, she will rinse out the prayer as well.

This passage marks the contrast between the tragic circumstances in East Pakistan that Lilia is trying to make sense of and her still-youthful way of processing things. Even as she makes the mature decision to pray for Mr. Pirzada (something she hasn't grown up doing) her superstition that she might accidentally wash the prayer out of her mouth is clearly childish. Here, then, Lilia is struggling to comprehend and help with a situation far more dire than anything she has ever encountered before. On another note, Lilia's association of the candy with Mr. Pirzada's family again suggests that food can be a powerful way of connecting with people, even across vast distances.

Nobody at Lilia's school discusses what is happening in East Pakistan. Everyone just keeps focusing on the long-ago American Revolution—they memorize parts of the Declaration of Independence, and boys pretend to be British Redcoats and American colonists at recess. With her friend Dora, Lilia is assigned to do a report on the British surrender at Yorktown, the battle that marked the end of the American Revolution. Mrs. Kenyon, the teacher who assigned the project, sends the two girls to the library to do research.

The contrast between Lilia's home life—where news from Dacca is always on TV—and Lilia's school life is stark. While revolution is something that Lilia, her parents, and Mr. Pirzada are deeply and personally connected to at home, at school, revolution is a merely game to be played at recess. Moreover, it is important that Lilia's project is on the Battle of Yorktown, the battle most associated with American victory. Once again, the narrative of independence that Lilia gets at school is much more straightforward and optimistic than the one she experiences at home.

While at the library, Lilia stumbles into the "Asia" section of books. She eventually finds a book about Pakistan, and she becomes engrossed in a chapter about Dacca, where Mr. Pirzada is from. Dora interrupts Lilia's reading to tell her that Mrs. Kenyon is coming to check on their progress. When Mrs. Kenyon sees that Lilia is reading about Pakistan, she tells Lilia that if the book is not for her report, there is "no reason to consult it." She takes the book from Lilia and puts it back on the shelf.

Just as Lilia prayed without being taught to, now she is determined to find out more about South Asia on her own terms. Her teacher's refusal to let Lilia do this research then underscores the narrow, exclusionary view that Lilia's school takes of the world: the curriculum teaches that only the U.S. is important, and that there is "no reason" to learn about anything else. Tellingly, this is the only specific anecdote from school that Lilia includes in the entire story, suggesting that Mrs. Kenyon's reprimand has stayed with Lilia for many years.

As time goes on, Dacca is less and less discussed on the **TV** news, even though the violence continues to escalate. Still, Mr. Pirzada "enjoy[s] long, leisurely meals" with Lilia's parents. He stays late into the night, and when the adults can no longer discuss politics, they move on to other topics, like the men's work and "the peculiar eating habits" of Lilia's mother's American co-workers.

Just as Mrs. Kenyon paid no mind to the conflict, more and more Americans are turning their attention away from the situation in East Pakistan—even though it is getting worse for the people who are there. Without reliable information about the war, Mr. Pirzada starts spending more time and seeking more comfort from Lilia's family. Food plays an especially interesting role in this passage: it allows Mr. Pirzada "leisure" during a crisis, but it also gives him solidarity with Lilia's parents. The three adults poke fun at the "peculiar" eating habits of the Americans around them, and in doing so, are able to implicitly share their feelings of cultural isolation.

On these nights, Lilia's parents eventually send her to bed—but from her bedroom, Lilia still hears the adults listening to Kishore Kumar cassettes, playing games, and "anticipating the birth of a nation on the other side of the world." As Lilia falls asleep, she wants "to console Mr. Pirzada somehow," but there is nothing she can do besides eat his **candy** and pray for his family in Dacca.

Lilia has begun to refuse to accept her parents' sheltering: here, she stays up past her bedtime, listening to her parents' conversations through the floor. However, Lilia is simultaneously realizing that even as she gains awareness, she does not gain any power to "console Mr. Pirzada" in his time of need. It is also worth noting the complex relationship to independence articulated in this passage: though the conflict is fraught for Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents, they are also excited about the possibility of Bengali independence ('the birth of a nation").

In October, Mr. Pirzada asks about the pumpkins he sees on people's doorsteps, so Lilia explains the concept of a Halloween jack-o'-lantern. The next evening, Lilia's mother brings a pumpkin home, and Mr. Pirzada tells Lilia he will help her carve it. For the first time, everybody gathers around the dining table instead of watching the **TV**. Lilia shows Mr. Pirzada how he should carve the pumpkin, and he begins to cut off the top and make holes for eyes.

Though often Mr. Pirzada possesses cultural knowledge that Lilia does not have, here, the roles are reversed, as Lilia is able to educate Mr. Pirzada about an American tradition. In this moment Mr. Pirzada forgoes the TV—with its potential for updates about his family—in favor of helping Lilia carve the pumpkin, which is a testament to how important his fatherly relationship with Lilia has become to him. The move to the dining room table rather than the coffee table is symbolically important, as it suggests that Lilia's family and Mr. Pirzada are able to be more present in this moment than they have been in the rest of the story.

Lilia and Mr. Pirzada debate whether they want the jack-o'-lantern's mouth to be a smile or a frown. Mr. Pirzada wields the knife with ease—but as he carves, a reporter on the news announces that India will go to war with Pakistan unless other countries volunteer to take East Pakistani refugees. Mr. Pirzada's hand slips, and he damages the jack-o'-lantern's mouth.

This moment of family unity is quickly disrupted by news on TV, emphasizing that there is never an instant when Mr. Pirzada's mind is not on Dacca. It is also important to note the visceral, physical toll this news takes on Mr. Pirzada. Whereas Lilia's school teaches revolution as something distant and historical, Lilia here realizes the intense emotional impacts revolution can have (even on people thousands of miles away). Moreover, the fact that this news interrupts carving the pumpkin and ruins the jack-o'-lantern (something quintessentially Western) implies that Mr. Pirzada will never be able to fully immerse himself in the U.S. and its traditions while his family is at risk in East Pakistan.

Mr. Pirzada offers to buy another pumpkin, but Lilia's father carves around the gash, turning the pumpkin's mouth into a gaping hole. The pumpkin, which Lilia had meant to look frightening and fierce, now looks astonished instead.

This look of astonishment reflects the surprise and disorientation that Mr. Pirzada, far from home and fearful for his family, experiences every day. The ruined pumpkin also shows, again, that Lilia's childhood pleasures are being disrupted and altered by the intensity of the conflict abroad.

Both Lilia and Dora dress up as green-faced witches for Halloween. Lilia's mother gives them old basmati rice sacks to trick-or-treat with—this is the first year the girls will be allowed to trick-or-treat by themselves, without parental supervision. Lilia's father makes her synchronize her **watch** to his and tells her to keep the watch on the entire night.

This is another moment of cultural exchange: the typical American tradition of trick-or-treating is, in Lilia's house, done with sacks used to carry Indian basmati rice. On another note, when Lilia's father asks her to synchronize her watch to his, he is doing something similar to what Mr. Pirzada does with his pocket watch (the one set to Dacca time). By synchronizing their watches, Lilia and her father share time in order to stay connected with each other, just as Mr. Pirzada tries to share time with his daughters.

Mr. Pirzada brings Lilia **candy**, as he always does, but he jokes that she does not need it tonight, since it's Halloween. Mr. Pirzada checks to see that Lilia will be warm enough under her costume. He then takes off his own coat, but as Lilia goes to grab it, she is distracted by Dora calling for help with her makeup.

In the chaos of Halloween, both of Lilia's rituals with Mr. Pirzada are disrupted: she does not take off his coat, and she does not dwell on his candy (as she will be getting a lot more when she goes trick-or-treating). Since ritual is so important to Lilia's bond with Mr. Pirzada, this break in the ritual foreshadows the larger break in their relationship that is soon to come.

Lilia's father and Mr. Pirzada linger in the living room, listening to the sounds of other trick-or-treaters. Lilia's father warns Lilia to be safe, and Mr. Pirzada worries that trick-or-treating is dangerous. Lilia's mother assures him that it is "tradition," and that all the children will be safe.

Here, Mr. Pirzada's anxieties over his flesh-and-blood daughters spill into his relationship with Lilia. Though he rationally knows trick-or-treating poses little danger, he cannot help worrying about being separated from Lilia (who acts a surrogate daughter) at the same time as he is separated from his girls back home.

Mr. Pirzada volunteers to accompany Lilia and Dora—he begins to fret about rain or that the girls will get lost, and his eyes betray a "panic" that frightens Lilia. "Don't worry," Lilia tells Mr. Pirzada. She has wanted to say these words many times to comfort him about his own family, and she is disappointed that she can only comfort Mr. Pirzada in reference to herself. Mr. Pirzada finally lets her and Dora go by themselves. "If the lady insists," he says to Lilia.

In this exchange, Lilia directly draws a parallel between her relationship with Mr. Pirzada and the one he shares with his daughters. When she tells him not to worry, she is ashamed that it is for her "own sake" and not for that of his family, who are in much more real and constant danger. This is also another moment in which Lilia shows her newfound maturity. Her sense of "shame" and insufficiency is a hallmark of her newfound awareness of life's difficulty—though she wants to help, she is realistic about her inability to do so beyond her prayers.

As Dora and Lilia leave, Mr. Pirzada stands in Lilia's family's driveway and waves to them. Dora asks Lilia why Mr. Pirzada wanted to come with them. Lilia explains that Mr. Pirzada's daughters are "missing," but then she worries that saying this out loud makes it true. Lilia backtracks, telling Dora, "I meant, he misses them. They live in a different country, and he hasn't seen them in a while, that's all."

Again, Lilia is confronted with the difference between her own perspective and that of her classmates: Dora cannot comprehend that Mr. Pirzada's daughters could actually be in danger, whereas Lilia has had to come to terms with this very real possibility. However, Lilia is not fully grown-up in her view: she still hold childish superstitions, as is evident in her fear that saying something out loud makes it true. Finally, the story plays with the word "missing" here: it can mark both a permanent absence (as in, the daughters have gone "missing") or a longing for reunion (as in, Mr. Pirzada has not seen his daughters in "a while," but he will see them again soon).

Lilia admires all the Halloween decorations in her neighborhood. As she and Dora go house to house, collecting candy, some of the parents tell Lilia that they have "never seen an Indian witch before." Lilia and Dora see signs of teenage pranks (toilet paper and cracked eggs) as they walk to Dora's house. By the time the girls arrive at Dora's, their feet hurt from walking, and their hands hurt from the burlap rice sacks.

Lilia's experience of Halloween, a night she was very excited for, is clearly colored by her awareness of Mr. Pirzada's anxiety—she pays attention not to the candy and costumes but to the darker pranks and the discomfort in her body. Most notably, this is one of the moments in which Lilia most directly encounters prejudice: the people in her town (who are presumably white) comment on her race, making Lilia feel different and alienated even though she and Dora are dressed exactly the same and doing the exact same thing.

Dora's mother gives the girls popcorn and cider, and she reminds Lilia to call home. When Lilia calls her mother, she hears the **TV** on in the background. When she hangs up, she realizes that the TV is not even on in Dora's house. Dora's father is reading a magazine with a glass of wine next to him; there is saxophone music coming from the stereo, but no television news.

In Lilia's house, the TV is always on—it is both a crucial source of information and a source of pain (whenever bad news comes out of East Pakistan). The absence of the TV news in Dora's house demonstrates Dora and her family's lack of awareness about what is going on in the world. But also, Dora's home is carefree (there is a glass of wine and pleasant saxophone music) in a way that Lilia's home, constantly interrupted by talk of war, cannot be. Here, Lilia is perhaps reckoning with the unique knowledge—and unique pain—that comes with always being tuned in to news from another part of the world.

After Lilia and Dora have gone through all of their **candy**, Lilia returns home to see that her jack-o'-lantern has been smashed in the driveway. Lilia starts to tear up, and she expects that her family and Mr. Pirzada will be similarly distressed. But when she enters the house, the three adults are sitting on the sofa, with the **TV** turned off. Mr. Pirzada has his head in his hands, but he is not concerned about the jack-o'-lantern.

Symbolically, the smashed jack-o'-lantern signifies several things. First, it marks another moment in which Lilia is disillusioned from her youthful excitement about Halloween. Second, since Lilia carved this jack-o'-lantern with Mr. Pirzada, the destruction of the pumpkin foreshadows the end of her bond with Mr. Pirzada. Finally, the fact that the jack-o'-lantern has been smashed runs parallel to the heightened crisis in South Asia—and the adults' disinterest in the pumpkin reflects their single-minded focus on that turmoil.

Lilia explains that that night, the adults had learned that Dacca would not accept anything less than full independence—and the war would be waged entirely on East Pakistani soil. War is officially declared on December 4th and lasts for 12 days. On December 16th, Dacca declares victory, and East Pakistan becomes the independent nation that is now known as Bangladesh. In retrospect, Lilla emphasizes that "all of these facts I know only now […] for they are available to me in any history book, in any library. But then it remained […] a remote mystery with haphazard clues."

Here, Lilia recalls her experience of the Bangladesh Liberation War—the 12 days when India had entered the fray and the conflict was most intense. She reveals that her knowledge of the geopolitical context of the war came later, through history books; as a child, her understanding of the situation was "haphazard," the result of piecing together the scattered emotional "clues" of her loved ones' reactions. Lilia's recollection therefore illustrates the difference between learning about a revolution, as she does at school, and living through one. While a book explains the names and dates of war, directly participating in or being connected to an independence movement—especially when its success is in doubt—is a much more confusing and unnerving experience.

During those 12 days of war, Lilla's father no longer asks her to watch the news, Mr. Pirzada stops bringing **candy**, and her mother only cooks rice and eggs. Some nights, Mr. Pirzada sleeps on Lilia's family's couch; other nights, Lilia's parents are on the phone with relatives from Calcutta. During this time, Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada act as "a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence, and a single fear."

Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada are completely united here: they share everything, from late nights to bodily needs to their "single fear" about Mr. Pirzada's family. Tellingly, Lilia is not part of this "single person:" her father no longer lets her watch the news, and Lilia is reminded of both her youth and her lack of familiarity with South Asia. It is also important that in this moment of crisis, rituals around food cease: Mr. Pirzada no longer brings candy, and Lilia's mother no longer cooks elaborate dishes. If food is an important source of connection both culturally and interpersonally, then the absence of food suggests a moment in which those ties are broken, which these 12 days certainly seem to be.

In January, Mr. Pirzada returns home to Dacca to see what remains of his life there. In retrospect, Lilia does not remember what their last meal together was like, but she knows that her father drove him to the airport while she was at school. Lilia and her family continue to watch the news at dinner—now without their guest—and they learn that Dacca is slowly rebuilding. More than one million houses were wrecked by the war, and the refugees returning from India now face famine and unemployment. Lilia pictures Mr. Pirzada looking for his family; she stares at the map on her wall and realizes it is now outdated.

Though Lilia does not explicitly state it, her inability to remember saying goodbye to Mr. Pirzada suggests that even though their relationship ended, she never got a sense of closure. Even as the geopolitical situation improves, then, Lilia personally struggles to feel satisfaction. This disconnect is symbolized by the map on her family's wall—as soon as Lilia got a grasp of the Indian subcontinent's geography, it changed, reflecting her own disorientation regarding Mr. Pirzada and the war.

During the Muslim New Year, Mr. Pirzada sends a card to Lilia's family—this is the first time they have heard from him since he left. He explains that he has been reunited with his wife and children, who escaped the worst violence at a relative's house outside of Dacca. Mr. Pirzada writes that his daughters are taller now, but that he still has trouble keeping track of their "A" names. At the end of the letter, he thanks Lilia's family but feels that he will never be able to properly express his gratitude.

Mr. Pirzada, now fully back in the swing of his Dacca traditions, breaks with one of his most important rituals with Lilia. He thanks her (and her family), even though he once asked Lilia never to thank him, because this is how strangers in the U.S. (rather than close friends or family members) talk to one another. Symbolically, then, this expression of gratitude also marks the end of Mr. Pirzada's relationship with Lilia and her parents.

Lilia's mother suggests a toasts for Mr. Pirzada, but Lilia does not feel like celebrating. Instead, though Mr. Pirzada has been gone for months, Lilia only now realizes how much she misses him, "just as he had missed his wife and daughters for so many months." Lilia's parents predict—correctly—that they will never Mr. Pirzada again. For the first time since January, Lilia does not eat a piece of **candy** before bed; "there [is] no need to." Eventually, Lilia throws the candy away.

Here, Lilia understands just how important Mr. Pirzada has become for her, to the extent that he seems like a family member—she misses him "just as he had missed his wife and daughters." But in making the comparison between Mr. Pirzada's sadness and her own, Lilia also realizes that her feelings of loss are not unique to her but are rather an inherent part of living in diaspora. Like Mr. Pirzada and her parents, she has learned that living far away from loved ones is always going to be painful. Crucially, Lilia's decision to throw the candy (a symbol of her connection to Mr. Pirzada) away the ends the story: having accepted that she has lost Mr. Pirzada, this symbolic act perhaps helps Lilia to grieve and move on from their bond.

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