

There Are Rivers in the Sky

There Are Rivers in the Sky by Radhika Maira Tabrez is a lyrical novel that explores the lives of two women, bound by fate yet separated by time and circumstance. Set against the backdrop of contemporary India, the story weaves together themes of family, identity, and the search for belonging. As the women navigate personal and cultural challenges, the novel delves into the transformative power of memory and the quiet strength found in everyday lives.

O: ARTHUR: On the way to the River Tigris, 1872

In the narrative set in 1872, Arthur is in Constantinople, anxiously awaiting a firman that will grant him passage to Nineveh. Days pass with little news, causing a sense of nervous tension that colors his every action. One evening, he's summoned by clerks and a dragoman who insists he should seek diversion after being largely cooped up. Despite his initial reluctance, he is swept into an unexpected night outing.

Soon, Arthur finds himself in a lavish house with ornate decor and trays full of delicacies. The dragoman reveals that it's an establishment meant to offer an authentic Oriental experience. However, Arthur feels uncomfortable and troubled by past memories associated with such places. Just as he contemplates leaving, a woman enters, understood to be the madam of the house. Despite Arthur's protests, the atmosphere shifts dramatically when music fills the room, played by three women, one of whom captivates him with her beauty and a qanun, a traditional musical instrument.

As the night unfolds, Arthur succumbs to the charm of the music, momentarily escaping his worries. The moment of calm is shattered by the alarming sound of a crowd outside — a fire has broken out in the neighborhood. Panic ensues as guests attempt to flee from the blazing inferno engulfing Pera, leading to the destruction of thousands of homes. Amid the chaos, Arthur rushes back to retrieve the qanun, which symbolizes a moment of beauty amidst turbulence.

Afterwards, Arthur seeks refuge and assistance at the embassy, only to learn of devastating news from the ambassador regarding his mother's passing. Unable to process the heavy loss and in despair, he questions the circumstances surrounding her death. Despite the ambassador's offer to arrange his return to England, Arthur resolves to continue his journey to Nineveh, determined to forge ahead despite the weight of personal tragedy.

The imagery throughout captures the vibrancy and danger of Constantinople, the transformative power of art and music, and the fleeting nature of life and home. The chapter ends with Arthur in deep introspection about his life's meaning and the loss he faces, signifying a turning point in his journey.

H2O

In this chapter titled "H2O," the narrative centers on water, describing it as one of the strangest chemicals and a profound mystery. The author highlights the unique structure of a water molecule, consisting of two hydrogen atoms bonded to a single oxygen atom, arranged in a bent formation instead of a linear one. This unique configuration is emphasized as crucial to the existence of life on Earth, positing that if water were linear, life as we know it—including all the stories accompanying it—would not exist.

The chapter includes a detailed physical representation of the water molecule, illustrating the relationship between the oxygen atom, which is larger, and the smaller hydrogen atoms that form single covalent bonds with it. This molecular configuration is succinctly summed up in the formula H–O–H, emphasizing the simplicity and complexity intertwined in the essence of water.

In drawing a parallel between the three atoms that combine to create water and the "three characters" associated with the unfolding story, the author suggests a narrative depth that transcends mere chemical properties. There is a thematic connection established between water and the interconnectedness of life, symbolizing how basic elements form significant relationships that foster life stories across different times and places.

Overall, this chapter sets the stage for exploring water's integral role in life on Earth, preparing readers to contemplate its broader implications. The interplay between science and storytelling is underscored, with water serving as a metaphor for connection, existence, and the shared narratives that bind life together.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

In the year 2014, Narin is forcibly taken from her home, packed into a truck among women and children, as they travel towards Mosul. Overwhelmed with anguish and fear, she experiences an intense sense of helplessness and loneliness. As the convoy moves, memories of her grandmother's teachings about distinguishing wild herbs surface; they keep her tethered to the familiarity of home amid uncertainty.

Narin reflects on the dual streams of good and evil within humans, a concept told in her grandmother's stories. She recalls tales of malevolent figures who, despite their cruelty, understood the nature of their actions. However, the true horror lies in the fanatical beliefs of those who commit atrocities while considering themselves holy. Narin struggles with the question of how anyone could please the Creator by inflicting pain on His creation. Her grandmother's teachings linger in her mind, urging her to seek the light amidst despair, yet she feels trapped in darkness.

As the convoy halts at a significant building in Mosul, Narin begins to realize the extent of the chaos unfolding around her. Women and children from various Yazidi settlements are gathered, revealing a coordinated campaign against their culture and community. With dread, she witnesses brutal violence inflicted by militants who are often familiar faces from her own life.

Inside the building, fear races through the room, filled with the cries and desperation of captives as militants assert their power. Narin is selected for translation duties and is confronted with accusations of her people's infidelity and her potential fate as a 'lawful wife' to militants, inviting her to renounce her faith. In a moment of defiance, she cries out for her grandmother, showcasing her desperation.

After being physically abused and dragged across the floor, Narin loses consciousness. Upon waking, she learns of her captivity and must contend with her surroundings, the threat, and the lack of time. Despite her fears, she reveals her young age of nine, marking her as a target for exploitation. The captives endure further indignities, refusing to conform to the militants' expectations.

As time passes in captivity, Narin meets Salma, a woman who once knew her grandmother, and they find solace in shared memories. However, the grim reality of their situation looms, with Salma having to navigate their harrowing existence while protecting Narin. Salma's attempts to shield Narin from further harm demonstrate the bonds formed in their suffering, but the omnipresent danger of the commander's demands continues to threaten their safety and sanity.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In the early morning of 2018, Zaleekhah is surprised by an unannounced visit from her Uncle Malek at her houseboat by the River Thames. His usually immaculate appearance is marred by bloodshot eyes and hinting grey stubble, leading Zaleekhah to question his wellbeing. Uncle Malek, having ignored the usual calling protocols, seems to hide his true feelings behind a flippant demeanor. As they converse, he inquires about her unconventional living arrangements, finding humor in her sparse décor.

Their conversation quickly shifts as Uncle expresses concern about Zaleekhah's marital struggles, suggesting that despite her husband Brian filing for divorce, a reconciliation may still be possible. Zaleekhah reveals that she's in no position to entertain those thoughts, but Uncle insists on taking her out for a meal, a suggestion interrupted by the sound of a flushing toilet, hinting at unexpected company.

Zaleekhah's guest, Nen, soon appears in her pajamas, startling Uncle Malek. The tension in the room rises as Uncle's expressions oscillate from shock to irritation. Sensing the awkwardness, Nen offers to leave, but Zaleekhah insists she stay. Uncle Malek then demonstrates disbelief at Zaleekhah's changes, perceiving her friendship with Nen as a deviation from her previously exemplary character.

Zaleekhah defends her choices, confronting Uncle's assumptions about her nature and willingness to follow traditions. Uncle reflects nostalgically on their past, highlighting the bond they share. His revelation of vulnerability surprises Zaleekhah, as he expresses a desire to protect his family, underscoring the emotional gravity of the situation.

Before leaving, Uncle Malek proposes a dinner invitation, urging Zaleekhah to bring Nen along, with a promise to keep their family matters confidential. He wishes for Zaleekhah to find happiness, although he struggles with the emotional turmoil surrounding both their lives. Uncle's parting comment about appearances being deceptive hints at deeper relational complexities, revealing the layers within family dynamics as they navigate change and uncertainty.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

In the chapter "By the River Tigris, 2014," the story unfolds with Grandma preparing for an upcoming journey, excitedly making traditional foods like stuffed vine leaves and borek. Narin, her grandchild, shares her excitement, praying for guidance and protection from the spirit Khider, alongside other unseen beings aiding their community. These spirits include Sore-Soran, Mama-Rasan, and Xud?ne-M?!?, each representing different aspects of everyday life and support. Grandma highlights how kindness can emerge from unexpected places through the tale of Ibrahim—a moral story emphasizing the importance of compassion and action when one's neighbor is in distress, signifying that even the smallest efforts matter against great challenges.

As they sit together, Grandma reflects on the nature of storytelling versus clock time, emphasizing that stories convey deeper truths transcending mere chronology. This lesson of resilience and perspective is mirrored in a personal story from her childhood, showing how neighbors who seemed friendly held prejudices against her family. Grandma's wisdom extends to her belief that despite pain and adversity, the world is filled with beauty.

Their conversation shifts to their imminent trip to Iraq and the significance of their ancestral home in Lalish, said to be created by divine intervention. Grandma recounts the legendary formation of this sacred valley through the angels' journey and the leavening of water, instilling a sense of pride and connection to their heritage in Narin.

As the night approaches, a deeper conversation follows about their family lineage, particularly centering on Leila, who migrated and demonstrated extraordinary talents. Grandma explains that these gifts have evolved

through generations, potentially culminating in Narin. The notion of a "firman" arises, describing the dangerous edicts that led Leila to escape her homeland due to impending violence against their people. This historical pain remains palpable, echoing the ongoing memories held by the Tigris River itself.

Ultimately, they settle down for the night, with Grandma promising to reveal the truths of their history when they arrive at Nineveh, illustrating that sometimes, even rivers must abandon their original paths in search of safety.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

In the chapter titled "H—NARIN," set by the River Tigris in 2014, we are introduced to Narin, a girl excited about her cousins' visit from Germany. The family has roots in Turkey, and the children's fluent German impresses Narin, who shares her grandmother's unique talent as a healer through water dowsing. As her cousins question her about their grandmother's abilities, Narin describes how her grandmother detects hidden water streams and hopes to inherit this skill. Despite some sibling squabbles, their time together allows Narin to feel the joys of having cousins.

The family prepares a grand breakfast for their guests, showcasing a variety of traditional dishes, and the scene highlights their customs and values, particularly concerning cleanliness and respect for the deceased during a visit to the village's cemetery. The importance of honoring ancestors is emphasized through their rituals, with women leading the remembrance ceremonies.

As the children explore the cemetery, questions arise about a tombstone belonging to an Englishman who died by the Tigris while searching for a poem. Their discussion reveals curiosity about history, identity, and the loss of heritage, especially poignant given the impending construction of a dam that threatens to submerge Hasankeyf, the community's ancestral home.

Later that evening, during a family dinner, Narin's family continues to engage with their past via a mortuary feast, symbolizing a connection between the living and the deceased. Conversations turn serious as Narin overhears her uncle's concerns about rising violence and the future of their homeland, leading to discussions about relocation to Germany. Her father expresses doubts about abandoning their roots, revealing a generational conflict about the safety and future of their community. Narin's thoughts weave between her impending hearing loss, the fear of fanatics, and the comfort of familial love.

This chapter captures the essence of tradition, the burden of heritage, and the complexity of identity amid chaos, leaving Narin feeling unsettled yet hopeful about her family's journey to Iraq and her own personal growth.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1857

In the chapter titled "Arthur," set by the River Thames in 1857, we meet a young boy named Arthur, who feels dwarfed by the grandeur of the British Museum. As he approaches the imposing building with its grand columns and majestic architecture, Arthur battles feelings of self-doubt and anxiety. Despite his nervousness, he enters, determined to explore. Disguised as a student, he hesitantly follows a group, contemplating his past interactions with the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities but lacking the courage to inquire about him.

After a brief stint with the group, Arthur ventures off alone, searching for the lamassus from Nineveh. When he encounters a museum staff member who teasingly questions the boy's expectation that the ancient artifacts might have flown away, Arthur feels the weight of his class difference and hurriedly tries to exit, overwhelmed by the sense of not belonging. However, he accidentally wanders deeper into the museum,

stumbling into a storage area filled with clay tablets adorned with enigmatic cuneiform writing.

Engrossed by these tablets, Arthur's fascination intensifies, especially when another museum attendant finds him. Although the man is kind, Arthur struggles with feelings of inadequacy, suspecting that his appearance suggests his impoverished origins. The narrative explores the deep societal barriers and class divisions that Arthur grapples with, emphasizing his longing for knowledge and self-discovery.

Determined, Arthur returns to the museum daily on his lunch break, meticulously budgeting time to study the tablets while rushing through the city. The chapter details his efforts to maintain himself—staying clean in filthy London—and his interactions with the staff, who initially view him with intrigue and confusion.

Eventually, Arthur catches the attention of Dr. Samuel Birch, the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities. Their encounter leads Arthur to reveal his interest and burgeoning understanding of the tablets' inscriptions. Birch, both surprised and impressed, offers Arthur a chance to assist in organizing the artifacts at the museum, a pivotal moment that threatens to upend Arthur's routine and apprenticeship while opening doors to a world of knowledge and discovery. The excitement of this new opportunity fills Arthur with hope and the challenge of balancing two demanding roles looms ahead.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In this chapter titled "Zaleekhah," set by the River Thames in 2018, the main character Zaleekhah introduces her guest, Nen, to her Uncle Malek and Aunt Malek during a family dinner. Initially filled with doubt over the introduction, Zaleekhah's concerns amplify as Uncle Malek begins to bombard Nen with intrusive questions about her profession as a tattoo artist and her living situation. Nen, unfazed, explains her recent breakup and that she had to rent out her houseboat, prompting Uncle Malek to directly inquire about her sexual orientation. While Nen responds with composure, the dynamics shift when Aunt Malek expresses acceptance, welcoming Nen as a friend.

However, Nen's remark about not being friends adds an uncomfortable note, followed quickly by a toast to friendship that shifts the air around the dinner table. Nen, who does not drink as she celebrates eight years of sobriety, receives mixed reactions—curiosity and disapproval from the adults, and admiration from Zaleekhah.

The arrival of Zaleekhah's glamorous cousin, Helen, brings a new energy but also concern about another family member, Lily, who is undergoing medical tests. This somber note contrasts with Uncle Malek's boisterous, and increasingly inebriated, rants about cultural identity, the misrepresentation of the Middle East, and his pride as a British citizen. As the evening progresses, Uncle Malek rotates into deeper topics, sharing his passionate beliefs about family and identity through tales from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Conversations spiral into arguments about the text's interpretations, centering on personal values over family loyalty. A moment of tension arises when Uncle Malek critiques Zaleekhah's life choices, showcasing his traditional mindset and causing ripples of discomfort throughout the table.

After dinner, Nen and Zaleekhah's walk home allows for deeper connection and reflection on their evening, with Nen sharing a story about her first fish, tying it back to the themes of love and gratitude. As Zaleekhah leaves, she receives a unique necklace made from lapis lazuli, which symbolizes the bond they've begun to form amid the complexities of family dynamics and personal beliefs. This chapter encapsulates the layered relationships and societal expectations that shape the characters' lives.

O: ARTHUR: On the way to the River Tigris, 1872

The chapter begins with Arthur arriving at the British Embassy in Constantinople, located in the Pera district, designed to resemble Buckingham Palace. Exhausted after his journey, he eats rabbit stew before settling into bed, listening to the sounds of the bustling city outside. The following day, he meets the ambassador, a well-educated and aristocratic man, in an opulent chamber filled with diverse artwork. Their conversation is strained, with Arthur eagerly asking about his travel to Nineveh, only to learn that he must wait for a necessary firman, an official permit from the sultan, to begin excavations.

Arthur's frustration mounts as days turn into weeks without news of the firman. He attempts to navigate Ottoman bureaucracy but struggles due to a language barrier and cultural misunderstandings. He feels like a fish out of water amid the embassy's elite, reflecting on how different the customs and manners are compared to his own.

During his time in Constantinople, Arthur has various culinary experiences, trying local dishes that often upset his stomach, although he finds enjoyment in sweet desserts and coffee-house atmospheres. He delights in the city's vibrancy, often taking strolls along the Bosphorus, observing the storks, dogs, and multicultural crowds that populate the streets. He finds the absence of women striking, witnessing glimpses of their lives within the confines of the harem.

While exploring the Grand Bazaar with a dragoman, Arthur immerses himself in the local culture, fascinated by the specialized quarters within the market. He happens upon a commotion involving a Yazidi man accused of devil-worship. In a moment of compassion, he erases the chalk circle drawn around the old man, earning grateful words from him that resonate with Arthur's own quests and existential reflections. As he leaves the bazaar with a piece of lapis lazuli, he ponders the man's cryptic message about a river flowing through him, contemplating his own restless heart and its connection to the ancient epic tales that inspire his journey .

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In 2018, Zaleekhah arrives at her Uncle Malek's home by the River Thames, filled with anticipation as she is greeted warmly by her Aunt Malek and her younger cousin, Lily, who is engaged in building a Victorian dollhouse. The playful atmosphere shifts as Aunt Malek invites Zaleekhah to sit with her, though Uncle Malek insists they have pressing matters to discuss. Tension simmers between the couple, highlighted by their differing views on Zaleekhah's recent marital choices.

As Zaleekhah takes her seat, she notes the ongoing transformations in the dining room, a space adorned with a chandelier from the Great Exhibition and various antiques meticulously collected by Uncle Malek. Their discussion drifts to Aunt Malek's plans for a Zen garden, which Uncle Malek dismisses as an expensive folly. The couple's contrasting perspectives on finances surface, particularly Uncle Malek's willingness to spend extravagantly on his passions versus Aunt Malek's disdain for the topic.

The conversation veers towards Zaleekhah's work on a project to restore lost rivers, which she finds easier to discuss than her own issues within her marriage. She explains to her relatives about efforts to revive the buried Bièvre river in Paris, and the implications of urban waterways being hidden or destroyed globally, drawing parallels to lost rivers in cities like Athens and Tokyo. Uncle Malek's skepticism about revitalizing these rivers reveals deeper family tensions surrounding wealth and privilege.

Once the main course is served, Zaleekhah's mind wanders back to her childhood, marked by cherished memories of nature before a tragedy took her parents. This loss lingers in her conversations with Uncle Malek, who hints at their shared past as he reflects on family and heritage. The chapter concludes with Zaleekhah's quiet resolve to reconnect with her cousin, Helen, prompting reflections on family ties amidst past traumas. Ultimately, Zaleekhah borrows a book on ancient Assyria, intrigued, as she prepares to leave

the evocative ambience of her uncle's house, longing for new beginnings while haunted by memories entwined with the sadder aspects of her life.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In the chapter titled "Zaleekhah," set by the River Thames in 2018, we meet the titular character as she awakens from a troubled sleep at 3:34 a.m., a time she has come to associate with deep melancholy. She turns on her laptop and is confronted with alarming news about scorpion invasions in Egypt, triggered by severe weather. As she contemplates the chaos, she takes sleeping pills, signifying her distress and need for escape.

Zaleekhah receives a poignant message from her husband, Brian, revealing his intention to file for divorce, which makes her reflect on their relationship and how to convey the news to her uncle. Simultaneously, cheerful birthday messages from colleagues provide a stark contrast to her emotional turmoil. An unexpected visit from her friend Nen interrupts her somber thoughts. Nen's cheerful demeanor and thoughtful gift—gingerbread biscuits shaped like Mesopotamian tablets—lighten the mood. The biscuits, inscribed in cuneiform, reveal a playful element in their friendship, with each biscuit representing a word.

Their conversation flows from the whimsical to the profound as Zaleekhah learns about Nen's tattoo business, which incorporates cuneiform inspired by ancient aesthetics. Nen expresses a passion for female figures in history, sparking a discussion about the roles women have played, often forgotten or overlooked in narratives. Zaleekhah reveals her own history of loss, sharing that her parents died in a flash flood when she was young, shaping her relationship with water and her chosen profession. The chapter showcases a blend of personal grief and burgeoning friendship, as Zaleekhah finds solace in Nen's understanding.

As they share stories, Nen hints at the deeper significance of tattoos as storytelling. The conversation is punctuated by moments of laughter and warmth, lifting Zaleekhah from her somber thoughts. As Nen departs, Zaleekhah feels inspired, leading her to unexpectedly invite Nen to a birthday dinner at her uncle's house that evening. This gesture reflects a blossoming connection, a possible turning point from her solitude towards new companionship amidst her struggles.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1872

In the chapter titled "By the River Tigris, 1872," Arthur embarks on a challenging journey from Constantinople to Mosul, covering almost 900 miles. As he navigates through Mesopotamia, he grapples with its complex tapestry of religions and cultures, observing the stark differences among people from the same region. In spite of the bewilderment, he finds familiarity in the ancient landscape, recalling images from his readings of ancient civilizations—irrigation canals, reed-based homes, and a sense of timelessness enveloping the past.

During a stay at Jacob's Inn near the Tigris, Arthur is humorously criticized by a friend for the inedible meal served, highlighting the cultural quirks of his travels. The term "Orient" perplexes him, leading him to reflect on Napoleon's historical campaigns and his fascination with the Middle East. Napoleon's mission suffused with Enlightenment ideals contrasts starkly with the realities of the region, hinting at deeper conflicts between Eastern and Western perspectives.

As Arthur travels along the Tigris, which he perceives as more unpredictable than the Nile, he contemplates its historical significance, filled with both beauty and ferocity. The river serves as a living memory, and its currents remind him of the fragility of life and history alike. Images of ancient prosperity juxtaposed with current poverty haunt him, signifying the stark realities that have shaped the landscape.

Upon arriving in Mosul, Arthur attends a banquet hosted by the pasha, where cultural misunderstandings surface, particularly when he fails to respond to the pasha's implied expectations. The interaction is laced with tension as the pasha's scrutiny amplifies Arthur's discomfort. His Levantine friend warns him of the pasha's suspicions regarding his intentions in the region, as he attempts to remain steadfast in his purpose of uncovering and preserving antiquities.

Despite the swirling doubts about his motives as a foreign archaeologist, Arthur's excitement reignites as he approaches the legendary ruins of Nineveh. The chapter concludes with Arthur insisting on a shortcut that leads him to a village called Zêrav, whose dark reputation raises the guide's concerns about devil-worshippers. Arthur's determination is palpable, setting the stage for anticipated conflicts in a land steeped in storied history and present dangers.

O: ARTHUR: On the way to the River Tigris, 1872

In March 1872, King Arthur of the Sewers and Slums embarks on a journey across the English Channel, feeling compelled by a sense of duty and fear that public interest in Mesopotamia may wane. As his ship navigates the dark waters, Arthur contemplates his motivations for uncovering ancient tablets while grappling with memories of his mother's illness. Leaving London to seek adventure evokes a sense of remorse, as he feels he may be abandoning her. When a fierce hailstorm strikes, Arthur worries about his fate at sea, sharing a moment with a chatty merchant who encourages him to embrace the journey.

Upon arriving in Paris, Arthur is captivated by the vibrant city, with its blooming flora and rich history that he has only encountered through literature. Wandering the elegant streets, he revels in a sense of freedom, contrasting his previous life in London. However, he soon confronts the stark reality of poverty in the city's underbelly, noticing the dismal conditions of the poorer neighborhoods. This dichotomy presents a reality where wealth allows for leisurely living, while the impoverished struggle against the relentless grind of time.

Arthur's exploration leads him to the Louvre, where he immerses himself in Mesopotamian artifacts, feeling a deep connection to historical relics. After a brief stay, he boards a steamer for the Mediterranean, where he encounters a diverse group of passengers, including a plant hunter headed to Bhutan. Despite battling seasickness, Arthur finds wonder in the vast ocean and the places he passes, fueling his desire to uncover the missing lines of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Filled with doubt, Arthur grapples with feelings of inadequacy as he prepares for his journey to Nineveh. However, as days at sea transform into exhilarating anticipation for the adventures ahead, he embraces the thrill of pursuing his long-held aspirations, symbolized by the three magical syllables: Ni-ne-veh. Upon nearing Constantinople, Arthur is immersed in the stunning scenery, but is met with skepticism from the captain, who warns him of the city's seductive nature. As he arrives and searches for the British Embassy, Arthur feels unease at being alone in a bustling, foreign land, ultimately reflecting on how past memories intertwine with the fresh experiences awaiting him.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1872

In 1872, Arthur, feeling triumphant after discovering the Flood Tablet, faces an unexpected turn of events when his employers announce his return to England, despite his wishes to extend his stay by the River Tigris. Despite his attempts to convince them to allow him to remain in Nineveh, he must reluctantly prepare to return home. On the night before his departure, he shares a poignant moment with Leila, a local villager, who spills water for luck and encourages him to return freely. Arthur marks a pomegranate tree as a symbol of his promise to come back.

Upon arriving in London, Arthur is met with adulation and claims of heroism. The media casts him as a celebrated scholar, and he is bombarded with invitations, though the fame feels overwhelming. While he resumes his work at the British Museum, he feels a sense of alienation, struggling with hybrid emotions amidst newfound praise and disdain from critics, including accusations of falsifying artifacts.

Arthur's fiancée, Mabel, is eager to further their wedding plans, reflecting her desire for social elevation through his fame. Shopping sprees for attire reveal the tangible impacts of his elevated status, yet Arthur feels uneasy; the grandeur feels constricting. At a party hosted by an affluent countess, Arthur is confronted with the commodification of the artifacts he cherishes, displayed for the amusement of the elite instead of respected as cultural treasures.

The ensuing dinner conversation turns to accusations about the people of the places Arthur visited, leading him to defend the Yazidis and emphasize their dignity. This moment of disconnection from his dinner companions heightens his feelings of isolation. Arthur senses a profound change within himself, as he longs for Mesopotamia, a place where he felt authentic and connected.

After marrying Mabel, their struggles with financial constraints become apparent. While Arthur remains barred in his scholarly pursuits, Mabel pressures him to seek a promotion to support their growing family, reflecting their diverging perspectives on life. As Arthur immerses himself in his work, he remains haunted by memories of the land and woman he left behind, feeling a lingering sense of incompleteness and a yearning to reconnect with his past.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1854

In 1854, Arthur, a fourteen-year-old boy, finally gets a chance to visit the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, held in the magnificent Crystal Palace in Sydenham Hill, after previously being unable to afford the entrance fee. The exhibition had been attended by millions and was initially opened in 1851 by Queen Victoria. On a warm summer day, Arthur, clutching his shilling, joins the crowd making its way to the palace. Overwhelmed by the throngs of people and their noise, he finds solace in mentally multiplying numbers to calm his racing heart.

Once inside, he is awestruck by the vastness and splendor of the exhibition, filled with a dazzling array of exhibits from around the world. As he moves through the galleries, he is introduced to the cultures of distant lands, marveling at the exotic artifacts displayed. The displays represent the achievements and crafts of various nations, stirring a longing in him to explore these places in person rather than just read about them.

Arthur encounters a variety of products, marvels at the intricate craftsmanship of items from countries like India and the United States, and finds himself captivated by a statue named *The Greek Slave*, which invites contrasting views from admirers and abolitionists alike. He observes the beauty of the lamassus from Nineveh, pondering their history and the stories they could tell.

Later, back in the office with Mr. Bradbury, Arthur discusses his experience at the exhibition, revealing a newfound desire to explore ancient civilizations. Mr. Bradbury, noticing Arthur's potential, encourages him to visit the British Museum and see the tablets from Nineveh. Despite the boy's lack of funds and impending responsibilities at home, Mr. Bradbury generously offers him a treat. Arthur leaves the office, contemplating his choices and yearning for a better future.

However, the following day brings tragedy as Arthur discovers Mr. Bradbury's lifeless body in the office, having succumbed to suicide. This devastating revelation leaves Arthur grappling with profound sadness and confusion over the nature of despair, particularly in someone who seemed to have it all. As life continues, Arthur dutifully fulfills his responsibilities but feels a deep sense of loss and isolation, withdrawn into himself as he struggles to comprehend the complexity of human emotions and the burdens of existence .

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1876

In August 1876, Arthur embarks on a challenging journey from Nineveh to Castrum Kefa. The heat of the day dulls his appetite, forcing him to subsist on dates, flatbreads, and camel's milk. He and his guide, Mahmoud, travel primarily at night, finding solace in the serenity of the starlit landscape, which feels alive under the moon's ethereal glow. Though Mahmoud warns of dangers at night, Arthur revels in the peaceful stillness, sensing an ancient history beneath the sands.

Traversing this desolate terrain, Arthur reflects on the past glory of the land, once teeming with vibrant cities now reduced to dry desert. Historical trauma looms large; avarice, power struggles, and environmental abuse have obliterated civilizations. Arthur's understanding of civilization shifts from a sturdy construct to an ominous threat, a storm poised to destroy all that stands in its way.

Upon passing through a village, Arthur encounters despair—people stricken by cholera, evoking memories of personal loss. He urges Mahmoud to find help, but the guide sadly dismisses him, stating no doctor would come. Here, Arthur observes Mahmoud's poignant prayers for the sick, an act that envelops him in comfort despite his struggles with his faith, recalling the futility of seeking solace through religious observances amid profound suffering.

During their restless ride, Arthur remains focused on reaching Castrum Kefa to check on Leila, internally grappling with Mahmoud's advice to turn back, especially considering the impracticality of his quest for a woman who may never fully belong to him. Mahmoud's reference to the tale of Layla and Majnun hits Arthur hard, as he recognizes his infatuation with Leila mirrors the tragic story of unattainable love.

After persuading Mahmoud to return to safety, Arthur presses on alone. However, he soon succumbs to debilitating illness, feeling the grip of dysentery. Mahmoud, despite his earlier intentions to return, finds Arthur and insists on accompanying him, highlighting a deep loyalty. As they approach Castrum Kefa, Arthur's strength wanes, and Mahmoud carries him to a shepherd's hut, seeking help while watching over Arthur.

In his feverish state, Arthur experiences muddled visions of his past, revealing both cherished memories and painful losses. A thief enters, scavenging Arthur's belongings, and unwittingly takes a significant blue tablet that Arthur possessed, a subtle act that suggests the ongoing significance of the past even as Arthur's present darkens with illness.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

In this enchanting chapter titled "By the River Tigris, 2014," Narin, a curious child, engages in a dialogue with her grandmother about the mythical lamassus the latter mentions. Grandma explains their disappearance from their homeland, hinting at their current existence in foreign museums, a tale that Narin struggles to believe fully. Yet, Grandma clarifies the importance of storytelling, calling it a vehicle for truth, which stirs Narin's respect and curiosity.

Grandma conveys wisdom steeped in her culture, citing reverence for the earth. She stresses that they hold the land sacred, advising Narin to treat it gently, emphasizing that their people abstain from marrying in April due to its significance as a time of fertility for the land. She also shares an anecdote about a Yazidi woman shocked by the bathing practices in Germany, illustrating cultural differences in respecting water.

As the conversation deepens, Grandma shares her rituals of honoring celestial bodies with prayers at dawn and dusk, attesting to the hidden wonders of nature, from trees to insects. The Tigris river holds a special

place in her heart, treated with the utmost dignity. Describing her healing practices, Grandma discusses the sacredness of ash and the numbers that guide them, particularly the number seven. For her, time management concerning emotions and decisions is paramount, urging Narin to allow a week to pass before acting on feelings.

Symbolically, rivers embody personalities, and through dialogue, Grandma illustrates the contrasting natures of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, suggesting that tranquility demands a fierce internal struggle. Ultimately, she declares respect for the Euphrates, valuing gentleness over strife, which aligns with her spiritual teachings.

Through tender exchanges, Grandma imparts lessons on humility, wellness, and lifelong learning, using analogies of water and nature to enrich Narin's understanding. The profound connection of knowledge to water encourages Narin to appreciate the wisdom that flows through their lineage. The chapter beautifully encapsulates cultural practices, environmental respect, and familial bonds through the lens of storytelling.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

In the village of Zêrav, the inhabitants awaken one morning to a devastating sight; their sacred water sources have been poisoned overnight. Hundreds of sacks of pesticides and debris have been dumped, leaving them desperate. Several men journey to a nearby Yazidi village for help but find that their neighbors have also been affected. With no potable water available, they venture to check on nearby Muslim villagers, only to discover their fountains remain untouched. A few are willing to help, but many refuse, an indication of rising tensions. With the heat intensifying, they collect bottles of water, painfully aware that their family members are relying on them.

As the day wears on, the villagers struggle to clear debris from their fountains, yet the Tigris River remains polluted, too. Days later, at night, their enemy returns, this time targeting the trees, burning olive groves and reducing fertile fields to wastelands. Narin, a young girl, observes the destruction from her window and feels a deep sadness. She reflects on the hatred surrounding them and the fragility of life amidst such violence.

Narin's father, Khaled, calls her the next day from Baghdad, informing her that he has been detained at a checkpoint. Upon hearing about the water contamination and destruction, he resolves to return home swiftly. Yet, his journey is complicated by roadblocks and danger, as Yazidis and other minority groups face threats from extremists.

Meanwhile, Grandma grows increasingly restless, unable to sleep since the poisoning of the wells. Early one morning, she notices that the Kurdish forces protecting Zêrav have vanished, prompting fear and panic among the villagers. News spreads that thousands of troops have withdrawn, leaving the Yazidis vulnerable. The villagers debate whether to stay or flee but ultimately decide to display white flags and wait, hoping to avoid violence.

As Khaled arrives at another Yazidi location, he witnesses militants commandeering the streets. Hajji Amer, a man he once considered a friend, is now leading the armed men. Khaled and the other Yazidi men are forced to leave their homes, stripped of valuables, and threatened with violence. As the militants turn hostile, Khaled's resolve strengthens. However, tragedy strikes as they are taken to a water cistern and executed en masse.

In the chaos, Khaled survives, bleeding and alone, and manages to call his mother-in-law, urging her and Narin to escape immediately. They must flee to Mount Sinjar for safety. Meanwhile, Narin awakens to her grandmother's urgent plea to leave with the few relatives willing to escape, setting off into the uncertain night, unaware of the perilous journey ahead. As dawn breaks, they face an ambush from ISIS, and chaos ensues, leaving the survivors fleeing into the desolate mountain with dwindling hope.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

In the chapter titled "By the River Tigris, 2014," Narin engages her grandmother in a conversation about the Flood, a significant event in their heritage. Intrigued, Narin asks how it started, prompting her grandmother to recount the tale of a single drop of water that heralded the impending disaster. This drop escalated into relentless rain, ultimately drowning the land and claiming many lives. However, they, as Yazidis, were saved by a courageous woman named Pira-Fat, who floated above the chaos and preserved their seeds, allowing them to repopulate the earth after the waters receded.

Narin's curiosity expands as she learns there were potentially multiple Floods: the first affected the children of Adam and Eve, while the second directly impacted the Yazidis. This legacy of survival raises questions for Narin about divine intentions behind such calamities. Her grandmother suggests these trials may serve as cleansing events meant to address human misdeeds but emphasizes her belief that God's nature is one of benevolence, steering clear of deliberate punishment. She compares the world's ongoing chaos to yogurt – still roiling beneath the surface, symbolizing the cycles of nature and history, known as dewr.

The narrative shifts to their family heirlooms stored in an ornate chest, which holds treasures like crocheted doilies and a decorative qanun, an instrument with ties to Narin's father. One poignant object is an ancient slab of clay inscribed with symbols, passed down from Narin's great-great-grandmother Leila, a gifted healer and diviner, who once practiced the art of seeing the future. Narin's grandmother fondly recounts Leila's beauty and talent, introducing a new dimension to their family's legacy.

However, this gift comes with peril. Divination, as her grandmother explains, can lead to profound pain and trauma, particularly after witnessing a grim prediction that scarred Leila for life. Following this event in Nineveh, Leila renounced her prophetic abilities, asserting that future generations should avoid such burdens. Instead, they embraced their ability to locate water underground and healing, maintaining a connection to their heritage while adapting to the hardships they face.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In the early hours of dawn, Zaleekhah steps out onto the deck of her houseboat by the River Thames, her surroundings calm as the river swathes quietly in dark satin. Wrapped in a fleece and tennis shoes, she embraces the serenity of the Thames, the pull of running has been her lifelong companion, often seen by her husband as a means of escape from something unresolved in her past.

As she runs, her body struggles at first with the cold air pushing against her nostrils, the initial discomfort giving way to fluid movement along the Chelsea Embankment. She encounters early risers and those just returning from nightlife, their lives intersecting in the dim light of morning. Amidst the bustle, she reflects on her environmental work, specifically the impacts of pollution on the river's crustaceans, revealing alarming truths about the ecosystem, such as the harmful plastics found in the stomachs of mitten crabs.

Zaleekhah finds a sense of connection with the Thames, once declared lifeless, now teeming with aquatic life yet still suffering from urban waste. Her research has spanned across different climates and locations, revealing the interconnectedness of water and climate crises. The irony of humanity's neglect of water, an elemental force greater than time, weighs heavily on her.

While running, memories invade her thoughts, pulling her back to her childhood in Turkey, where she recalls hiking with her parents, feeling the safety of their presence. This nostalgia transforms into anxiety as she navigates her emotional landscape, culminating in a physical ache urging her to keep moving, lest she drown in the past.

Reaching her uncle's opulent home for dinner, Zaleekhah feels the familiar dissonance of stepping back into a world that feels foreign. Uncle Malek embodies the essence of a successful immigrant, yet she senses his internal struggles with belonging. Their conversation dances around family expectations, disappointments, and cultural differences. As they exchange concerns over her recent marriage troubles, the weight of unspoken fears about identity and alienation becomes palpable.

Despite the comfortable surroundings of Uncle Malek's mansion, Zaleekhah carries a sense of discomfort, feeling the need to be "normal" while grappling with the complexities of her life's choices. She navigates through her memories of childhood, offers an unrefined glimpse into family dynamics, and reflects on the compromises inherent in familial love and expectation—all underlined by her ongoing commitment to the environment that binds her to her work and inner self.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1840

In the bleak winter of 1840, London is beset by early snowfall, chilling temperatures, and an oppressive, polluted atmosphere. The Thames, once a river renowned for its fresh waters and plentiful fish, now runs murky and tainted, bearing the burden of industrial waste, human refuse, and decaying corpses. This neglect underscores the city's rapid industrialization, which has made it the world's most crowded metropolis. Amidst this grim environment, toshers, determined scavengers of the riverbanks, valiantly search for valuables among the filth—coins, scraps of metal, and sometimes precious items inadvertently discarded.

On a particularly frigid November morning, a group of toshers diligently combs the Chelsea shore. They must navigate the dangers of flooded sewers and the risk of accidents, often working in teams for safety. Among them is Arabella, a heavily pregnant woman whose husband, a once-promising carpenter, now drowns his potential in alcohol. Despite her condition, she toils, motivated by a desperate need to provide for herself and her child.

While her companions rummage through the sludge, Arabella unexpectedly feels labor pains and, alarmed, expresses her distress to an elderly toshers' member. Panic ensues as her waters break in the filthy riverbanks. The group rushes to help, but uncertainty looms as Arabella confesses her husband's absence and her dire situation—her meager earnings scarcely support her own hunger, let alone a newborn.

Amid this chaos, a royal scene unfolds in Buckingham Palace as Queen Victoria also endures the pains of childbirth. The contrasting realities of motherhood highlight the disparities of life in London. In the dirt and squalor, Arabella's baby—a boy—is born by the water's edge. Named King Arthur by the compassionate toshers gathered around, he begins life under starkly different circumstances than the royal child, yet embodies hope and the potential for a new beginning.

Despite his grim surroundings, Arthur, gifted with an extraordinary memory, senses the world's beauty in the falling snow. This moment defines him as a child of the Thames, forever shaped by the stark realities and contrasts of life in Victorian London. His remarkable ability to remember everything he experiences, while a blessing, also hints at the burdens he will face as he grows. This environment, fraught with challenges and uncertainty, frames his early existence, setting the stage for his journey ahead, seeded with both promise and hardship.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1876

In "Arthur" by the River Tigris, set in 1876, King Arthur finds himself in a dire situation. Unable to work due to the rampant plague and cholera, he sends a telegram to the Trustees of the British Museum expressing his desire to cut short his expedition. The curt reply from S. McAllister Jones, Secretary to the British Museum,

emphasizes the need for caution but does not provide the escape Arthur longs for. Trapped in Nineveh with the pressure of discovery looming over him, Arthur turns to the discarded debris of past archaeological teams, diving into the heaps of chipped tiles and potsherds.

While sifting through the material, he uncovers a striking cobalt tablet, a portion of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* unfamiliar to him. The tablet resonates deeply, featuring themes of loss as Gilgamesh returns home a broken man. Intriguingly, it contains a note referring to a junior scribe and dedicating the work not to the typical deity Nabu, but to an enigmatic goddess, Nisaba. Reflecting on Mesopotamian lore, Arthur considers how rivers serve as vital lifelines, connecting past and future, life and death, mirroring the human experience of grief and loss.

Amidst this contemplation, Mahmoud arrives with news of a young Yazidi woman seen traveling alone, which immediately piques Arthur's interest. Believing it to be Leila, a woman who predicted disaster years prior, Arthur's hope ignites. Despite Mahmoud's caution about uncertainty and danger, Arthur rushes to prepare for the journey to Castrum Kefa, where Leila's sister resides. Determined to find her, he insists on setting out, and Mahmoud, recognizing the dangers Arthur would face alone, decides to accompany him.

Thus, in mid-August, equipped with minimal provisions, Arthur embarks on a quest along the River Tigris, leaving behind Nineveh and a piece of himself among the artifacts that tell stories of a lost world .

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1871–2

In the aftermath of Arthur's successful lecture at the Society of Biblical Archaeology, his life transitions into a whirlwind of social engagements, including invitations to educational societies and gentlemen's clubs. Encountering refined gentlemen adorned in silk cravats and indulgent meals, including turtle soup, Arthur feels both awe and social pressure. He relishes in the luxurious environments filled with gilded mirrors and champagne flutes, yet beneath this facade, he grapples with an overpowering preoccupation with the missing Flood Tablet from Nineveh.

During a dinner at The Boltons, Arthur meets Mabel, a charming young woman from a respectable family. Their encounters seem coincidental, but Arthur senses a collective effort of his peers to draw them closer. Mabel, while not particularly well-read, expresses genuine interest in Arthur's work, and her simplicity and warm demeanor contrast sharply with his shyness. As Arthur navigates middle-class societal expectations surrounding love and marriage, he becomes acutely aware of their idealization of domestic life, which starkly contrasts with his priorities regarding the Mesopotamian tablets.

Amidst this societal backdrop, Arthur receives an unexpected opportunity from the Daily Telegraph to spearhead an archaeological excavation. With excitement brewing, he prepares for a journey to the land of Gilgamesh, but financial limitations weigh on him. Nevertheless, he feels empowered and optimistic, especially considering Mabel's father's support, who urges Arthur to propose to Mabel before departing, emphasizing the importance of companionship during his travels.

As Arthur packs for his adventure, he feels a sense of urgency to visit his mother, who has been in a sanatorium. Upon arriving at the Middlesex County Lunatic Asylum, he learns about her suffering from "restless melancholy." The grim reality of her condition becomes painfully clear as he witnesses her transformation into a shadow of her former self, struggling for recognition and connection. Reality dawns as Arthur recounts stories to her, trying to revive the warmth of their bond amidst her detachment. He yearns to make her proud and promises to fight for a better future for both of them, holding on to the hope that his endeavors in Nineveh will lead to her recovery and a brighter life filled with comfort and love.

As Arthur's journey draws near, he carries a guardian spirit carved for his mother, a tangible reminder of his affection and commitment to return for her—as he embarks on his path toward Nineveh .

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

In a bleak cinderblock house by the River Tigris in 2014, Narin scrubs pots amid a tense atmosphere marked by militant frustration over losses in battle. The commander abuses the two newly acquired Yazidi women. One, a younger woman, cries constantly, while the elder attempts suicide, resulting in brutal punishment from the commander. Narin, tasked with serving tea, nervously enters a room full of militants only to be grabbed and spun around before being saved by the commander, who scolds her captor and drops her unceremoniously.

Three days later, conversations in the kitchen reveal the commander's wife believes that Narin is cursed, responsible for her husband's impending death. Agitated by the hostility, Narin attempts to avoid the commander's wife, but their encounters are frequent and uncomfortable. The commander eventually informs Narin that she will be sold to a new owner in Antep due to her "bad luck." Devastated, Narin pleads for her friend Salma but is denied. Horrified by the implications of her new master's appetite for young girls, she fears there is no chance of escape given the brutal realities faced by those who resist.

In despair, Narin stumbles upon a clay tablet while seeking support, reminiscent of the ones she learned about from her grandmother. Her brief moment of joy turns to terror when the commander discovers her. He violently reprimands her by striking her and subsequently kicks her while she is incapacitated. After regaining consciousness, Narin encounters a doctor and the commander, who reveals he wants her to read the tablet as part of his looting and selling scheme involving antiquities.

Narin learns that the militants not only commit violence but profit from stolen artifacts, perpetuating a cycle of destruction and greed. The commander presents her with a lapis lazuli tablet, demanding she reads it for potential profit. In a moment of defiance, she extracts a promise that Salma must not be harmed. Faced with the reality of her friend's suffering as a result of the commander's viciousness, Narin succumbs to despair, feeling only numbness as she awaits an inevitable demise.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

In the narrative titled "H—NARIN," set by the River Tigris in 2014, a poignant relationship unfolds between a girl named Narin and her illiterate grandmother. As they navigate a trail, gathering wild herbs, Narin expresses a concern for those who speak ill of her grandmother, wishing they could truly understand her. In response, Grandma becomes a vessel of oral tradition, sharing tales that connect their heritage with the divine.

One particular story describes the creation of the world, beginning with God, known as Xwedê, who existed alone in silence before molding a pearl filled with divine light. A magical bird, Anfar, protects the pearl until God, for reasons unknown, smashes it, creating the mountains, forests, and other elements of nature. This act leads to the creation of angels and humanity, with an intriguing distinction: Yazidis trace their lineage back solely to Adam, diverging from other faiths.

As the story unfolds, themes of loss emerge; Grandma discusses the forthcoming dam's implications for their environment, foreseeing their beloved pistachio trees drowning and the birds losing their habitats. Together, they dream of an ark akin to Baba Noah's to save their home and wildlife. In a further reflection on mortality, Grandma reassures Narin about the cyclical nature of existence, emphasizing that the soul travels beyond death, and that Yazidis believe everyone returns to earth multiple times.

Their conversation meanders through memories and folklore, including Grandma's tattoo, ancestral spirits, and the neglected grave of an Englishman who sought lost poetry. This man, a symbol of longing and perhaps loss, died of thirst, echoing the themes of connection to land and culture in stark contrast to the

looming destruction by the dam. The chapter closes with the realization of impending change, as bulldozers work nearby, foreshadowing an end to their familiar world and leaving Narin with heavy, unanswered questions about the future and her heritage.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In the chapter "By the River Thames, 2018," we follow Zaleekhah, who enjoys working late at the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. As she analyzes samples under a microscope, she contemplates the threat of cholera, an illness still prevalent in developing regions due to environmental degradation and pollution. She reflects on global water scarcity, particularly the vulnerable conditions of the Tigris River, which flows through the Fertile Crescent, a region that is diminishing rapidly.

Zaleekhah also grapples with her Uncle's disconnection from his homeland, contrasting his detachment with the instinctual behavior of salmon that return to their birthplaces. A phone call from her friend Helen reveals exciting news about a donor for a family member's transplant, which prompts Zaleekhah to express her support and willingness to travel to Istanbul for the procedure.

The narrative shifts to Zaleekhah preparing dinner for her friend Nen. She orders Lebanese food and creates a charming atmosphere with improvised dining arrangements. As they eat, Zaleekhah shares insights about her research regarding the Tigris River, discussing how upstream dam constructions exacerbate water shortages downstream, reflecting on human impact on the environment.

Nen listens attentively as she narrates ancient Mesopotamian tales, including the creation story of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers from the tears of the goddess Tiamat. Zaleekhah, overwhelmed by emotions, acknowledges her struggles with sadness, contrasting her feelings with the illusion of happy people around her.

Their conversation leads to a deeper connection, culminating in Zaleekhah kissing Nen. As they share intimacy, Zaleekhah reflects on her own insecurities but is met with Nen's encouragement to see her own beauty. A sense of camaraderie and affection blossoms between them.

The chapter closes with an exploration of Zaleekhah's traumatic past—the flood that claimed her parents' lives during a family trip to the Middle East. Nen gently probes Zaleekhah's memories, revealing the lasting impact of that event on her psyche. The two women cultivate a bond that promises healing and understanding amid their shared vulnerabilities, highlighting themes of environmental concern, personal trauma, and the quest for connection in the face of loss.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

In the chapter titled "By the River Tigris, 2014", Narin converses with her Grandma about past experiences related to cultural myths and the feelings of isolation that arise from such beliefs. Her Grandma recounts a painful memory of her younger brother being ostracized by peers, revealing the underlying prejudices about their culture. As they drive towards Iraq, excited and feeling grown up, Narin reflects on her family's heritage and the journey ahead.

Upon reaching Cizre, Grandma introduces Narin to a notable figure from their culture, the scientist Al-Jazari, who lived in Upper Mesopotamia. Through Grandma's stories, Narin learns about Al-Jazari's passion for water and his remarkable inventions, including a mechanical peacock that dispenses water and attendants with soap and towels. Narin is fascinated, and her father shares that Al-Jazari's pioneering designs are kept in museums in America, which spurs a conversation about cultural ownership and the accessibility of their

history. Grandma expresses concern over Westerners possessing and showcasing their heritage, feeling a profound disconnect from the artifacts now housed abroad.

The family discusses how Al-Jazari's identity is viewed differently depending on the perspective of Arab, Iranian, or Kurdish individuals, highlighting issues surrounding cultural recognition and belonging. Despite the erasure of historical figures like Al-Jazari due to neglect, Narin's father reassures her that their family holds the memories alive, describing them as the "memory tribe."

Their journey leads them to the Tigris River, where Grandma reminisces about the rich wildlife that once thrived in the region, such as oryxes and lions, now lost due to hunting and the destruction brought forth by devastation related to war and political upheaval. The family recalls the beauty and fertility of the marshlands, recounting the adverse effects of past regimes that left their homeland barren. Narin's father culminates the reflections by explaining the tragic fate of Yazidi communities displaced by governmental actions and the ongoing peril surrounding the Mosul Dam, emphasizing the fragility of their history and the hope for preservation amidst adversity.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In the chapter titled “—H Zaleekhah” set by the River Thames in 2018, Zaleekhah sits in her houseboat after Nen's departure, her thoughts distracted by a seagull carrying something mysterious. As she prepares to eat the cuneiform biscuits brought by Nen, she reflects on the murky, overcast sky, reminiscent of storms, and ponders where fish might shelter during tumultuous weather. Despite scientific understanding of fish behavior in adverse conditions, she realizes the true answer remains elusive. Pollution in the river complicates matters further, as fish struggle to find breathable oxygen and can perish in moments of crisis, highlighting a natural world's fragility.

Later, feeling inadequate about her attire for an evening celebration with family and friends, Zaleekhah grapples with memories of a birthday party from her past—one attended mostly by strangers after a traumatic life change. Her recollections are marked by a mermaid-themed cake her Uncle Malek tried to make perfect for her, which only reminded her of her melancholy. Images of her late parents and moments spent together evoke a sense of longing and loss, contrasting sharply with her current superficial concerns.

Zaleekhah struggles with self-image and familial expectations as she sorts through her clothing, none of which seem good enough. Her past at Uncle Malek's home lingers in her mind, representing not a true home but merely a temporary refuge following the loss of her parents. The more she reflects, the more it becomes clear how deeply she yearns for her old life, filled with the warmth of her parents' presence.

As evening descends, she finds herself reluctant to attend her own birthday dinner, contemplating withdrawal from the world altogether. Yet, the notion of completely detaching from life stirs fear within her, urging her to seek something suitable to wear and prepare for the gathering, realizing it is still her special day. Ultimately, the chapter juxtaposes themes of isolation, memory, emotional turbulence, and the struggle for identity, all set against the backdrop of a seemingly celebratory occasion.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1853

In London, enveloped by a dense fog in 1853, thirteen-year-old Arthur navigates the oppressive atmosphere with his father. The thick brume dulls the world, and Arthur hurries behind his father, who hastily insists he finds an apprenticeship after his prolonged absence. Once a source of warmth, his father's demeanor has soured, reflecting the family's financial struggles. Arthur, though only recently out of school, has been laboring tirelessly to support his family. He scavenges, collects manure, trades old clothes, and even dives

into filthy waters to gather leeches, all while caring for his younger siblings as their mother works fewer hours.

Despite some nostalgic yearning for the structured life of school, Arthur recognizes his responsibility to provide for his family in a world where child labor prevails, with his peers existing in dire conditions across the city, often risking their lives in hazardous jobs. As they walk, Arthur's curiosity about the job opportunity sparks questions, all met with harsh rebuffs from his father. Tensions escalate when Arthur's inquiry about the nature of the work they are headed to earns him a violent rebuke.

Their journey leads them into St Giles, notorious for its squalor and vice, where Arthur feels a mix of shame and anger at his father's cruelty towards a desperate prostitute. This encounter leaves a mark on him as they venture onward to Bradbury & Evans, a prominent publishing house.

Upon their arrival, Arthur's father attempts to leverage a connection with a local chemist for a job. However, the publishers inform them that they are not hiring. Desperation takes hold of Arthur's father as he pleads for a chance for Arthur, claiming his son is a genius. After some hesitation, the publishers engage Arthur, challenging him to recall specific dates from the past, impressing them with his extraordinary memory but leaving him emotionally conflicted regarding the events he recalls.

Eventually, they agree to take Arthur on as an apprentice, provided they can assess his abilities over a week. Arthur is simultaneously excited and apprehensive as he steps into the world of printing and publishing, ignited by curiosity and a burgeoning love for literature and learning that he had long craved yet been denied .

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1876

In a dilapidated shepherd's hut by the River Tigris, Arthur lies dying, his senses struggling to comprehend his surroundings filled with poverty. Surrounded by rags and cold tea, he discovers his journal on the floor. Breathing labored, he manages to write, reflecting on life's inclinations that shape our destinies. Arthur recognizes that his own life has revolved around an ardent love for poetry and words, dedicating years to collecting, interpreting, and translating literary works, particularly an ancient epic that provides him with immense joy.

Throughout his life, others perceived his talent—his mother unquestioningly celebrated it, his father acknowledged it at times, and his colleagues agreed, though his wife's belief remains uncertain. He grapples with the idea that talent may be outshone by passion, which embodies a restless heart seeking to push boundaries. Echoes of Gilgamesh and Ashurbanipal fill his mind, both kings who endured tribulations and losses, leaving Arthur reflecting on his own identity as “King of the Sewers and Slums,” far removed from his origin.

As tears fill his eyes, Arthur laments missed opportunities as a father and husband. He feels loneliness where intimacy should thrive, harboring unvoiced desires and unshared secrets. Unlike the scholarly pursuit of ancient texts that brought him solace, he recognizes love as a complex puzzle he has yet to decipher. He acknowledges the collective ownership of epic narratives, contemplating their significance to history and culture while holding tightly to a blue tablet from his explorations—a gift to Leila, embodying both connection and disconnection.

Arthur dreams of the Epic of Gilgamesh transcending time and borders, enchanting admirers of ancient poetry with its complexity and flawed beauty, mirroring an imperfect world. He believes art serves as a testament to human emotion, a legacy for future generations to recognize their ancestors' humanity and fragility. In his final moments, he embraces mortality, finding peace as he recalls teachings about death as a new beginning.

As King Arthur takes his last breath on August 1876, he embodies a multifaceted identity—a son of the Thames, a scholar, an explorer, and a man entangled in love and secrets. Mahmoud arrives, bearing news of his demise, and Leila, now marked by Arthur’s memories, awaits, embodying the profound connection they shared. Arthur is to be buried at the Castle of the Rock, forever remembered as King Arthur of the Sewers and Slums, an enduring reflection of both his triumphs and struggles.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

The chapter titled “H—NARIN” takes place by the River Tigris in 2014, where Narin and her Grandma regularly escape to connect with nature after relocating to Zêrav with relatives. They rest on a rock near decaying buildings, once vibrant eateries filled with tempting aromas of grilled fish, particularly masgouf, amid lively neon lights. Narin, adhering to her faith, refrains from eating fish and feels a pang of sadness at the site’s current desolation, wishing to have witnessed its former glory.

Their peaceful moment is interrupted by Grandma spotting a scorpion. This leads into a whimsical conversation about how everything in the world communicates—the sounds made by nature and the spiritual connections they form with it. Grandma’s profound reflections on existence highlight that even silence and death hold conversations that continue beyond life. Narin, curious yet apprehensive, mentions Grandma’s tendency to speak to potentially hazardous creatures.

Suddenly, Grandma becomes serious, sensing something in the river. When Narin follows her, they discover a floating body, a sight that starkly contrasts their earlier musings. Grandma recognizes the tragedy, sharing her sorrow for a lost life, and she attempts to retrieve the body from the strong current. However, despite her resolve and gentle prayers, she cannot bring the corpse ashore. This encounter makes Grandma reconsider sharing the incident with their family as it ties into the unsettling rumors of disappearances in the area, with whisperings of people going missing and others returning traumatized.

The Tigris, once a beautiful and lively river, is now polluted with waste and has become a forgotten graveyard of victims, leading to a fatwa against fish consumption. The atmosphere changes drastically as it becomes evident that contentment in their natural surroundings is overshadowed by the lurking dangers and silent horrors that the river now embodies. Grandma continues to speak to the elements around them, but an invisible menace haunts their tranquil retreat, emphasizing the tension between the beauty of nature and the dark realities of human existence.

By the River Tigris, in olden times

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O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1872

In the village of Zêrav, Arthur is warmly welcomed by curious children and elderly men, including a sheikh in white attire who carries an intricately designed cane. After expressing gratitude for their hospitality, Arthur and his guide are led to the sheikh's home, where they are offered goat's milk and a lavish dinner featuring chicken biryani and kubba Mosul. The sheikh conveys that every guest is considered God-sent, making Arthur grateful he chose to visit.

During dinner, Arthur observes his guide's reluctance to partake in the meal, which provokes an unexpected appetite in him. Arthur expresses sympathy towards the sheikh regarding the negative perceptions some hold

about his village, to which the sheikh replies with resilience, acknowledging life's unfairness but affirming their strength as a community.

Post-dinner, while sipping coffee, the sheikh warns Arthur about the local Pasha of Mosul, who sees his arrival as an opportunity for wealth. Confidently, Arthur clarifies his true intention: finding an ancient poem related to the Great Flood. The sheikh assures him he is in the right place, steeped in history linked to the Ark and the Deluge.

As the evening progresses, the sheikh inquires about Arthur's personal life. Arthur reveals he has a fiancée but battles an internal conflict regarding his emotions, feeling drawn irresistibly by a 'ghost river' away from personal ties. He meets the sheikh's adopted daughter, Leila, who is identified as a faqra, possessing a unique spiritual insight into the world.

That night, Arthur has a restless sleep due to a strange rustling outside. He glimpses Leila sleepwalking, serving as an enigmatic connection to deeper truths. The next day, he wakes to the laughter of children and discovers his guide has left. The villagers offer a delightful breakfast while Dishan, the sheikh's son, steps in to assist Arthur as a new translator.

Arthur expresses a desire to start excavating near the archaeological site of Ni-ne-veh. The sheikh generously invites Arthur to stay while he works, emphasizing a belief that sharing food enhances its value. Energized by this warmly received invitation and hopeful about his mission, Arthur looks forward to excavating Kouyunjik, where layers of history await him beneath the surface, as he reconnects with the essence of an ancient world.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

In the spring of 2014, on the banks of the Tigris in Turkey, a gathering of mostly elderly Yazidis convenes for the baptism of a nine-year-old girl named Narin. Dressed in white, Narin possesses delicate features accentuated by bright sage-green eyes. As she undergoes the sacred ceremony, she is blessed by a sheikh, who invokes a path of goodness and strength for her. The ceremony connects deeply with Narin's grandmother, who expresses her affection with vivid anatomical metaphors—referring to Narin as “the corner of my liver,” and “the light of my eye.” This fluidity in their expressions of love emphasizes the interconnectedness of their beings.

Despite the joyous occasion, Narin is troubled by her father's absence; he is a popular qanun player often away for work. Their family history is marked by grief and loss, with Narin raised predominantly by her grandmother following her mother's death shortly after Narin's birth. As the sheikh prepares to conclude the baptism, their moment of tranquility is shattered by the arrival of a bulldozer, a foreboding sign of impending disruption due to a major dam project by the Turkish government. This project will displace thousands and obliterate the ancient settlement of Hasankeyf, drowning its rich history under artificial lakes.

Despite protests from local farmers and activists, the dam construction continues. The bulldozer driver interrupts the ceremony with hostility, emphasizing the urgency of their relocation. Grandma, representing the stoic strength of her people, confronts the driver. As the bulldozer tears through the land, symbolic of the despair faced by the Yazidi community, the group is forced to move further up the river, seeking a quieter location for the ceremony.

With challenges mounting, Grandma expresses a desire to take Narin to Iraq for a proper baptism, as they have never achieved the journey to the Valley of Lalish, the holiest site for Yazidis. Meanwhile, Narin grapples with her hearing loss, a result of a rare genetic illness. Grandma reassures her that love endures beyond loss, emphasizing the importance of memory and identity within their cultural narrative. Amidst rising tensions and the poignant weight of their shared history, Narin's baptism embodies both a personal and

communal hope against the backdrop of an uncertain future. The baptism remains incomplete, yet its significance in acknowledging both connection and loss reverberates through the pain of their reality.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

The Ancient Mesopotamians viewed mountains as living entities, serving as a bridge between the earth and sky, with one of the oldest words related to them being "hursag," meaning mountain. Sinjar, the tallest peak in the region, is essential to the Yazidi faith, representing sanctuary for the persecuted. It is adorned by the Sharfadin Temple, an ancient structure of pale yellow stone, emphasizing the holiness of its landscape.

As chaos unfolds across the barren terrain, desperate families ascend the mountain, each member burdened with fatigue and grief. Among them, a grandmother supports her granddaughter Narin, administering the last drops of water. The sky, devoid of mercy, casts down unrelenting heat, with the sun violently scorching those seeking refuge. When water runs out, the elderly, weakened by thirst, succumb first, leaving a landscape of pain and suffering.

Nightfall brings a stark temperature drop. The family gathers for warmth, and the grandmother's determination shines as she comforts Narin, instructing her to connect her feelings to water as a form of emotional release. Meanwhile, rumors of American aid begin to circulate, but the desperate families see little to no help.

Desperate for survival, the grandmother sends boys to fetch water from a nearby fountain, only for them to become victims of ISIS gunfire upon their return. Amidst the growing sense of doom, the grandmother decides to seek water herself, driven by love and desperation. Using a forked branch, she believes she can discover an underground spring, but her search is perilous.

As she wades further into danger, fatigued and alone, she feels a coldness signal the presence of water beneath the parched earth. However, her hope is shattered upon the realization that she is being watched by ISIS militants, who mock her efforts. In her moment of dread, a chilling voice calls out—Narin has bravely followed her grandmother, putting them both at risk amidst the looming threat of violence. This moment encapsulates the fragility of their situation, as survival becomes a shared hope against insurmountable odds.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames/Tigris, 1876

In the chapter, Arthur prepares for his return to Nineveh, marked by a prevailing heaviness due to the absence of a sponsor and the emotional struggle of leaving his family, especially his twins, who feel his departure keenly. As he navigates their sorrow, their innocence is poignantly captured in his daughter's embrace and his son's drawing, which symbolizes the boy's understanding of their father's journey as both noble and dangerous.

Tensions also flare between Arthur and Mabel, his wife. She confronts him about his decision to travel so soon, revealing her deep-seated resentment over his apparent prioritization of work over family. Arthur defends his choice passionately, expressing a deep connection to the ancient tablets he studies, asserting that his scholarly pursuits are vital to him. Nevertheless, Mabel remains unswayed, her accusations of infidelity suggesting a fracture in their relationship. Despite this emotional turmoil, Arthur feels compelled to fulfill his responsibilities as an archaeologist.

On arrival in Constantinople, the atmosphere is fraught with unrest heightened by the recent death of the sultan. Arthur is cautioned about the perils he might encounter on his journey toward Nineveh, including uprisings and disease. Undeterred, Arthur embarks on his expedition, intent on sending letters home to his

family, vividly recounting his experiences in hopes of bridging the physical and emotional distance.

As he nears a Yazidi village he remembers fondly, a sense of trepidation washes over him. Accompanied by his guide, Mahmoud, Arthur learns that the village has changed dramatically due to violence and devastation, a stark contrast to the memories he cherishes. Mahmoud's sorrowful demeanor reveals the extent of the tragedy that has befallen the community, which Arthur learns through shocking details of a massacre carried out by the local leaders, leaving him reeling as he contemplates the loss of friends and culture.

The massacre is an atrocious act that, while buried in the past, haunts Arthur's current existence. It forces him to confront not only the fragility of human life but also the implications of his endeavors in archaeology. The reality of sorrow and loss clashes with his previously held convictions about his work, invoking deep introspection regarding his role in the world. His attempts to connect with the living and the dead now invoke doubt and guilt, signifying a profound shift in his life's purpose. The chapter captures Arthur's emotional upheaval, the weight of history, and his struggle with identity amidst conflicting allegiances to family, past friendships, and professional duties.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In a chic enclave of Chelsea, Zaleekhah arrives at her Uncle Malek's home, feeling a sense of estrangement. As she enters, the familiar elements of the garden evoke nostalgia, yet simultaneously highlight her disconnection. She hands over a book, "Nineveh and Its Remains," to Kareem, the doorman, before making her way upstairs past her closed childhood bedroom door.

Zaleekhah enters Uncle Malek's study, a room filled with exquisite decor and an ambiance of warmth. She peeks out the window to see her Uncle and Aunt with Lily, their granddaughter, engaging tenderly with each other, which evokes mixed emotions in her. Intending to leave the book on the coffee table but drawn to an old drawer, she discovers a concerning photograph of a young girl alongside unsettling details about her condition. The image strikes a chord of alarm within her, leading her to take it with her when she abruptly leaves, feeling conflicted and anxious.

Downstairs, Kareem notices her hurried exit, mentioning that Uncle Malek was informed of her visit and would be joining her shortly. Despite his insistence, Zaleekhah asserts the necessity of her departure. Uncle Malek arrives shortly thereafter at a tattoo shop searching for a girl, a scenario that underscores his distress and desperation regarding Lily's health. When Zaleekhah confronts him, he reveals the gravity of the situation: Lily is critically ill, and time is running out for a suitable organ donor.

Uncle Malek explains that he's found a match within a group of Yazidi girls in dire circumstances, indicating that they are often overlooked and neglected. He insists that unbeknownst to most, this arrangement could ultimately benefit all involved, especially the girl, who would be rescued from a life of abuse. However, Zaleekhah is horrified, realizing his proposition amounts to organ harvesting cloaked in paternalistic rationale.

Their argument escalates as she grapples with the morality of his plans and the implications it holds for the girl and her family. Uncle Malek attempts to justify the "arrangement," but Zaleekhah remains resolute in her condemnation of the ethics behind it. Their familial bond, now strained by the revelation of his intentions, forces Zaleekhah to reckon with her uncle's choices and the deeper, darker narrative they encapsulate surrounding their family's dynamics and values.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1856

In the year before Arthur turns sixteen, his family's financial struggles force him to work extra shifts to pay the rent. Waking before dawn, he maintains a strict personal hygiene routine, washing with diluted vinegar and cold water, despite the poor quality soap provided by charity. The streets of London at these early hours are a somber sight, filled with beggars and those defeated by life, one morning revealing a man who has frozen to death on the sidewalk.

Hunger plagues Arthur daily, often beginning with a simple bread roll that he tries to accompany with a bit of butter or a warm drink at a nearby stall. He takes small joys in bringing treats home for his mother and little brother, clinging to these moments to add meaning to his existence. By night, the weariness from his labor prevents him from reading, leaving him devoid of dreams and hope. The memory of his deceased brother weighs heavily on him, while fleeting moments of beauty, like the songs of gulls or the scent of roasting chestnuts, offer him brief solace.

At the office one morning, Arthur becomes engrossed in examining illustrations for a potential English reprint of "The Works of Rabelais." His admiration for visual storytelling contrasts with his self-doubt about his artistic abilities. Suddenly, the door bursts open and a man, later revealed to be Charles Dickens, rushes in seeking Mr. Evans. Dickens expresses interest in publishing with their firm but is soon reminded of Mr. Bradbury's passing. The boy identifies himself as Mr. Bradbury's apprentice, earning Dickens' attention and heartfelt acknowledgment of Arthur's potential.

Their conversation touches on Arthur's unique perceptiveness and the challenges faced by authors under oppressive publishing contracts, with Dickens expressing a desire to change his own situation by proposing a partnership with Mr. Evans. Their agreement results in four successful novels being published, although their attempt to launch the "Daily News" fails financially.

Months later, Arthur meets a disheveled Dickens who brings an exotic treat from the Ottoman lands, revealing more about the author's personal struggles amid rumors of his infidelity. As they talk, Arthur shares his aspiration to visit Nineveh, and Dickens provides him with a gift—tailored clothing to help him experience the world beyond the limitations of his upbringing. A letter accompanying the gift encourages Arthur to seek out new horizons, hinting at a journey that promises transformation. Dickens, however, soon vanishes into his turbulent personal life, leaving Arthur with the hope of a brighter future that extends beyond London's confines.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1853–4

In the context of Arthur's life, an unexpected twist occurs when he becomes an apprentice at a prominent printing and publishing house. Initially, Arthur performs menial tasks, such as cleaning and maintaining the workspace, but soon he is permitted to engage with machinery, notably a rotary steam printing press. Although the job seems hazardous, Arthur finds it enchanting and is captivated by the notion of creating identical copies and the vibrant atmosphere of the print shop. The work environment is a stark contrast to his school experience, devoid of harsh punishments, allowing him to thrive despite the occasional ribbing from fellow employees.

Arthur is assigned to various projects, including the creation of postage stamps and exploring embossing techniques. The burgeoning demand for illustrated prints in homes and businesses excites him, making his role purposeful. Mr. Bradbury, his employer, enlightens him about the power of printed words, comparing them to free birds reaching various audiences, regardless of class.

He becomes fascinated with the art of engraving and the works of significant artists and writers, nurturing his burgeoning appreciation for beauty. Arthur's aspiration for a better life ignites when he receives his first wages; however, the lingering shadow of poverty is palpable as he walks through London, hyper-aware of his

modest existence compared to wealthier individuals.

A clash with his father upon returning home reveals familial tension as he tries to support his siblings with his earnings but faces wrath instead. Despite physical abuse, Arthur's resilience shines through as he immerses himself in reading and literature. Mr. Bradbury recognizes his potential and offers him books to borrow, igniting Arthur's quest for knowledge beyond the confines of his current life.

Arthur's desire to enter the publishing sphere evolves as he articulates his aspirations, leading to Mr. Bradbury's encouragement of his growth. This mentorship becomes a pivotal moment for Arthur, marking the beginning of his transformation from a boy in squalor to someone with dreams stitched from the pages of books, encapsulating both hope and ambition amid hardship. The narrative beautifully interweaves themes of aspiration, beauty, and the transformative power of literature, setting the stage for Arthur's journey.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1872

In 1872, Arthur finds himself on a mound in Nineveh, surveying the chaotic remnants of ancient archaeology where local people have scavenged stones from historic walls. He oversees thirty laborers who toil beneath the relentless sun, their sounds reminiscent of a speeding train, creating a steady rhythm of excavation. However, the harsh realities of their work weigh upon him, as he worries about the dwindling funds to pay the laborers. Despite the exhaustion, Arthur retreats to a makeshift tent during the heat of the day to study cuneiform tablets, driven by the determination to recover lost literary treasures.

His curiosity leads him to discover remnants of an ancient boatyard, hinting at forgotten harbors beneath the parched landscape. Once a thriving trade hub, the area is now covered by time's passing and human neglect. Arthur reflects on the historical significance of the region, particularly on the initial discoveries made in Ashurbanipal's palace, where tablets were overshadowed by the glamour of statues, leading to their mismanagement and neglect.

He learns that artefacts unearthed have often suffered damage during earlier excavations due to chaotic methods and a lack of care. The rivalry between French and British teams compels them to rush their findings to Europe, feeding an insatiable desire for Mesopotamian antiquities, intensifying their competition. The tragic incident of an attacked transport ship reveals the peril in retrieving historical treasures, as the artefacts destined for Europe sink into the Tigris River.

Arthur, feeling a mix of humility and confusion, ponders the legacy of past civilizations. He contemplates the ephemerality of grandeur, realizing that behind every triumph lies a neglected side steeped in brutality. Each evening, he returns to the Yazidi village, forming bonds with its inhabitants, particularly with Leila, the faqra, who shares enchanting stories and music. Her presence captivates him, pulling him into a narrative that thrives solely through oral tradition—an intriguing contrast to his scholarly pursuits of written texts. Arthur's evenings merge with Leila's tales of water, drawing him deeper into the Yazidis' vibrant cultural fabric, forging connections and insights that enrich his understanding of their heritage amidst the remnants of ancient civilizations.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1852

In the year 1852, Arthur, a clever and eccentric boy, grows up in the impoverished Sews and Slums beside the River Thames. By age five, he has learned the details about all his neighbors, even picking up Yiddish from a Jewish–Russian family at eight, along with an ability to replicate the sounds and sights of his community with remarkable precision. Enrolled in a ragged school aimed at educating destitute children, Arthur finds himself among peers who come from backgrounds of poverty, crime, and neglect. The

conditions at the school are grim, and students often leave, seeking better alternatives, yet Arthur persists, benefiting from the daily food and the chance to learn.

Despite being overshadowed by more boisterous classmates, Arthur, now twelve, is hardworking and dedicated, quickly mastering lessons and assisting his teacher, Mr. Hopkin. His introverted nature and tendency to daydream, paired with his disheveled appearance, often render him invisible. One fateful day, while arriving late due to taking care of his unwell mother, Arthur is confronted by a strict substitute teacher. This teacher, dismissing Arthur's explanation about his absence, belittles him and prepares to discipline him for asserting that a math assignment had been miscalculated.

After enduring a physically punishing encounter with the headmaster, Arthur's intelligence is inadvertently acknowledged, revealing his exceptional memory and aptitude for learning. Although he faces severe punishment, Arthur conveys to the headmaster a memory from his past, showcasing not only his academic ability but also an awareness of the world – a world beyond the slums where history and culture exist.

As Arthur leaves the school for the last time, he grapples with fear and hunger but finds himself inexplicably drawn to the British Museum. There, he is captivated by the sight of immense stone sculptures being transported, historical artifacts that embody the ancient civilization of King Ashurbanipal. His encounter with Dr. Samuel Birch, the museum's Keeper of Oriental Antiquities, leaves him with a profound sense of curiosity and a taste for knowledge, igniting aspirations beyond his current impoverished state. The chapter closes with Arthur feeling a kinship with the bound stone beasts as they, too, struggle with their new existence in an unfamiliar land.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In the chapter titled "HZALEEKHAH," set in 2018 by the River Thames, Zaleekhah meets her cousin Helen at a café in Russell Square. The ambiance, filled with lush greenery and vibrant flowers, contrasts starkly with the distressing news Helen shares: her young daughter requires a kidney transplant. Zaleekhah expresses her sympathy, and they discuss the challenges of finding a donor while reflecting on familial support. Helen's husband is returning early to offer assistance, but the conversation continually circles back to the looming transplant issue.

Amidst this, Zaleekhah is struck by her cousin's weariness and laments her own unending melancholy. Helen mentions that Zaleekhah no longer seems happy, prompting Zaleekhah to reflect on her own struggles with depression and sleeplessness, feelings she decides not to share with her cousin. The dialogue shifts when Helen praises Zaleekhah's friend Nen, revealing their shared appreciation for familial complexity.

As Zaleekhah departs the café, she's consumed by thoughts of her conversation and feels ashamed of her own troubles compared to Helen's plight. This prompts an introspective moment where she acknowledges a pressing need for change in her life. She then visits a tattoo shop looking for Nen but learns she's at the British Museum.

Finding Nen sketching a *lamassu* at the museum, Zaleekhah admires her friend's unique style, which sharply contrasts the more formal attire of her colleagues. Their conversation touches on the therapeutic value of ancient artifacts, their cultural significance, and the heavy burdens of mental health. Nen shares how her interest in Ancient Mesopotamia provided solace during her own tumultuous journey with mental health.

The discussion deepens as they explore the complexities of history, power, and personal struggles, with Nen using her experiences with alcohol as a metaphor for seeking refuge. The synergy of their thoughts leads to a shared understanding of feeling lost in life's currents.

The chapter culminates with Zaleekhah contemplating getting a tattoo, symbolizing a turning point, empowered by her connection with Nen as she leaves the shop with a significant mark on her body—a simple

yet profound representation of water, echoing her desire for change and healing.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1857–8

In the chapter titled "By the River Thames, 1857–8," the story follows Arthur, referred to as King Arthur of the Sewers and Slums, as he starts his role at the British Museum. With a newfound purpose, he is introduced to the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities and his assistant, Edward, who is everything Arthur is not: well-educated, fit, and from a wealthy background. Edward's polite demeanor contrasts sharply with Arthur's self-consciousness, marked by his lack of formal education and the state of his attire.

Upon entering the museum, the enormity of the task ahead is daunting; Arthur must work with over thirty-five thousand clay tablets from Mesopotamia, many of which are damaged and fragmented. Despite expectations that he would soon quit, Arthur returns day after day, perceiving order where others see chaos. This work is not just labor for him; it becomes an invigorating puzzle as he aims to uncover the stories contained within the fragments, propelling him to delve into the ancient past.

Arthur's fascination intensifies as he begins to relate to the original creators of the tablets, envisioning their struggles and experiences. He finds humorous and poignant inscriptions that reveal human emotions and frustrations, indicating the timeless universality of human experience. Each successful deciphering of a tablet becomes an enlightening moment for Arthur, and the mundane records of transactions transform into a miraculous link to ancient lives.

As Arthur perseveres with these tablets, the British Museum also undergoes a transformation, shifting from a chaotic collection of items to a more structured and academically focused institution. Arthur, at first an outsider, discovers that the field of Mesopotamian studies lacks the hierarchical structure of his peers' fields, offering him a rare opportunity to contribute and grow in knowledge equally.

However, challenges arise; his home life deteriorates, leading to eviction notices and cramped living conditions. As Arthur becomes increasingly disheveled, concerns about his job security mount. His parents are overwhelmed by their struggles, exacerbated by his father's issues with drinking and his mother's declining health.

Amidst the personal turmoil, Arthur makes a fortuitous discovery in a tablet that hints at poetry—an extraordinary revelation that inspires a deeper dedication to his work. This newfound passion helps him secure a full-time position at the museum, where he vows to piece together and preserve the voices of the past. In doing so, he finds his purpose: tending to what history has discarded, much like the flowing River Thames that symbolizes continuity and remembrance .

H2O: NARIN, ZALEEKHAH, ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 2018

In the year 2018, an imminent flooding is about to commence by the River Tigris as the dam's floodgates are opened. The once barren landscape, likened to a fallen creature, is slowly being transformed as the reservoir will eventually rise. Zaleekhah, filled with sorrow, reflects on the impending submersion of Castrum Kefa, an ancient walled city that will soon be lost beneath the water.

As Zaleekhah and her companion, Nen, contemplate their surroundings, Zaleekhah shares her thoughts on soft-shelled turtles displaced by habitat destruction. The conversation shifts to her family, revealing her deep-seated concerns. Estranged from her uncle and aunt after making a tough choice about organ donation for her friend Helen, Zaleekhah grapples with guilt. Despite their estrangement, she is determined to support Helen in finding another donor, underscoring her sense of responsibility and commitment to her friend.

They make their way to an old cemetery where a girl named Narin sits alone, mourning her ancestors. Purchased from a dealer tied to ISIS for \$3,200, Narin embodies the plight of Yazidi captives. As Zaleekhah and Nen watch her from a distance, they ponder the emotional scars she bears and the distant hope of recovery.

Narin, absorbed in her own thoughts, places flowers on her family's graves. She feels the absence of her beloved Grandma Besma and remains uncertain about her father's fate. Anticipating a reunion with her relatives in Germany, she also senses the possibility of moving to London with Zaleekhah and Nen, albeit unknowingly of the complications that lie ahead.

The women finally approach her, opening up a faint glimmer of trust within Narin when she notices Zaleekhah's wrist tattoo, reminiscent of her grandma's. The trio heads back to their hotel, where they come across a peculiar tombstone inscription that sparks a moment of intrigue.

The narrative reflects on the transient nature of time and cultural identity, as tomorrow will witness the drowning of historic Mesopotamia, leaving only memories. The cycle of water resonates through its transformation, insinuating the possibility of rebirth amidst loss, as a snowflake ultimately falls upon an innocent child in London, symbolizing an eternal connection to the rivers that endlessly flow.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In 2018, Zaleekhah, a young woman, walks along the Chelsea Embankment, carrying a damp cardboard box filled with books, a china teapot, mismatched cups, clothes, and a Tiffany-style lamp. As rain drizzles down, she is oblivious to getting wet, her chestnut curls and dark brown eyes reflecting her ancestral heritage. She moves past the luxurious flats and recalls a time when this area was filled with slums, now transformed into desirable property with views of the Thames, which she finds uninteresting compared to the nearby houseboats.

These houseboats, moored at Cheyne Pier, vary in size, with each bearing a unique name. Zaleekhah is set to move into her new home on one of these boats, an adventure that feels surreal. Known as Dr. Z. Clarke in her professional life, Zaleekhah has had a lifelong struggle with her name. Often mispronounced and misrepresented, she feels stung by a colleague's casual dismissal of it, opting for a nickname instead.

Zaleekhah is named after Zuleikha, a figure often depicted negatively in history, representing the complexities of desire and punishment. Unlike the seductive Zuleikha, Zaleekhah feels mundane, eschewing vanity for comfort. The name symbolizes both her family's rich cultural heritage and the burdens of expectation. Her mother's choice connects her to their roots in Mesopotamia, while her father humbly accepted it.

As she approaches her boat, Zaleekhah reflects on her difficult breakup and emotional pain masked in her scientific pursuits. Her husband's remarks insinuated she would be a bad mother, a comment that hit deep, underscoring the pressures of familial expectations. Now living alone on the houseboat, she grapples with feelings of failure – not just in her marriage but in life, echoing the immigrant experience of her ancestors.

Once inside her new home, with minimal furnishings, she observes the dilapidated conditions and considers spontaneity in her choice of abode. Zaleekhah's thoughts turn darker, revealing a contemplation of her existence. Use of water as a metaphor for her own struggles surfaces repeatedly. As tears mingle with the Thames currents outside her boat, she considers her own mortality, planning a quiet end to her life in a month, wishing to reconnect with a familial sense of belonging, yet feeling the weight of disconnection.

Zaleekhah, consumed by inner turmoil and societal expectations, hovers between life and a desire for retreat, facing the abyss of her identity and purpose with resignation.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1871

On a warm June day in 1871, Arthur walks briskly through Piccadilly, preoccupied with his thoughts and clutching a scented silk handkerchief. He has recently started growing a beard, adjusting to this new aspect of himself. His pocket holds a perfume he formulated from an ancient Mesopotamian recipe by a female parfumer named Tapputi, a blend that reflects his dedication to both his work and his personal style, albeit at a high cost. Despite his years of studying tablets at the British Museum, he has yet to receive a promotion, emphasizing his sense of frustration.

Arthur's thoughts frequently return to profound loneliness, exacerbated by the absence of his family. His younger brother lives in Yorkshire, having distanced himself from London, and he has not seen his mother in four years after she was institutionalized for mental distress. The fabric of his family life feels shredded, mirroring the fragmented state of his professional recognition.

As he moves past St James's Church, he is caught in the noise of the city, where vendors shout and the clatter of carriages resounds. A newspaper boy's shout jolts him: "The author is dead! Mr. Dickens has gone to meet his Maker!" Arthur buys a paper and is struck by the poignancy of the news, reflecting on the fleeting nature of extraordinary lives. He contrasts the end of Dickens's life with joyful news from the London Zoo—a new calf born to the hippopotamuses, symbolizing life amid death.

Upon arriving at the British Museum, Arthur immerses himself in his research, locking his door to shut out the world. His solitude shifts the next day as he, now invigorated, impulsively calls for a meeting with trustees and colleagues, an unusual move for the typically reticent Arthur. He shares a newfound discovery from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, revealing a story of a catastrophic flood and alluding to parallels with the biblical Noah's Ark. His impassioned revelation gets met with enthusiasm, conviction igniting within him as a sense of importance swells.

The public's interest burgeons around his discovery, drawing Arthur into an unexpected spotlight. The prime minister, William Ewart Gladstone, invites him to lecture at the Society of Biblical Archaeology, though Arthur feels ill-equipped to handle such an esteemed platform. On the night before the event, he struggles with sleeplessness, petrified but determined to make his mark.

During the lecture, he elaborates on Mesopotamian history and its civilizations, culminating in his interpretation of the Flood Tablet. The success of his presentation leads to genuine applause and admiration, yet he is overwhelmed by the newfound public scrutiny and media attention, culminating in various sensational articles detailing his life and achievements—some flattering, others distorting. Despite the accolades, he feels the weight of nerves and vulnerability, particularly about his humble beginnings, leaving him feeling exposed amidst the bustling city that thrum with discussions about him.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1854

In the sweltering afternoon of August 1854, London exudes a fetid atmosphere as noxious odors from tanneries, factories, and cesspools permeate the air. The Thames, once a vibrant river, now sluggishly carries flotsam and reflects the city's decay, severely affecting the health of its inhabitants. Arthur, a concerned individual, takes measures to protect himself and his family from the miasma. He walks briskly to his office and home, covering his mouth with a damp cloth, and desperately opens windows to allow fresh air into their poorly ventilated basement flat.

On a particularly hot Thursday, after an early stoppage at the printing press, Arthur navigates through the muck of the streets, noting the overwhelming number of horses and the waste they leave behind. Despite the

adversity and dangers, Arthur is determined to provide little treats for his family. He buys his mother a pair of gloves, rationalizing he might forgo treats for his brothers. After picking up water from a reliable pump, he returns home to find joy in a new book he has acquired, **The Poetical Works of John Keats**.

However, the next day, Arthur's world crumbles when one of his younger brothers falls ill, suffering from vomiting and diarrhoea. Despite efforts to combat the sickness, it becomes evident that cholera has invaded their home. Arthur takes on the responsibility of caring for his family while harboring a growing dread stemming from the water he had brought home. As the cholera epidemic unfolds, Arthur learns of its source and suspects that the water he provided was tainted, leading to his brother's tragic condition.

As authorities attempt to resolve the crisis through misguided actions focused on addressing miasma, a doctor named John Snow uncovers that the cholera epidemic is waterborne, primarily stemming from the contaminated pump on Broad Street. Despite his attempts to warn city officials, they dismiss his findings. As the death toll soars, Arthur grapples with the harrowing realization that he may have inadvertently caused the illness of his brother, highlighting the grim connection between human actions and the health crisis brought forth by the polluted Thames. Ultimately, the narrative underscores the need for significant reforms in how London manages waste and water, recognizing that humans are at fault in poisoning their own source of life .

Note to the Reader

The chapter opens with a heartfelt reflection by the author on their maternal grandmother, who, despite being unaware of Thales of Miletus, recognized water as a vital principle of life. The author recounts how literature ultimately bridged their understanding of water's intrinsic mysteries, which represent not only the flow of life but also the desiccation of ancient landscapes. The narrative shifts to Mesopotamia's historical context, where the once-thriving Tigris and Euphrates rivers, now drying, expose ancient settlements, marking a dire reality for water-stressed nations.

The figure of King Arthur of the Sewers and Slums emerges, a fictional representation inspired by the once-renowned George Smith, a self-taught Assyriologist pivotal in decoding cuneiform and discovering the **Epic of Gilgamesh**. The author's homage to Smith and other scholars underscores their extensive research, drawing from works like **The Buried Book** by David Damrosch and **The Ark before Noah** by Irving Finkel, which highlight water's significance both literally and metaphorically.

Various historical characters and events interweave throughout, such as the vivid accounts of the Yazidis and the devastating mentalities that led to massacres and the tragic genocide faced by this community. The author emphasizes the complex, nuanced relationship with the cultural heritage of the Yazidis and the broader implications of their plight, connected thematically to the world's response—or lack thereof—toward ongoing human rights atrocities.

The author expresses gratitude to numerous scholars and survivors whose stories and resilience inform the narrative, illustrating a deep connection to the history and cultures represented. The chapter closes with a poignant image of Thales observing water, emphasizing the continuity of life through the ages and the shared experience of humanity represented by a single droplet connecting us all, transcending time and space. This reflective note encapsulates the themes of interconnectedness, history, and the weight of cultural narratives within the flow of water.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1872

In an evocative scene by the River Tigris in 1872, Leila accompanies Arthur to his excavation site, sharing her beliefs about spiritual connections within the Yazidi culture. She speaks of the concept of "axiretê," or

the next world, emphasizing that every Yazidi should have a spiritual sibling to rely on. Leila shares a playful thought about her own "heavenly sister" living upstream, whom she humorously suggests would transform into water after death to meet her again. Arthur, however, feels discomfort about the discussion of death, particularly after Leila's unsettling divination. He struggles with his emotions, wishing to comfort her but restrained by the strict Yazidi codes.

Arthur reveals to Leila his own loss, having had a younger brother die from contaminated water—a tragedy he hasn't forgiven himself for. This shared sorrow deepens their connection as Leila listens with compassion. The narrative quickly shifts as Arthur receives an urgent summons from the Pasha of Mosul, which he must heed. At the pasha's residence, he faces scrutiny for his association with the Yazidis, labeled as "heathens" and "devil-worshippers." Despite the pasha's mocking demeanor, Arthur defends the Yazidi people, indicating his desire to learn their language from the children in the village.

The pasha, eager to exert authority, questions Arthur's motives for the excavation and insinuates that he seeks not just a poem but also power and fame. The arrival of the high qadi intensifies the atmosphere, as the qadi expresses disdain for the Yazidis and coldly explains that lying to them is permissible. Arthur's heart races with concern for the Yazidis as he senses the danger encroaching upon them.

Disturbed by the pasha's words, Arthur returns to the village after being summoned, contemplating whether to share his troubling experiences with the sheikh's family. Later, while examining his newly unearthed tablets, he discovers a vital piece of the Flood Tablet, igniting hope for his research. As he contemplates his success deep into the night, his thoughts stray to Leila, whom he realizes he has feelings for, resulting in an introspective monologue about love and connection. The chapter culminates in a poignant moment as Leila, in a dreamlike state, kisses Arthur on the cheek, leaving him both elated and apprehensive about their delicate bond.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In "H Zaleekhah," set by the River Thames in 2018, Zaleekhah navigates Great Russell Street, distracted by the hum of rush hour traffic. She had visited a gallery supported by the Malek family, hoping to see her cousin Helen, but finds she is not there. While walking back, she recalls her neighbors mentioning the owner of a nearby houseboat and unknowingly heads towards a tattoo parlour named "The Forgotten Goddess."

Surprised by the clean and inviting atmosphere inside the tattoo shop—featuring a stylish emerald sofa and warm decorative touches—Zaleekhah soon meets the owner, a tall and charming man who mistakes her for a potential tattoo client. Zaleekhah identifies herself as the tenant of the houseboat, only to learn that the actual owner, Nen, is downstairs.

When Nen appears, she greets Zaleekhah warmly, sharing that she has five younger brothers, which drives an engaging conversation about family dynamics. Zaleekhah's explanation of her solitary childhood leads to a mutual appreciation of the meaningful connections in life. As the conversation meanders, Zaleekhah mentions a leaky kitchen sink, prompting Nen's sincere concern and willingness to address the issue.

Nen offers Zaleekhah a unique coffee brewed with dried lavender, which she enjoys, intrigued by the conversation about the cultural significance of cuneiform tattoos, which are crafted in a script thousands of years old. Their dialogue flows naturally, with Nen sharing stories from her explorations of the Thames, including treasures and curiosities unearthed during her mudlarking adventures.

As Zaleekhah prepares to leave, Nen expresses her surprise at Zaleekhah's renting a houseboat, suggesting that life on the water may bring unexpected wonders. Zaleekhah finds herself intrigued but uncertain, recalling a childhood book that invoked a different life. Finally, she leaves, holding a slab of dough marked with her name in cuneiform, leaving behind hints of new connections and the possibility of a fresh chapter in

her life as night falls over the houseboat.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1872

In the chapter titled "By the River Tigris, 1872," the narrative unfolds during the Yazidi festival "Çar?ema Sor," known as 'Red Wednesday,' marking the arrival of spring and new beginnings. The villagers of Zêrav engage in traditional celebrations by painting eggs, cleaning homes, and making candles from sheep fat. The atmosphere is festive, yet Arthur, an outsider from England, finds himself in a cultural juxtaposition, as he explains that his New Year comes in the dead of winter, eliciting polite curiosity from the local children.

As the celebration reaches its peak on the seventh sunset, Arthur is invited to the sheikh's house, an unusual honor for an outsider. He observes as the villagers lay out food, and the scent of rosemary and sage fills the air. Among the attendees is Leila, a faqra, who begins to perform ritualistic divination with her daf. The scene escalates when Leila enters a trance and sings a haunting melody that transcends time. Arthur is captivated yet deeply unsettled when she starts uttering ominous prophecies that predict a massacre of the Yazidi people.

Her intense behavior shifts to despair as she cries out "Firman," which not only signifies permission but ominously conveys a license for violence against her community. The chilling specifics of the prophecy detail impending destruction and loss, including the obliteration of sacred sites and a warning to escape to the mountains when the dangerous forces arrive.

As the moment lingers in silence, the children return to the joy of the festivities, unaware of the darkness shared in their brief absence. Arthur, unable to sleep that night, grapples with a heavy sense of foreboding and the burdens of history that weigh upon the Yazidis. The remnants of Nineveh haunt him as he considers the painful truth of prophetic knowledge. He wonders whether it is better to remain in blissful ignorance rather than face the grim realities of their doomed future. The chapter closes with an eerie feeling of impending change, mirrored in nature around him, suggesting a looming catastrophe on the horizon.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

In a black cab arranged by Uncle Malek, Zaleekhah reflects on London as she watches the cityscape blur by, viewing it not as a realm of historical grandeur but as a living entity shaped by its rivers, both visible and buried. The River Fleet, once a vital waterway, is now hidden beneath bricks, having endured decades of neglect, serving as a metaphor for forgotten memories. Similarly, the River Effra flows unnoticed under urban structures, while the Tyburn, a former source of fresh salmon, is now lost beneath the city's infrastructure, and the Westbourne runs unseen through the Sloane Square Tube station. All of these rivers represent the hidden histories of the city, echoing Zaleekhah's introspection.

Upon arriving at the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology in Bermondsey, she steps into an office environment filled with typical bureaucracy, devoid of personal touch but designed for collaboration. She finds her office marked with her name, symbolizing the identity she has reshaped through marriage. As she contemplates her life, she grapples with feelings of her marriage disintegrating—her husband seemed to be the center of her universe, yet their relationship had steadily frayed.

Zaleekhah recalls her late mentor, Professor Berenberg, who passionately researched the concept of 'aquatic memory'—the idea that water holds memories of the substances it's come in contact with. Having faced career-ending ridicule for his unconventional theories, Berenberg became a ghost in Zaleekhah's life; she seldom voices his name, but his influence lingers in her thoughts. After his death, Zaleekhah secretly continued his experiments, exploring the validity of his ideas, but tensions with her husband arose when he

discovered her obsession, which he deemed a waste of time.

The clash reveals deeper fractures in their marriage, focusing on Zaleekhah's unresolved feelings for Berenberg—an emotional complexity her husband couldn't accept. After a heart-wrenching confrontation about her past, Zaleekhah leaves their home, taking refuge in the lab for the night. Surrounded by memories and reminders of lost connections, she reflects on her shortcomings in communication and emotionally prepares for the path ahead, haunted by the specter of Berenberg's legacy.

As she drifts into sleep on a sofa in her office, she feels the presence of the rivers of time—unseen yet potent, representing both lost opportunities and the relentless flow of life and science that persists, with or without her engagement. Zaleekhah acknowledges her attraction to those driven by dreams larger than themselves, despite the perilous cost that such commitment often entails.