

Ask Me No Questions Study Guide

Ask Me No Questions by Marina Tamar Budhos

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Contents

Ask Me No Questions Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Section 1: Chapter 1.....	5
Section 2: Chapter 2.....	8
Section 3: Chapters 3 and 4.....	10
Section 4: Chapter 5.....	12
Section 5: Chapter 6.....	14
Section 6: Chapters 7 and 8.....	16
Section 7: Chapter 9.....	18
Section 8: Chapter 10.....	20
Section 9: Chapter 11.....	22
Section 10: Chapter 12.....	25
Section 11: Chapters 13 and 14.....	27
Section 12: Chapter 15.....	29
Section 13: Chapter 16.....	31
Section 14: Chapters 17 and 18.....	33
Section 15: Endnote.....	35
Characters.....	36
Objects/Places.....	40
Themes.....	42
Style.....	44
Quotes.....	47
Topics for Discussion.....	51



Plot Summary

"Ask Me No Questions" by Marina Budhos is the story of a family of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and the trials they face in America after the tragedy of 9/11. When Abba is detained by the INS for violating his visa, Nadira and Aisha attempt to save their father as they struggled with the daily challenges of finding their place in a country they now realize is not their home. "Ask Me No Questions" is a heartrending tale of the horrors one family is forced to endure after the U. S. tightens immigration regulations following 9/11.

After the Hossains are denied asylum in Canada, Abba is arrested for violating his visa upon their return to America, so he sends Nadira and Aisha back to school in Queens, NY. Aisha tells her younger sister that they are alone now and must work together, but Nadira refuses because she has always been jealous of her perfect sister. Upon their return to school, Mr. Friedlander tells Aisha that he has arranged a college interview at Barnard for her. Uncle scares Nadira by telling her that becoming legal will not make people look at them differently, so when Aisha tells Nadira she is a candidate for valedictorian, Nadira tells her it does not matter since they will not be able to stay in America anyway. Nadira feels guilty for making her sister cry when she learns Abba is being held on suspicion of being involved with an illegal organization because he donated money to a local mosque. When Nadira and Aisha visit their lawyer, Mr. Rashid, he tells them they must wait and see, so Aisha tells Nadira they need to handle it themselves, but Nadira believes this is impossible.

Lonely at school the next day, Nadira realizes Aisha is the only one who can understand and she tells her sister that maybe they can figure it out together. The sisters compose a letter to the head of immigration about how hard Abba works and about how the \$3000 that he gave to the mosque was savings for his daughters' college tuition. When the police arrest Uncle for his expired visa, Aisha blames herself for being unable to convince the police to release him, and she becomes even more depressed when no one responds to her letter, beginning to act strange and avoid her friends. Uncle is released, but he tells Taslima about how he was humiliated. Nadira accompanies Aisha to her Barnard interview, and talking to an Asian girl while Aisha is at the interview, Nadira sees herself at college for the first time. Back at school, Mr. Friedlander calls Nadira to the office to tell her that Aisha missed her interview at Barnard, and when Nadira asks Aisha why she did not go to the interview, Aisha admits she was scared; she thinks that maybe they cannot hurt her if she does not want so much.

Learning that Abba's preliminary hearing is coming up, Nadira finds a mistake on his papers, but deciding she needs something bigger to save him, she calls Tareq to buy a fake ID but changes her mind as she recalls how Abba taught her to always choose right. Nadira takes a bus to Burlington and joins Ma for Abba's preliminary hearing in order to show the judge that Abba's name is spelled incorrectly and there is a case of mistaken identity. The judge releases Abba and promises that Immigration will hear the Hossains' final appeal for residency. Aisha helps Taslima run away to marry Tim since Uncle and Auntie are returning to Dhaka.



Abba becomes depressed because he sees no future for his family in America, and agreeing, Aisha throws out her college acceptance letters when the Hossains receive their letter scheduling their residency hearing, saying there is no point since she will not be here. Nadira insists that Aisha needs to make people see her instead of blending in so much, so the girls talk to Mr. Friedlander about everything that has been going on. During her valedictorian speech, Aisha admits she is an illegal immigrant, tells her peers about her family's trials and claims she wants the same thing they want, a future. At the Hossains' final appeal for residency, the judge grants Abba permission to file the paperwork again, guaranteeing it will be processed correctly and accepted this time. Abba, Ma, Nadira, and Aisha go home.



Section 1: Chapter 1

Section 1: Chapter 1 Summary

"Ask Me No Questions" by Marina Budhos is the story of a family of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and the trials they face in America after the tragedy of 9/11. When Abba is detained by the INS for violating his visa, Nadira and Aisha attempt to save their father as they struggled with the daily challenges of finding their place in a country they now realize is not their home. "Ask Me No Questions" is a heartrending tale of the horrors one family is forced to endure after the U. S. tightens immigration regulations following 9/11.

Nadira feels like she is dreaming as her family drives toward Canada to apply for asylum. She worries about things like green cards, special registration and deportation, though she does not fully understand them. Aisha, Nadira's older sister, cries as they pass through Boston because she has always wanted to attend Harvard, but Ma assures Aisha she will get into a good school in Canada. Nadira has never gotten along with Aisha, and she feels that it is difficult to have a perfect sister. When they stop at a diner to eat, Ma worries about what they will do if Canada denies them asylum, causing Abba to remind her that it is possible since no one guarantees asylum. The family knows they will have to return to America if Canada turns them down, and Abba will probably be arrested for having an expired visa. After that, they may be permitted to apply for residency again, or they may be deported back to Bangladesh. Nadira is jealous as her sister cheers her parents, as she always does, by talking to Ma about the restaurant they will open in Toronto and asking Abba to tell a story. Abba tells the familiar story about stealing a piece of his father's fine stationary to write a poem for Ma when they first met. Ma looks at Aisha in gratitude, increasing Nadira's jealousy. Recalling when her family first arrived at the New York airport, Nadira notes they were nervous because they planned to stay past their visa expiration, as many Bangladeshis do. Abba began making money as a waiter, but for a long time, they lived so they could move at a moment's notice, "floating, not sure where we belong" (p. 8), as they always have lived. Eventually, he relaxed and bought furniture, and they went for many years without thinking of Abba's expired visa for "you forget you don't really belong here, that this really isn't your home" (page 8). Assuming they would get the paperwork right someday, they kept going, even after 9/11 when they heard how bad things had gotten from friends. As things worsen and they hear about Homeland Security and the Patriot Act, they begin to see themselves as dangerous, like others see them. Taslima, Nadira's cousin, dates a white law student, Tim, and Tim explains the new registration law mandating all men over eighteen from certain Muslim countries register, but those who register are arrested or deported. Deciding he wants to live in a place where he can hold his head high, Abba decides to flee to Canada for asylum. He charts a course to Canada and the Hossains pack and begin driving toward Canada to apply for asylum.



Section 1: Chapter 1 Analysis

It feels like a dream as the Hossain family drives up Interstate 95. Aisha and Nadira sit in the back, and Abba drives while Ma hunches against the passenger door. Abba can barely see through the snow, and though Ma used to joke about snow, "jokes lie still in our throats" (p. 1). As they drive up the east coast, Nadira thinks of special registration, green cards, deportation, residency and asylum; she does not understand these words, but she knows her family is driving to the Canadian border to apply for asylum. They worry about Abba's expired license if they are stopped and about Ma standing out so much in her traditional Bangladeshi garb. When they reach Boston, Aisha cries because she has hoped to study medicine at Harvard since the family still lived in Dhaka. In Dhaka, Abba boasted of Aisha's good grades, and he feared nothing then. Sometimes, Nadira hates "being the one who has to trail after Aisha. But sometimes it feels safe. I'm nestled in the back, not seen" (p. 2). As Ma assures Aisha she will get into a top-rate school in Canada, Aisha kicks Nadira for complaining Canada is too cold. Aisha and Nadira have never really hit it off. Aisha has always know what she wanted, and at the age of eight, she showed Abba an article about a Bangladeshi girl who succeeded after going to university in America, back when Abba was unsure about immigrating. Aisha always says the perfect thing, and Nadira feels it is difficult to have a perfect sister. After stopping at a gas station in Portland, Maine, the Hossains stop at a small diner to eat, and Nadira notes that her family rarely goes to restaurants because Ma fears misusing English. Now, as Ma worries what they will do if Canada turns them down, Abba tells her it is possible because no one guarantees asylum. They have gone over the risks many times and know that if Canada turns them down, they will need to reenter the U. S. Border and Abba will likely be arrested since their visas have run out long ago. They do not know what may happen: maybe they will get U. S. residency one day, or maybe they will be sent back to Bangladesh. Though Abba insists this is for the best because Aisha must start university in the fall, he sounds unsure. Aisha comforts Ma by talking about how they will open a restaurant in Toronto, and Abba relaxes when Aisha asks him to tell a story. Nadira is jealous of how her sister always manages to cheer their parents up, and she thinks she should have asked Abba for a story since she is always the one who listens to the elders' stories about Bangladesh. Though she was only seven years old when they left, she can almost see her birth country when she listens to the stories. Now, Abba tells a comforting story about the stationery his grandfather received after working as a printer. It was the best stationery the printer made and had Grandfather's name printed on it, but he never used it. When Abba met Ma, he stole a sheet to copy a poem for her. Grandfather was furious and punished him, and Abba was off to a poor start with Ma who thought he was a rich man who could write poetry. Ma is pleased by the story, and as she looks gratefully at Aisha, Nadira is jealous. Nadira recalls when her family first arrived at the New York airport and how they were nervous because they planned to stay past their visa expiration, though many Bangladeshis in America are illegal and buy fake social security numbers so they can work. Abba worked various jobs until he got a job as a waiter in a restaurant on 6th Street in Manhattan, and then, he brought money home every night. The Hossains have always lived like this, "floating, not sure where we belong" (p. 8). In the beginning, they lived so they could pack and move any day, but over time, Abba relaxed and bought furniture so



they lived in a dream home. The family went on year after year without thinking of Abba's expired visa; "you forget you don't really belong here, that this really isn't your home" (p. 8). They assumed they would get the paperwork right someday, and in the meantime, they kept going, as happens all the time.

Even after 9/11, the Hossains keep on going, though they hear how bad it has gotten from friends who cannot get work and think about returning to Bangladesh, but things get worse, and they feel like the air is frozen around them as they hear news about Homeland Security, the Patriot Act, Code Orange, Special Registration and the hundreds who are deported. Watching the news, they see themselves as others see them, as dangerous. One day, Nadira's cousin, Taslima's boyfriend, Tim visits and explains the new registration law. All men over the age of eighteen from certain Muslim countries, including Bangladesh, must register, but those who did were arrested or deported. When Abba hears about immigrants fleeing to Canada for asylum, he asks why wait for them to kick his family out. He wants to live in a place where he can hold his head high. One evening, Abba tells his wife and daughters to start packing, and asking Nadira to bring out a map of the northeast, he charts a course to Canada where they need to go and apply for asylum. Nadira worries what will happen if Canada does not admit her family. The next morning, they wake to see a blue Honda parked by the curb.



Section 2: Chapter 2

Section 2: Chapter 2 Summary

The Hossains are silent as they drive the last stretch toward Canada, sure they will be granted asylum. As they pass the sign announcing "Leaving the United States of America," Abba rubs his chest; leaving hurts because they were supposed to stay, become residents and be able to call America home. Reaching an officer, Abba explains his family is applying for asylum, but the officer says they are overwhelmed with immigrants and the Hossains must return to America. He warns them one of them will probably be arrested if their visas are not current, but if they can put together about \$5000 for the bond, they can try to apply for asylum in Canada again in a few weeks. Driving back to America, the Hossains show their expired visas and are sent to a low building where they wait for hours until they are told Abba is being detained and deportation proceedings may begin. He will be released if they come up with \$5000, and then they can apply for asylum in Canada. Abba sends his daughters back Auntie and Uncle's apartment to New York, insisting they cannot miss school, but Ma will wait for him at a shelter in Burlington. Abba warns his daughters not to tell anyone at school what is going on. After Abba is taken away, Nadira and Aisha help Ma buy a purple coat like what Jackie Kennedy wore, and they leave her at the shelter. Thinking about how Abba loves America and is full of trust, Nadira can hear his heart shattering as she and Aisha head toward the highway.

Section 2: Chapter 2 Analysis

The day is in full swing by the time they get back on the road, but the Hossains are silent in the car because this is the last stretch. Soon, they will leave the main highway and stop at the immigration station on the border of Vermont and Canada to ask for asylum. It will take a long time to fill out the forms, but then Canada will welcome the Hossains. Nadira has always wanted to visit New England, as well as Disney World and Las Vegas. She once saw a funny show about the EPCOT Center, but she could not laugh because she has never been there. She notes that is how one can tell the difference between immigrant children and children born in the U. S.; "we don't laugh about those places. We just want to go" (page 12). Driving slowly along the foggy road as he tries to see through the windshield, Abba rubs his chest as they pass the sign "Leaving the United States of America" because leaving hurts since they are not supposed to do this. They are supposed to stay and be able to call America home one day. As the car slows, a uniformed man asks for their passports, and Abba explains they are applying for asylum. Seeming sorry, the officer says they cannot process all the people coming through. While Ma cries quietly, Aisha asks what the officer recommends, and he advises them to return to the U. S. side. Though one of them will probably be arrested if their visas are not current, the bond is about \$5000, and if they put that together, they can come back in a few weeks and try to apply for asylum again. Abba slowly reverses. Nadira notes how long it takes to arrest a person, unlike on



television where it is very fast. After the Hossains drive to the U. S. side and show their expired visas, they are directed to a low building where they wait for hours before being told Abba will be taken into detention and deportation proceedings may begin, but he will be released if they come up with \$5000 and they can apply for asylum in Canada, though it could be weeks until they even open their files. Abba tells Nadira and Aisha they need to go home because they cannot miss school. Ma will stay at a shelter in Burlington and send for them when the paperwork is done. Nadira feels like Abba has sliced a gap between her parents and their daughters. Giving Aisha a bag of money for their upkeep, Abba tells her to go to Auntie, attend school and say nothing to anyone; Nadira understands because "that's the way it has always been. Go to school. Never let anyone know. Never" (p. 16). As Aisha cries, Abba tells her he is doing this for her, and Nadira is cut inside, wondering why it is always about Aisha's future. After the officer takes Abba away, everything happens fast. The women divide their clothes into suitcases before going to Salvation Army to find a coat for Ma. Anxious to look a certain way when she goes to court for Abba, Ma finally finds a purple coat with large buttons like what Jackie Kennedy wore since she always looked nice in public, despite her personal trials. At the shelter, Ma tells Aisha and Nadira to be good, and as Aisha drives away, Nadira thinks about Abba in jail and how he loves this country in his own way and is full of trust. She can hear his heart shattering as they head toward the highway.



Section 3: Chapters 3 and 4

Section 3: Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

In Chapter 3, Nadira explains that her family is from Bangladesh, the northeast corner of India which is laced with river. Long ago, her family lived together, going with the water when it rose, but when 1943 brought a drought, her great-grandparents moved to Dhaka, driven by famine. A few years later, the British divided Bengal in half, an act called Partition, which caused many riots between the Hindus and the Muslims. "You're only little, but you know it's there: that feeling that you never know what terror will pulse from the ground" (p. 22).

In Chapter 4, Nadira assumes she and Aisha will have a lot to talk about on the road, but Aisha drives in angry silence. She notes how hard Aisha tries to fit in with the American children, but Aisha is oblivious to some things, like how sad Ma was when they first moved to America. Stopping at an all-you-can-eat buffet, Aisha is disgusted by the obesity of the customers, offending Nadira whose weight has always been a sensitive topic. Aisha tells Nadira she needs to go on a diet now that Aisha is in charge, but Nadira insists Uncle and Auntie will be in charge of them. Insisting they are on their own now, Aisha claims they need to stick together instead of fighting, but Nadira know this means she is supposed to do what her sister says, so she tells Nadira to forget it and heads back to the buffet for more food.

Section 3: Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

In Chapter 3, the Hossain family's history begins with water as Bangladesh is in the northeast corner of India which is laced with rivers, and there is no difference between the land and the sea. Nadira is fascinated by maps because those borders tell one story while the land tells another. Long ago, her family lived by the water in several houses arranged in a circle, and they all worked together. The rains were good, and they went with the water when it rose, the land returning after the rainy season. There were no borders, and this was the only way of living for many years. One year in 1943, the rain does not come, and driven by drought and famine, Nadira's great-grandparents packed and moved their family to Dhaka where they found work in a jute farm. A few years later, the British divided Bengal in half, and this was called Partition. Half belonged to India and held mostly Hindus while the half containing mostly Muslims was called Pakistan. During Partition, there were many riots between the Hindus and the Muslims, and Nadira's grandmother told many horror stories about that time.

In Chapter 4, with Abba in INS detention and Ma sleeping at a shelter, Nadira figures she and Aisha will have a lot to talk about on the road, but they do not. Aisha drives in angry silence with no answer to make it all better. Nadira knows secrets about her family, like how Aisha works so hard at who she is. Though Aisha seems like nothing can shake her, Nadira knows better. When they first arrived in America, the sisters only



hung out with other Bengali children, but complaining it was no different than being in Bangladesh, Aisha studied American kids and mimicked them. In sixth grade, she decided which clique of girls she wanted to befriend and begged Ma to buy her the same clothes. At first, Ma was hurt, but she figured Aisha's changes would be good if she is really going to make it in America. Every night, Aisha lays out her clothes and rehearses who she wants to be the next day. She is embarrassed by her average sister, but Ma tells Nadira to go at her own pace. Aisha misses stuff, though, like how sad Ma was when their family first came to America. Ma called her mother when no one was home, and afraid to go outside, she secretly talked about going back to Bangladesh. Once, Nadira came home to find eggplant burning in a pan, and she ran outside to find Ma crying on a park bench. Ma's spirits lifted after Abba got cable because she loves watching the cooking shows. When Aisha and Nadira stop at an all-you-can-eat buffet outside Providence, Nadira is hurt when Aisha complains about how disgustingly fat the people are because Nadira's weight is a sore subject in their house. No one else in their family is fat, and though Nadira tried to take an extra period of gym, she was laughed off the basketball court because she is clumsy and not athletic. Aisha always looks at her like she is lazy, and now, Aisha tells her she needs to go on a diet since she is in charge of her younger sister. They are moving to Canada, so it is time to make a fresh start. When Nadira argues that Aisha is not in charge of her, Aisha insists she is older and can drive, but Nadira points out that Uncle says girls are not allowed to drive. Aisha laughs because Abba and Ma are enlightened and would not let her drive if they believed all that gender crap. Nadira hates it when Aisha uses words like gender and enlightened, but Aisha and Taslima talk like that a lot, huddled in corners at family gatherings; however, they do not do it in front of the adults because Aisha was raised to respect her elders. Nadira claims Uncle and Auntie will be in charge of them when they get back, but Aisha claims they are on their own and need to stick together, not fight. She holds out her hand in a peace offering, but there is no way Nadira is sticking with Aisha because she knows it actually means she is supposed to do what her sister says and Aisha will get the credit. She tells Aisha to forget it, before heading back to the buffet to get more food.



Section 4: Chapter 5

Section 4: Chapter 5 Summary

On Tuesday morning, Aisha and Nadira return to Flushing High, pretending nothing has happened. Mr. Friedlander, a school counselor, approaches the girls to inform Aisha that he has arranged a college interview for her at Barnard, but when he suggests calling her later to schedule it, she asks him to send her a note instead, lying that their phone is broken since they no longer live at home. On Nadira's way to Ali-uncle's shop after school, she is approached by Tareq, a local hoodlum, who has heard of Abba's trouble and suggests he can sell her a green card. Ali-uncle is glad to see Nadira, but he makes her nervous as he constantly mutters that Abba will be alright. As they close the store, he reminds Nadira that they are only visitors in this country and must be careful not to offend or break the law, and he also warns her that one day he may have to go away if he finds he has no place to stay. Back at the apartment, Nadira finds Auntie talking on the phone with Ma, and Ma tells Nadira they finally have enough for Abba's bond and he will be released tomorrow. Ma hangs up after thanking God for a patient daughter like Nadira. When Taslima returns home, she quarrels with Auntie. After Tim explained the Special Registration law, Abba wanted to register, but Uncle insisted it was better to wait or return to Bangladesh; however, Taslima argued about returning to Dhaka because she is still studying at university. Now, Auntie scolds Taslima for dating Tim without her parents' permission. As Taslima slams into the bathroom and Auntie bangs on the door, Nadira covers her ears and tries to do her homework, wishing she could focus like Aisha or talk back like Taslima, but she likes being quiet and still; sometimes this way feel lonely, and at times, "I wish I could lift out of myself and do something that really counts" (p. 41).

Section 4: Chapter 5 Analysis

Aisha and Nadira return to Flushing High on Tuesday morning as if nothing happened. Though they are not the only illegals at school, one has to pick up the signals, such as a hesitancy to answer personal questions, yet they all agree not to notice. The policy at school is ask no questions, tell no lies, and while the teachers do not question them, sometimes, Nadira wants to beg them to ask her. While Aisha and Nadira are at their lockers, Mr. Friedlander, a counselor, comes up, and Aisha lies that she was sick yesterday; she already told Nadira not to mention their trip to the border to anyone. Mr. Friedlander tells Aisha that Barnard is interested in her, and he has scheduled an interview. He is the coach for the math team, of which Aisha is one of the stars, and he does not know the Hossains are illegal. Hoping the immigration papers would go through after Aisha filled out her college applications, Aisha lied about the financial aid forms, claiming her family had saved up and were all chipping in. When Mr. Friedlander offers to call tonight to set up a date and time for the interview, Aisha freezes because he cannot call since they do not live at home anymore before lying that the phone is broken and asking him to send her a note later. After school, Nadira visits Ali-Uncle, a



friend of her father's who lives above a dry cleaning store and works at a magazine shop in the afternoons. She often watches the register and gathers the papers while he rolls out his rug for evening prayers. When Ali-Uncle is not working, he spends his time at the local mosque, and Ma says he is like a guardian spirit who watches over others and makes sure they are safe from harm. As Nadira turns the corner, Tareq pulls up to the curb. Aisha calls Tareq a lowlife because he dropped out of school and is shady. Tareq summons Nadira over, telling her he hear Abba is in trouble but he can help as there are places to buy what the Hossains need because not everyone gets a green card by playing by the rules. He gives her his cell number before Ali-Uncle calls to Nadira. Ali-Uncle is glad she came back safe, and Nadira wishes the small shop were larger as Ali-Uncle looks at her with worried eyes. He tells her not to worry about Abba because he is a strong man and Ma will make sure he gets his papers right. They work silently together, but Nadira is jumpy because he occasionally mutters not to worry under his breath. As they leave the store, Ali tells Nadira that they are only visitors in this country and must be careful about offending or breaking the law. He also tells her she must say nothing if he must go away someday, assuring her nothing is wrong, though there may come a time when he has no place to stay. Nadira understands since she knows many who move around in hopes that the authorities will not track them down. She does not like the way Ali looks at her with the sadness of the world in his eyes when he is usually so calm and reassuring. As Ali walks down the blocks, Nadira feels "the words inside me are stones in my mouth" (p. 37). Back at the apartment, Auntie paces excitedly as she talks on the phone with Ma, saying tomorrow is good before handing the phone to Nadira. Ma tells Nadira they have enough for the bond now, so she will fetch Abba tomorrow. Assuring her daughter that Abba is doing as well as can be expected, Ma asks about Aisha and Nadira, and Nadira tells Ma that Aisha has her Barnard interview. Whenever they speak of Aisha, Nadira is proud of being her baby sister, but then she gets angry, wishing for a way to make their parents notice her too. Asking Nadira to keep an eye on Aisha and Taslima, Ma thanks God for such a patient daughter. Nadira wants to say that is not all she is, but Ma has already hung up. Nadira cannot focus on her homework when Taslima comes in and starts quarreling with Auntie. Taslima acts American-born and has begun dating Tim, a white law student she met while working at a human rights organization. When Tim explained the Special Registration law, Uncle said it was crazy because they fought to be free of Pakistan and now they are put in with them, but Taslima interjected that all brown people are the same to Americans. Insisting that America has been good to him, Abba lamented that he was the one breaking the law. Everyone quarreled for days after Tim's visit; Abba wanted to register, but Uncle believed it was better to wait or return to Bangladesh. Taslima argued against going back since she is still at university. Now, Auntie scolds Taslima for coming in late as she never gave her permission to date Tim. Nadira wishes she could do something that really counts, foreshadowing her collaboration with Aisha.



Section 5: Chapter 6

Section 5: Chapter 6 Summary

The next morning, Uncle dresses for his catering job as he does every day, though he does not often get called to work anymore. Uncle mocks Nadira's future laziness in Canada, suggesting they need to stop asking Allah for so much since it just gets taken away. Auntie explains Uncle is scared because his work friend was imprisoned by the INS. On the way to school, Nadira considers how she can fight, like Taslima does. Lily Yee, Nadira's best friend, accosts her on the bus, lamenting how much her parents fight because her mother suspects her father of infidelity; however, Nadira does not have the energy to listen and wishes she could talk to Lily about her family's problems. During her geometry quiz, Nadira cannot focus and tries to cheat off Lily, but Mr. Chin notices. By the end of the class, Nadira only answers twelve of the twenty questions on her quiz. Strangely, Aisha invites Nadira to sit with her perfect friends at lunch, and the girls talk about college, confused that Aisha applied to McGill in Canada. When Aisha tells Nadira she has been nominated for valedictorian, Nadira tells her sister it does not matter since she is not even going to college, feeling a strange, pleasant power by making Aisha cry for the first time. Returning home that afternoon, Nadira and Aisha learn Abba's bond has been denied and he is being held for questioning regarding giving money to a mosque which is suspected of being involved with an illegal political affiliation. They now have no option but to wait and see. Aisha silently goes into Taslima's room, and though Auntie begs Nadira to go to her sister, she cannot go to anyone now, feeling she has brought this misfortune on her family by her earlier cruelty to Aisha.

Section 5: Chapter 6 Analysis

The snow is melted in the morning, and Nadira imagines Ma asking why she dresses like a boy as she pulls on jeans and a t-shirt. Uncle brushes and polishes the shoes he wears for his catering job. The money there was good when he was first hired two years ago, but though his supervisor does not call for days at a time now, Uncle still gets ready every morning and waits by the phone. Unhappy with coming to America, Uncle finds fault with Abba for spoiling Ma and the way Taslima and Aisha egg one another on, claiming the house is being run by women. Asking if Nadira is ready to live in Canada, Uncle tells her people will not look at them differently because they are legal and he can imagine her sitting around, fat and lazy. When he suggests they need to stop asking Allah for so much because it just gets taken away, Auntie yells at him for being a bitter man and trying to poison Nadira. Fixing breakfast, Auntie tells Nadira he is just scared because his friend at work was imprisoned by the INS. She further explains there are two types of people: those who run when they hear bad things and those who fight, and Taslima will always fight, even when it is time to run. Thinking of Uncle's losses on the way to school, Nadira wonders how she can fight. Her best friend, Lily Yee, accosts her once she reaches school to lament her parents' fighting because her mother suspects her father of being unfaithful, but Nadira does not have the energy to listen and there is



a tightness in her chest since she cannot tell Lily what is going on. When Lily asks to meet after school, Nadira tells her she is not sure if she can. Unable to focus on her geometry quiz, Nadira gets the lavatory pass, and in the mirror, she sees a fat, stupid girl who does not look like someone who can help her parents with anything. Back in class, she tries to see Lily's answers, but Mr. Chin hopes he did not see what he thinks he saw. By the time the bell rings, Nadira is only able to answer twelve of the twenty questions on her quiz. Though it is rare for Nadira to hang out with Aisha at school since Aisha is friends with the perfect girls, Aisha invites Nadira to sit with them at lunch. When Risa questions why Aisha applied to McGill in Canada, Aisha lies that Abba may get a job there and they have cousins in Toronto. Nadira can feel how humiliated Aisha is because her friends are legal. When her friends leave, Aisha tells her sister she has been nominated for valedictorian, but Nadira flies into a temper, asking who cares if she is valedictorian because she is not going to college. Looking like she has been struck, Aisha cries and walks away. Nadira has never made Aisha cry before, but she feels a new power, like what Uncle did to her this morning, and strangely, she likes it. When she goes home, Nadira finds Tim with Auntie, and he says they have had a setback; Abba's bond has been denied because they decided to hold him for questioning. They say he lied about where he lives on his application, and they are looking at a political affiliation because of money he gave to a mosque they are investigating. Mr. Rashid did not straighten it all out as he was supposed to, and though lawyers are keeping track of the situation, the INS can detain Abba as long as they want if they suspect he violated his visa or is involved with a suspicious political affiliation. Now, they must wait and see what happens concerning his asylum application. Nadira feels it is her fault, as if she brought misfortune on her family by trying to cheat and by being mean to Aisha. Silent, Aisha takes her book bag to Taslima's room, and though Auntie begs Nadira to go to her sister, Nadira is hunched in her chair and cannot go to anyone now.



Section 6: Chapters 7 and 8

Section 6: Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

In Chapter 7, Nadira notes that Bangladeshis always keep going and try to do the right thing. She tells about Naseem, Abba's older brother, who was killed when he joined the Mukti Bahini, a group of freedom fighters. When Abba saw Ma at a Bengali New Year fair, he saw the shy, fearless girl he must marry, and he refused to eat until his father arranged their marriage. It was good for Abba to marry someone who was not afraid since he believes in doing the right thing, and this is what he taught his daughters, though it was difficult to know what the right thing was after they came to America. Becoming invisible, Abba told them the most important thing was not to stick out, but Nadira believes it hurt him to hide so much.

In Chapter 8, Aisha wakes Nadira in the morning, telling her they are going to see Mr. Rashid because he needs to get them out of this mess. Mr. Rashid's waiting room is crowded, but the secretary promises to try to squeeze them in since Aisha insists it is an emergency. Nadira recounts how the first lawyer they hired to make them legal was investigated for fraud, so they hired Mr. Rashid. Becoming impatient after waiting for a long time, Aisha barges into Mr. Rashid's office and explains Abba is in detention and demanding Mr. Rashid clear up this business so her family can get on with their lives. When Mr. Rashid claims they will have to wait and see, Aisha slams her bag on the floor, claiming she hired him to do the best job possible, and while they may not be as rich or educated as his other clients, her family still matters. Nadira follows Aisha out of the office, and Aisha says they must convince the authorities that they are making a mistake themselves. When Nadira repeats that they must wait and see, Aisha claims Nadira's problem is she gives in and does not fight. Aisha admits that she is scared for Abba, and the girls imagine various versions of what is happening to Abba on the subway home. Everything looks different to Nadira now as she realizes none of this belongs to her anymore. She says nothing for the rest of the ride, but she inches closer to her sister.

Section 6: Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

In Chapter 7, Nadira claims that Bangladeshis keep going no matter what happens to them, and they always try to do the right thing. While Abba and Ma were growing up, people tried to shake the borders, not wanting to be joined to the Pakistan thousands of miles away, so Naseem, Abba's older brother disappeared to join the Mukti Bahini, Freedom Fighters, and was killed. Abba never forgot Naseem, and when he recognized Ma as the girl who grew up across the street at a Bengali New Year fair, he saw the shy, fearless girl he must marry, though his mother claimed she was conceited and would cause problems later in life. Abba refused to eat until his father inquired about Ma and arranged their marriage, but it was a good thing for Abba to marry someone who was not afraid because he believes in doing the right thing, in standing for something like



Naseem. This is what Abba taught Aisha and Nadira, but they did not know what the right thing was when they came to America.

In Chapter 8, Aisha wakes Nadira in the morning and tells her to dress in her good clothes. They are going to see Mr. Rashid themselves because he has to get them out of this mess. She does not seem to consider the possibility that Mr. Rashid may not see them. Since Aisha is stern and determined, Nadira has no choice but to follow her to the subway. Mr. Rashid's waiting room is crowded, but his secretary will try to squeeze them in since Aisha insists it is an emergency. As they wait, Nadira recalls how they have encountered a chain of mistakes with their visas which have worsened over time since they got to America. The first lawyer Abba hired never filed their paperwork and was investigated for fraud. They hired Mr. Rashid after Aisha saw him on television and convinced him to take their case, though he does not usually take cases like theirs. After a long wait, Aisha rushes into Mr. Rashid's office, telling him about her nomination for valedictorian but it does not matter because Abba is in detention. She says Mr. Rashid needs to clear up this business so the Hossains can get on with their lives. Explaining anyone without legal status has no right to a hearing and going to Canada was a mistake, Mr. Rashid says they are in quite a mess. Noticing the pile of folders on his desk, Nadira realizes her family is only one folder and not a very important one. When Mr. Rashid insists they will have to wait and see, Aisha slams her bag on the floor, claiming she hired him to do the best job possible, and while they may not be as rich or educated as his other clients, her family still matters. Aisha storms out of the office with Nadira on her heels. Claiming Mr. Rashid is not going to do anything for them, Aisha says they must take care of it themselves; they will show the authorities that they are making a mistake. Wanting to laugh in disbelief, Nadira argues that Mr. Rashid said they made a mistake and now have to wait and see, but Aisha says the trouble with her sister is that she does not fight; she just gives in. Admitting she is scared for Abba, Aisha finally says what she and Nadira are both afraid to imagine, Abba in a cell, and they wonder if they are questioning him or beating him. Not knowing, they imagine different versions of what is happening to Abba as they take the subway home.



Section 7: Chapter 9

Section 7: Chapter 9 Summary

The next day at school, Nadira feels lonely because she is worried about Abba, and she finds Aisha in the cafeteria, realizing her sister is the only one who will understand, and suggests maybe they can figure this out together. After school, the girls go to Dunkin Donuts where Aisha tries calling the INS but receives the runaround. They call Ma to see if she has heard anything, learning they kept their savings through Ali-uncle. Overhearing their conversations, Tareq approaches, offering to take care of it, but Aisha rebuffs his kind of help, telling Nadira that a fake ID could get them in trouble and insisting there must be a way. Visiting Ali-uncle, Nadira and Aisha explain what is going on, and he tells them Abba saved \$3000 for their college tuition secretly in case they could not become legal because he did not want his daughters to be disappointed. He agrees to write a letter, explaining why Abba gave money to the mosque. That night, Aisha and Nadira map out their argument for writing the new director of immigration and their congressman, pleading for special circumstances. When Talisma returns home, she mocks them for thinking they can make a difference, but Aisha insists they must understand their enemy's argument in order to make a good case. Avoiding a fight, the girls curl up on the bed and gossip. Aisha and Nadira spend the next several days secretly working on their letters, sure they are doing the right thing. They get Abba's boss to write a letter about Abba, and they ask Ma to fax them copies of Abba's paperwork regarding his detention. Nadira feels good about Aisha for the first time in a long time, confident in their ability as a team. Thinking of Ali-uncle claims good words are like planting a garden and watching it grow, Nadira believes she and Aisha are planting a garden with their words, choosing carefully so it will grow straight because this garden is their future.

Section 7: Chapter 9 Analysis

At school the next day, Nadira fears an official coming for her. Though she is used to keeping to herself, it is now difficult to keep her troubles out of sight because she feels lonely as she worries about Abba, and realizing Aisha is the only one who will understand, she finds her sister in the cafeteria, admitting maybe she is right and they can figure this out. Aisha has an idea, so after school, Aisha and Nadira go to Dunkin Donuts and Aisha tries calling the INS, but they give her the runaround. Nadira knows it sounds crazy to think two teenagers can argue their way into the INS, but Aisha has a fire inside her that burns slow and steady. Suggesting they call Ma to find out what she heard, Nadira phones Ma who says they have questioned Abba, and she mentions how they keep their savings through Ali-uncle. Having overheard Aisha on the phone with the INS, Tareq approaches and offers to take care of it, but Aisha refuses his kind of help. Calling her stuck up, Tareq leaves. When Nadira worries he might be right that it is the only way, Aisha says a fake ID could get them in trouble and insists there must be a way. They visit Ali-uncle and tell him what has happened. He explains the Bangladeshis



keep a fund to take out money or borrow from for important things, and he shows them that Abba has saved \$3000 for their college. Neither girl knew that Abba was saving money because he knew they might not be able to become legal and he did not want them to be disappointed. At Aisha's request, Ali-uncle writes a letter, explaining this. That night, Aisha and Nadira lock themselves in Taslima's bedroom to plan their next step. They will write the new director of immigration and their congressman, pleading for special circumstances. Aisha maps out her argument, including the misunderstanding about the money, how Abba works hard in this country, and about how his daughters are two good students who want to contribute to the U. S. When Taslima comes in later, she mocks them for thinking a letter can help and shows them a flyer about a protest against the prosecution of immigrants. This is what she has been doing every day because "the only way to fight a political situation is to be political" (p. 75). Thinking Abba would never allow such a thing, Aisha points out that they have broken the laws and must understand their enemy's argument in order to make a good case. As Taslima gets angry, Aisha begs her not to fight and tells her about Tareq, so the three girls curl up on the bed and gossip, their laughter making bright circles in the room. Over the next few days, Aisha and Nadira work on their letters, but they do not tell Auntie or Uncle. They are sure they are doing the right thing when they hear from Ma, and Aisha gets Abba's boss to write a nice letter about Abba. She also includes the girls' school records and Ali-uncle's letter about the fund. Taslima scoffs at all they include, insisting that stupid bureaucrats will not care, but Aisha insists they have to try. Ma faxes them copies about Abba's detention, and when Nadira and Aisha pick them up from Tim's apartment, Nadira notices the resemblance between Tim and Taslima for the first time. They look at each other with a stillness that makes her happy and sad at the same time. It has been a long time since Nadira felt so good about Aisha; now, they are a sister-sister team. Sometimes, Nadira jots down ideas to tell her later, and it is as if her brain has suddenly become sharp and clear, though she moves slow.



Section 8: Chapter 10

Section 8: Chapter 10 Summary

The next day, Nadira wakes as Immigration arrives to demand documentation from Uncle. Taslima refuses to hand anything over without a lawyer present, but one of the officers insists Uncle come to the station house, obviously aware that Uncle is illegal. Taslima wants to call Tim for advice, but Uncle refuses and goes to the police station. Tim joins the family at the station, but he does not do any good as he talks to the police. When Taslima's cell phone does not work, a female officer tells her they cannot use phones in the waiting area, so Aisha politely asks where they can make calls, and the woman suggests calling in the hallway. Aisha asks to speak to the supervisor so that they can understand the procedures, and when another woman comes out, she says Uncle being held like this is a violation of his civil liberties; however, the woman says he has no liberties because his papers are not right. When Aisha argues that all individuals have a right to a lawyer regardless of their immigration status, the woman says they do not even have the right to sit here but the police are trying to make it easier on them before turning away. At 7 A.M., a police officer tells the family that Uncle is being detained and moved to a facility in Manhattan. Disoriented, the family goes to eat breakfast at a nearby diner. Refusing to listen to her family's disagreement, Aisha insists it is her fault for not being able to convince the police to release Uncle. Back at the apartment, Auntie and Taslima argue while Aisha walks around numbly. The apartment finally quiets, but Nadira still hears a thudding noise and realizes it is her heart, beating fast in her chest.

Section 8: Chapter 10 Analysis

Nadira wakes to banging on the door, and though Auntie tells Uncle not to let them in, he opens the door to reveal three immigration employees who tell him it is just a routine check as they ask to see documentation. Taslima refuses to hand over any paperwork without legal representation, but the officer asks Uncle to come to the station house. Uncle is frozen, hating that his daughter is showing him up in front of the American man, but when Taslima steps in front of him, he pushes her aside and asks the man to leave his home. The officer claims it will be better if Uncle comes to the station and answers his questions, the words obviously meaning they know he is illegal. Taslima pleads for Uncle to call Tim who can tell them what to do, but Uncle refuses to listen to Tim, blaming him for sending Abba to Canada. The fierceness drains from Uncle as he dons his coat and goes out the door. Joining them at the police station, Tim is upset Uncle already went in for questioning, and while he talks behind a glass partitioned area, seemingly doing no good, Auntie tells Taslima that Tim is not family and should not be here. Auntie suggests Tim should take Nadira and Aisha home, but Aisha insists on staying. Taslima argues with a female officer about using her cell phone, but Aisha politely learns they can call in the hallway, so she asks to speak to the supervisor so they can understand the procedure, but the supervisor turns away, claiming they have



no rights. After waiting a long time, a new officer comes out at 7 A.M. and tells Auntie that Uncle is being moved to a facility in Manhattan. While Auntie cries and Nadira's heart feels like it is in a knot, Aisha tries to argue, but the policeman explains it is out of his jurisdiction since the FBI takes these cases. They try to make phone calls, but it is too early for anyone to be in their offices, and they know Uncle has already been handcuffed and taken to the facility. Outside, Auntie turns in circles until Taslima leads her to a corner diner where they eat breakfast. Crying, Aisha blames herself for being unable to convince them to let Uncle out, and though Auntie disagrees and Taslima claims they are fascists who do not care about listening to anyone, Aisha refuses to listen, sobbing harder. Tired once they reach the apartment, Nadira drops onto the couch, listening to Auntie and Taslima arguing. With a blanket wrapped around her, Aisha makes her way across the living room. Nadira's heart thuds loudly in her chest.



Section 9: Chapter 11

Section 9: Chapter 11 Summary

The apartment is now run by women, and Nadira can feel Abba and Uncle in the empty rooms of the apartment. A few days after Uncle is detained, Nadira and Aisha organize their letters and send them by certified mail. As they celebrate with milkshakes, Aisha asks when Nadira became so positive, and Nadira admits that Aisha always took over and did not leave room for her. She fears her sister will be angry, but Aisha smiles and says there is plenty of room if only she knows how to grab it. Aisha begins allowing Nadira to sit with her at lunch every day after that, and as Aisha's friends talk about their plans for college and for the summer, Nadira is angry at first as she realizes Aisha feels alone and is using her because Nadira is the only one who knows what is going on and that makes her feel safe. Then, Nadira pities her sister for being so concerned about her friends' opinions. Aisha becomes obsessed as they do not receive a response to their letters, but she soon stops going out and begins skipping her school activities and avoiding her friends. Taslima also slips out often, and she confides to Nadira that she has not been going to class because she cannot pretend things are normal. When Nadira objects that she could get thrown out of school, Taslima mocks that she could be thrown out of the country any day. Nadira begins to isolate herself as well, unsure what she is looking for but knowing it is somewhere inside of her. When Lily comes to Nadira, worried that her mother will throw her father out of their home, Nadira confirms that Lily wants to know the truth about her dad even if it hurts. Nadira spies on the manicurist with whom Lily's father is accused of having an affair, following her home and gaining admittance to her apartment by claiming to sell Girl Scout cookies. After seeing pictures of Lily's father with the manicurist and a baby throughout the apartment, Nadira leaves to meet Lily and tell her everything. Lily cries but thanks Nadira for figuring everything out, yet Nadira does not feel that figuring things out is a great talent when it makes people sad. When Nadira returns home, Auntie tells her that Uncle is being released. Nadira calls Mr. Rashid who explains Uncle will have thirty days to resolve his immigration status or face deportation proceedings. Nadira and Auntie retrieve Uncle and return home where he is upset Taslima is not there to greet him. Taslima comes in late while Aisha and Nadira are trying to sleep. Aisha's interview at Barnard is scheduled for tomorrow, and wanting to protect her older sister, Nadira asks to go with her. The girls listen to Taslima talking to Uncle about how he was humiliated during his detainment, and Aisha dreams that she is arrested that night, causing her to suggest that she should not go to her interview in the morning. Nadira assures her sister it was only a dream and insists she should go, promising to accompany her.

Section 9: Chapter 11 Analysis

Like Uncle warned, the house is now run by women, and they have done all they can. Auntie works at the 99 cent store every morning, but there is less fish in the gravy and she buys brown vegetables. Nadira can feel Uncle and Abba in the empty rooms of the



apartment. A few days after Uncle is put in detention, Aisha and Nadira go to the library, type their letters and send them certified mail. Something shifts between Nadira and Aisha after that, as if Aisha makes room for her sister in her private world, even allowing her to sit with her friends in the cafeteria. When Kavita talks about how her graduation present will be visiting her grandparents in India, Aisha is sad that they can never go back to Bangladesh since they are illegal. Everyone chatters about their plans for the summer and next year, but that is nothing like what Aisha and Nadira wonder. As Aisha plays nervously with her hair, Nadira realizes her sister let her in because she feels alone and only feels safe with Nadira who knows what is really going on. At first, Nadira is angry that Aisha is using her, but then she feels sorry for her because she is so worried about what her friends think. When Aisha boasts about getting a C in U. S. Government, the others are puzzled because the boast is out of place in their straight-A group. That night, Nadira overhears Aisha chiding herself for failing to get Uncle out of the police station, and she feels sorry for her sister because she is wearing herself down. At lunch the next day, Aisha keeps repeating that Barnard would not give her an interview if they were not thinking about giving her lots of money, and on the way home, she insists they will hear from the lawyer or their letter will be answered today. Unfortunately, the mailbox is empty, and Aisha becomes obsessed as days pass without news. Growing frantic, she focuses on her homework and spends a lot of time studying, causing Nadira to wish she could stop her sister from whirring inside. Soon, Aisha stops going out, spending her time watching soaps on television and skipping her school activities. When her friends try to find out what is going on, she avoids them. Aisha stays in bed on Saturday, and Nadira can hear her crying. That night, she can sense her sister's fright and tells her to go to sleep, though she knows Aisha cannot. Taslima also slips away, staying out late working on the protest, and when Auntie is afraid, she claims they want them to be afraid. That night, Taslima pulls Nadira into her room, saying she cannot pretend everything is normal and making her cousin promise not to tell Auntie she is not going to class. When Nadira worries that Taslima could get kicked out of school, Taslima claims she could get thrown out of this country any day. Nadira is scared by how Taslima takes her angry outside for all of the world to see. Nadira does not know what to do with herself anymore because she cannot figure out how to get her family through this seemingly impossible situation. She feels silly looking at their files like she and Aisha did. She stops helping Ali-uncle at the store and starts avoiding Lily because, though she feels guilty, she needs to be alone. Nadira does not know what she is trying to find out, but she is sure it is somewhere inside of her. One day, Lily finds her and asks why Nadira has been avoiding her. When Lily confides that her mom is threatening to throw her dad out, Nadira suggests maybe he did do something wrong. She is confused about Abba; she misses him, but sometimes, she is angry at him for putting their family through this and wonders why he brought them to America without the correct papers. After Lily confirms she wants to know the truth about her dad even if it hurts, Nadira arranges to meet her at Dunkin Donuts in two hours before going to Lily's dad's shop and spying on the manicurist who he is suspected of having an affair with. She follows the woman home and knocks on the door, claiming to sell Girl Scout cookies. The manicurist admits Nadira who notes pictures of the woman with a baby and Lily's dad throughout the apartment. Feeling sick, Nadira meets Lily and tells her everything. Crying, Lily thanks her for figuring it all out, but Nadira feels putting things



together is not a great talent if it makes people sad. When Nadira returns home, Auntie rushes her to get ready because they are releasing Uncle. Nadira calls Mr. Rashid who explains that Uncle will be released but will have only thirty days to resolve his immigration status or deportation proceedings will begin, admitting he cannot get anything done with the INS in thirty days. Mr. Rashid did not tell Auntie all of this because she was so excited and he did not want to upset her again. Auntie and Nadira take a cab to Brooklyn, and while Auntie goes to get Uncle, Nadira feels guilty, though she does not know why. At home, Uncle is upset that Taslima is not there to greet him, and he claims they are all stupid girls who do not listen when Aisha stares silently.

As Uncle sits down to watch television, Nadira notices the cuts and bruises on his arms. In the kitchen, Auntie whispers that she does not know what is wrong with him; he does not talk except to incessantly ask for Taslima. Taslima comes in late as Aisha and Nadira try to sleep. Aisha agrees, though she is distracted by trying to listen to Uncle's bitter voice. Taslima asks her father to tell her what happened, and he says they humiliated him by treating him like a liar, but he was lucky they let him go so easily because many have been held for much longer. Aisha yells out in her sleep that night, and she confesses she had a nightmare about the police telling her she does not belong here and locking her in a cell. Nadira assures her it was only a dream and she will do great tomorrow, and when Aisha suggests that maybe she should not go, Nadira insists she should, promising to be there with her. Leaning back on the pillows, Aisha claims she is so very tired.



Section 10: Chapter 12

Section 10: Chapter 12 Summary

Aisha is nervous as she and Nadira arrive at Barnard's cramped campus the next day. As they walk around, Nadira encourages her sister to forget about their personal problems. Too nervous for her sister to accompany her to the interview, Aisha asks Nadira to meet her in an hour. Walking around campus, Nadira meets an Asian girl who is studying to become a geologist, and the girl explains people thought she was weird in high school for her fascination with rocks, but in college, lots of people are interested in strange things. Nadira imagines herself at college for the first time. When Nadira meets Aisha, Aisha is vomiting by the front gate, but she claims the interview went alright, refusing to elaborate. On Monday morning, Mr. Friedlander is angry with Aisha for missing debate team practices and meets, and Nadira is furious when her sister lies and blames it on her parents, claiming they are old-fashioned and do not like her going out so much. After leaving Mr. Friedlander, Aisha claims she did that because there is no point in bothering since she is probably not even staying in this country. Still, Nadira cannot believe she lied about their parents, but Aisha insists that sometimes it is necessary before walking away. Mr. Friedlander summons Nadira to the dean's office during math class and asks her what is going on with Aisha. Aisha is a strong candidate for valedictorian but has been acting strange the past few weeks, and she did not even show up for her interview at Barnard. Shocked, Nadira offers to talk to her sister. Finding Aisha on the bleachers, Nadira asks how she could skip the interview. Aisha admits she walked up to the room and froze because she was scared they would throw her out. Though she has always done what she has to do, she worries she will put herself forward and they will take everything away. She cannot do this anymore because it is too hard and nothing is working. "Maybe if I just stop wanting so much, they can't hurt me. I don't want to stand out anymore, Nadira. It hurts too much. I don't want to stand out. Not anymore" (p. 113). For the first time, Nadira puts her arms around her sister, and they sit like that for a long time as Nadira does not know what to say.

Section 10: Chapter 12 Analysis

Barnard's campus is small and cramped, and Aisha looks queasy. She and Nadira walk around since they arrive early, and Nadira tells her sister to forget about everything going on at home, encouraging her to breathe. When they return to the building where Aisha has her interview, Aisha tells Nadira to meet her in an hour because she is too nervous for her sister to accompany her, and watching Aisha enter the building, Nadira is sad, feeling "like she's already gone from us" (page 105). Taking a walk, Nadira strikes up a conversation with an Asian girl drawing a glacier rock formation for geology class. Amazed a girl can do something like that, Nadira asks how she knows she wants to be a geologist, and the girl explains she has done stuff with rocks since she was Nadira's age. In high school, people thought she was weird, but the cool thing about college is that lots of people do weird things. Nadira always thought of college as a



place for stars like Aisha, but it seems natural as she imagines herself at college for the first time. Returning to Barnard to meet Aisha, she finds her sister vomiting by the front gate, but Aisha claims she is alright now. She says the interview went alright, and they just asked her a bunch of stupid questions. Aisha opens a book, but instead of reading it, she just stares blankly at the page. On Monday morning, Mr. Friedlander angrily questions Aisha about missing finals and practice for the debate team, but Aisha claims she should not be on the debate team anymore because her parents are old-fashioned and do not like her going out so much, especially with boys on the team. Nadira is appalled by the bold-faced lie. When Mr. Friedlander offers to talk to their parents because Aisha is jeopardizing her valedictorian nomination, Aisha thanks him but says no before steering Nadira toward the library. During math class, Nadira is summoned to the dean's office where Mr. Friedlander and Mrs. Roble, the college counselor, ask for her help. Aisha is a strong candidate for valedictorian, but she has been acting strange for a few weeks; she is skipping classes, did not fill out her financial aid forms and did not go to her Barnard interview. Nadira is shocked that her sister skipped the interview. Mr. Friedlander asks if everything is alright with their family or if the girls have been harassed because of the race issues on the news. Nadira claims Aisha is sick and offers to talk to her. As she leaves, she overhears Mrs. Roble say Muslim girls often decide not to go to college after their marriage is arranged, but Mr. Friedlander insists that does not sound like Aisha. When Nadira asks Aisha why she skipped her interview, Aisha confesses she was scared. She believes things are too difficult and she does not want to stand out anymore because maybe they cannot hurt her if she stops wanting so much.



Section 11: Chapters 13 and 14

Section 11: Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

In Chapter 13, Nadira recalls how Abba was praised in Dhaka for being a great swimmer and for his strong lungs. When their family first moved to Queens, he taught Nadira how to swim by holding her under water to teach her to hold her breath, and he told her she could get through anything as long as she knows how to breathe. Now, Nadira tells herself to breathe so she can get through this and find her way to the other side. At the apartment, there is a message from Ma, and when Nadira phones Ma, she learns Abba's preliminary hearing has been scheduled and will determine if he will be released or deported. Nadira worries about Ma going to court alone, but Ma assures her there will be translators. Nadira looks at Abba's paperwork and thinks she has found a way to save him, but worried her discovery will not be enough and she needs something bigger, she arranges to meet Tareq, telling him she has \$3000. After convincing Ali-uncle to give her the money which she claims she needs for Abba's bond, Nadira feels strong and runs all the way to the bus.

In Chapter 14, Nadira joins Tareq who tells her she cannot talk about this or ever mention his name because it is illegal and dangerous. They drive to a brick house where Tareq begins making arrangements, but thinking of how Abba has always told her to choose right, Nadira claims she cannot give Abba's money to these people and runs outside, making her way blindly through the dark streets.

Section 11: Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

In Chapter 13, Nadira keeps thinking about Abba and swimming. Abba was a great swimmer in Bangladesh and was praised in his village for his strong lungs. When the Hossains first moved to Queens, he took Nadira to the city pool in Flushing Meadow Park and taught her to hold her breath by holding her under water until she was able to swim the length of the pool while underwater by the end of the summer. Abba told her one can get through anything if they know how to breathe, so now, she tells herself to breathe, get through this and find a way to the other side. Nadira returns home to find no one there and a message from Ma, so she calls Ma back and learns Abba's preliminary hearing is going to happen. If it goes well, Abba may be released, but if not, they may deport him immediately. Nadira tells Ma she cannot go to the hearing alone because who will translate, but Ma insists there will be translators at the court. Looking at the faxes Ma sent, Nadira thinks she has found a way to get Abba out, but fearing they will not care about her big discovery, she decides to do something bigger that is guaranteed to save Abba. She calls Tareq, and recalling Ali-uncle's ledger, she tells him she has \$3000. Taking the \$100 left of the money Ma gave her and Aisha for their upkeep, Nadira leaves a note, telling her family not to worry because everything will be alright. She goes to the mosque and tells Ali-uncle she needs their \$3000 for Abba's



bond, and as he gives her the money, he prays Allah will go with her. Feeling solid and strong, Nadira feels like she can run, so she runs fast all the way to the bus.

In Chapter 14, Tareq is waiting in his car in the parking lot, and when Nadira gets in, he shows her his gun and tells her she knows nothing. As he silently drives, she asks how it works, hypothetically, and he explains it is a real social security number, green card or passport from someone who won the Diversity Lottery and decided to sell it. It usually costs more, but his contact made an exception. They pull up to a brick house where several men sit at a table, and Nadira notes that there is a revolver on the counter. Tareq leaves her in the hall while he waits his turn, and she thinks that she wants everything to be how it was before they went to Canada. Recalling how Abba told her to always choose right, even when the storms come, Nadira tells Tareq she changed her mind and cannot give them Abba's money. She runs outside, hearing voices shouting behind her, and though she does not know where she is, she runs blindly through the dark streets.



Section 12: Chapter 15

Section 12: Chapter 15 Summary

Taking the bus to Burlington, Nadira finds Ma who was worried since Uncle and Auntie called her to tell her that Nadira had run away. As Ma and Nadira go to lunch, Nadira is shocked that Ma has made friends and no longer needs help speaking English or taking a bus. They go to the courthouse where the lawyer explains this is just a preliminary hearing, ignoring Nadira's attempts to tell him she has evidence for Abba. Nadira barely recognizes Abba when he joins them. After the judge explains that Abba is being held for suspicion of being affiliated with an illegal organization, Nadira asks to speak, passing out her paperwork. Nadira tells them they have the wrong person, explaining Abba spells his last name with an "a" while another guy in Florida who also gave money to the same fund spells his name with an "e" as on the court paperwork. The judge is shocked that they do not even have the name right, but Nadira says there is something else, producing the \$3000 and explaining it was not a contribution but Abba's savings for his daughters. The judge mocks the officials for the mistaken identity, smiling at Nadira for figuring it out. He also apologizes to Abba but claims he is still in violation of his visa; however, because of their difficulties and Abba's unjust detainment, the judge will ensure Immigration hears a final appeal for the Hossains' residency. Abba is released, and the lawyer explains they should hear from Immigration within a few weeks. Nadira knows she saved Abba in a small way by making the judge stop and take a second look at her family, and she cannot wait to tell her sister all about it.

Section 12: Chapter 15 Analysis

As Nadira boards the bus, she feels the money burning a hole in her knapsack and is sure everyone knows she is carrying \$3000. An American guy starts talking to her about visiting his sick mother who he has not seen in five years. Abba has taught Nadira not to talk to strange Americans, but this guy wants to talk, whether she does or not. Though Abba says Americans do not know how to be family, she is not sure he is right now because this guy seems sad and her family does not seem close anymore. It hurts Nadira to think that maybe that is what living in America does to a family. In Burlington, Nadira gets directions to the Salvation Army shelter where she finds Ma crying because Uncle and Auntie called to tell her Nadira disappeared, and after Nadira explains she had to run away since they would never have allowed her to come, Ma takes her to lunch and introduces her daughter to her new friends. Nadira is in a state of disbelief; Ma rarely left home without her family in New York, and she no longer needs Nadira to translate or help her catch a bus. At the courthouse, Ma leads Nadira to a disappointingly small room upstairs as Nadira imagines running up the aisle, shouting she has evidence. The tired lawyer explains this is just a preliminary hearing, cutting Nadira off when she tries to tell him she has found something. The judge enters the room, followed by Abba. Nadira forgot she would see Abba, but this unshaven, worn man is not the Abba she knows. He smiles and greets Nadira before slumping in his



chair. As the hearing begins, the judge says they have grounds for deportation since Abba changed residences three times without informing the INS and is being held in conjunction with the investigation of religious organizations that may be sponsoring illegal activities. After the lawyer says he has no information regarding the funds, Nadira asks to speak, not caring when the lawyer looks annoyed. Taking Ali-uncle's letter and her copies of Abba's court paperwork from her knapsack, she passes them around, finding it difficult to find the words to tell them she has proof Abba was saving money for his daughters' tuition. She wants to tell them that sometimes they cannot know who a person is, that she has lungs and knows how to let the air go; however, she knows who she is, and now they must look at the papers and see who her family is. Nadira shows the court that Abba's identity has been mistaken, and she produces the \$3000 as proof that it was savings, not a contribution. Everyone stares at the money as the judge asks Abba if this is true, and Abba confirms it, praising Aisha as a straight-A student and pointing out his brilliant girl here. Clarifying the man they want is Hossein, not Hossain, the judge accuses the agents of making a simple mistake that a ninth-grader straightened out in five minutes, and they all look embarrassed. The judge apologizes to Abba for the mistake in identity but says he is still in violation of his visa and could face deportation proceedings. However, it is clear the Hossains have been given the runaround for several years, and in light of Abba's unnecessary detainment, he is suggesting Immigration hear their appeal for residency one more time. The judge has no control over the decision but will forward the papers for another review. Ma's eyes are blank as she asks if Abba may go now, and the judge agrees, advising them to put the money in a safe place. After Abba is photographed and fingerprinted again, the lawyer says they should hear from Immigration in a few weeks, and his matter-of-fact tone makes Nadira realize she did not save Abba. Yet, maybe she did in a small way by making the court stop and take a second look at her family. She cannot wait to tell Aisha.



Section 13: Chapter 16

Section 13: Chapter 16 Summary

At home, friends visit to celebrate Abba's release, and Nadira enjoys being the special one who sits at Abba's side. She realizes this cannot last after their guests leave, and there is tension in the air as Uncle and Auntie argue at night and Taslima continues to sneak out. After walking in the park on Sunday, Nadira, Abba and Ma return home to find an uproar. Uncle is furious because Aisha has helped Taslima run away to marry Tim since Uncle and Auntie are returning to Dhaka. Learning Aisha has been skipping school, Ma questions her eldest daughter who retreats into Taslima's room. Nadira follows and suggests they talk to Mr. Friedlander, but Aisha insists it does not matter. Auntie and Uncle return to Dhaka four days later. Mr. Rashid hopes the appeal will come through, but otherwise, the Hossains will try to go to Canada again, though Abba does not believe Canada will admit them; he does not believe there is a future for him there. Though Abba and Aisha are proud of what Nadira did, they cannot seem to be happy, and Nadira believes it is "because the two of them hoped so hard; when things started going wrong for us they broke inside" (page 143). Aisha does not open her college acceptance letters, and when a letter arrives from the U. S. Government with the date of their final appeal for residency, Aisha rips the acceptance letters, claiming they will be deported and mocking her sister's faith that she could save them. Unable to stay at the apartment, Nadira goes to visit Ali-uncle but learns he has disappeared. Grieving, she goes to the playground across the street and sits on the monkey bars, considering her family's predicament. Aisha joins Nadira and apologizes for her behavior, but she still does not believe they have a future here. When she laments ruining her chance to be valedictorian, Nadira says it is her fault for messing up so much, but Aisha says she cannot act like a representative for the class when she does not even know where she will live. Feeling Ali-uncle telling her to look up, Nadira looks at the stormy sky and feels her elders breathing down on her, and she realizes it is not just about breathing; "it's about making yourself clear as water, honest and calm" (page 147). Nadira tells Aisha about being in front of the judge, explaining it was not just about showing them her mistake but about making them see her family. It may not be the only reason Abba was released, but she knows it made a difference. Nadira always thought Aisha was brave, but now she thinks she is a coward because she gave up when everything stopped being easy. She always tries to blend in, but sometimes she needs to make them really see her. Silent at first, Aisha asks how to do that, and Nadira says they are going to tell Mr. Friedlander everything and insist Aisha has to be valedictorian. When Aisha objects Ma and Abba will not allow it, Nadira insists "sometimes we have to do the right thing. In our own way" (page 148).

Section 13: Chapter 16 Analysis

Section 13: Chapter 16



In a family, one thinks it is always the same way. Aisha has always been the star, but Nadira has become the person slowly guiding them from behind. Ma and Abba praise her for using her head in the right way as they take the bus home, and looking at her reflection in the bus window, Nadira knows it is true. At home, friends visit to celebrate Abba's return, and though Nadira is embarrassed by the attention, she enjoys being the special one for a change. Only after the guests leave and the apartment becomes quiet again does Nadira realize this cannot last. The family tries to return to normal over the next few days, and Abba deposits his money in a bank in Flushing, but Nadira feels the tension in the air as Auntie and Uncle argue after everyone sleeps and Taslima sneaks off when no one is looking. While Abba, Ma and Nadira take a walk on Sunday and Auntie and Uncle visit friends, Aisha and Taslima stay at home, but they return to find the apartment in an uproar as Auntie and Uncle pack. When Ma asks what is wrong, Uncle tells them Aisha has not gone to school in days or done anything except help Taslima run away to live with Tim who she plans to marry to spite her parents since they have decided to return to Bangladesh, feeling it is better to be poor in a country where they are wanted than to live like this. Ma asks Aisha about school, graduation and her interview, but Aisha silently retreats into Taslima's bedroom while Ma and Abba stand frozen. Following Aisha, Nadira asks how she can let everything go like this, and Aisha responds she is too ashamed to even answer Mr. Friedlander's notes. Nadira suggests explaining everything to Mr. Friedlander, but Aisha insists it seems too far away and does not matter. Four days later, Auntie and Uncle return to Dhaka, leaving the apartment feeling too large for only the four Hossains. Ma has changed, always wearing her purple coat and leading Abba instead of walking behind him as she bustles around, planning for the future. In opposition, Abba is still and quiet, withdrawing into a depressed mood. College acceptance letters begin arriving, but Aisha leaves them unopened because they cannot afford tuition anyway. When a letter arrives from the U. S. Government informing them the final appeal on their residency status will be June 12, Aisha rips the papers, claiming the appeal is just a formality and they will be deported. She mocks Nadira for believing she could change the mind of the U. S. Government. Unable to stay in the apartment, Nadira rushes to Ali-uncle's store where she learns he disappeared. Distraught, she goes to the playground across the street where Ma brought her and Aisha when they first moved to Queens. Sitting on top of the monkey bars, she looks at the people, thinking maybe they would sponsor her family if they only asked. Joining her sister, Aisha apologizes for her previous behavior. She cannot believe Ali is gone, but it proves Abba is right: they do not have a future here anyway. Aisha is upset about ruining her chance to become valedictorian, but she cannot be a representative for her class if she does not know where she will live. Nadira tells her sister about standing in front of the judge and making him see their family, insisting it made a difference. She accuses Aisha of being a coward for giving up when things got difficult. Aisha always tries to blend in, but she needs to make them see her sometimes. Nadira decides they will tell Mr. Friedlander what has been going on and insist Aisha must be valedictorian, despite the fact that Abba and Ma would not approve. As Aisha looks uncertain about jumping from the monkey bars, Nadira holds out her hands, assuring her it is not that far, and Aisha jumps down, toward her sister.



Section 14: Chapters 17 and 18

Section 14: Chapters 17 and 18 Summary

In Chapter 17, Aisha takes the stage to give her valedictorian speech, and when she hesitates, Nadira signals her to go ahead. The audience gasps when Aisha introduces herself, admitting she is an illegal alien. She continues that her family came to America eight years ago on a tourist visa and stayed. Abba worked, and the first lawyer they hired to make them legal disappeared. They hired another lawyer, but it did not work. In those days, they were people that Americans did not see, but they needed each other. Then, two planes crashed into two towers, and the invisible people became visible, became dangerous terrorists. Wanting to do right for his family, Abba drove to Canada, but he was arrested because they accused him of giving money to a suspicious organization. Though this was not true, "none of those things tell you who he is or who we are" (page 152). Aisha admits she got scared, yet she does not tell her peers this to make them pity her but to understand what happened to her father. For all those years, her family believed they belonged here, that they could hope for a future, but the government took that hope away and broke Abba's heart as well as Aisha's. Now, "all I ask of you is to see me for who I am. Aisha. I spell my name not with a y or an e, but with an i. See me. I live with you. I live near you. I go to your school; I eat in your cafeteria; I take the same classes. Now I am your valedictorian. I want what you want. I want a future" (page 152). Crying, Aisha thanks her audience and disappears from the stage.

In Chapter 18, the Hossains rush to get ready for their final appeal. When they stop for lunch at McDonald's, Nadira and Aisha joke about going to Canada, but Abba chides them for acting like it is a certainty that they will be granted asylum. Ma urges Abba that it is time to go. As they park at the courthouse, Nadira recalls what Abba said after his last meeting with Mr. Rashid, "there are no guarantees. This is the last chance. We've run out of options" (page 157). The Hossains nervously enter the courthouse and joins Mr. Rashid. The judge, a young woman, enters and frowns as she looks at the files. She tells Abba he is in violation of his visa and has put his entire family in jeopardy, pointing out it is the applicant's responsibility to ensure the materials are filed properly. Abba nods, dejected, but the judge says it is an unusual case and grants the Hossains permission to file a new application for residency, promising the papers will be processed and accepted properly this time. The air seems to explode with light as she bangs the gavel. Crying silently, Abba ignores Mr. Rashid and looks at his wife and daughters who link arms. He asks if they are ready to go home now.

Section 14: Chapters 17 and 18 Analysis

In Chapter 17, Aisha shakes as she rises from her first row seat, and Nadira knows because Aisha refused to give her speech unless her sister sat with the graduates. Somewhere behind them, Ma and Abba sit with Taslima who is now married to Tim and



says someday she will exist in this country on paper. Not far from them is Cassie David, a reporter friend of Mr. Friedlander who wrote an anonymous article about the Hossains after Mr. Friedlander told her their story. Stepping on stage, Aisha pulls back from the microphone, but Nadira signals her to do it. Addressing the audience, Aisha admits she is an illegal immigrant and describes her family's trials since coming to America, including Abba's detainment. She explains that the government broke Abba's heart and her own when they took away their hope for a future. She tells her peers that she is one of them and hopes for the same thing that they do: a future.

In Chapter 18, Nadira dreams her family is swimming inside a map with Canada on one side and a courthouse on the other. Unsure which way to go, they grope forward blindly. In the morning, Ma hurries her family to get ready because they cannot be late. Ironically, she is the one running late, but she looks strangely beautiful as she emerges in a western style dress and announces "it's time" (page 155). As they drive, Ma nervously pats her bag which contains everything they need: the papers for the appeal, directions to Toronto and folders for Aisha for university. When Aisha lectures Nadira about the food as they stop at McDonald's, Nadira claims she will only eat Canadian food if they go to Canada. She read a book about Canada but did not learn much. Abba chides them for acting as if getting asylum in Canada is a certainty. He has been quiet and downcast since Mr. Rashid told him the appeal will either grant the Hossains residency or they will be deported in thirty days. Abba is braced for the worst. Abba looks at his feet as if he never wants to go, but saying it is time to leave, Ma urges him toward the car. At the courthouse, a guard asks for their IDs, and Abba tells him they have an important hearing, but the man waves them on like it is nothing. The Hossains go to court, knowing this is their last chance to become American residents. The judge looks at their file and chides Abba for violating his visa; however, she grants the Hossains permission to file a new application for residency, promising it will be processed properly this time and accepted. Abba is shocked, and he links arms with his family, asking if they are ready to go home now. As the Hossains leave the room, Nadira can feel the water pressing around them, "and we do as he taught us. We hold our breaths, then let them out, bit by bit. We push forward, into the unknown. Go" (page 159).



Section 15: Endnote

Section 15: Endnote Summary

After the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001, the U. S. Government cracked down on illegal immigrants and investigated Muslim communities. Every Muslim man over the age of eighteen was required to register, and illegals or anyone with a minor infraction on their visa was jailed, detained or deported. Though the registration program eventually ended, the FBI was given the power to raid homes and businesses and detain immigrants under the new Patriot Act. Many were jailed for months without legal representation, and some were abused. Their families were not allowed to visit, and the hearings were closed to the public. Uncertain of what would happen to them during this period, hundreds of immigrants fled to the Canadian border, but many were turned back and arrested by U. S. Immigration authorities. Many had lived in America for years and had children who were raised as Americans. This fictional book was inspired by these real events.

Section 15: Endnote Analysis

At the end of the novel, the author addresses the real-life events that occurred after the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2011. The government began targeting Muslim communities for investigations and enacted the Special Registration law which required Muslim men to register, and these men were often detained or deported. Though that program ended, the Patriot Act was then enacted, allowing the FBI to detain immigrants for suspicion of involvement with terrorist organizations. Immigrants were not granted legal representation, and their hearings were held in private. Many immigrants fled to Canada, but they were often sent back to America where they were arrested. "Ask Me No Questions" is based on these real events.



Characters

Nadira Hossain

Nadira Hossain is the main character of this novel as well as the narrator. She is a fourteen-year-old Bangladeshi girl and an illegal immigrant who lives in Queens, NY. After the Hossains are denied asylum in Canada, Abba is arrested for violating his visa upon their return to America, so he sends Nadira and Aisha back to school in Queens, NY. Aisha tells her younger sister that they are alone now and must work together, but Nadira refuses because she has always been jealous of her perfect sister. Uncle scares Nadira by telling her that becoming legal will not make people look at them differently, so when Aisha tells Nadira she is a candidate for valedictorian, Nadira tells her it does not matter since they will not be able to stay in America anyway. Nadira feels guilty for making her sister cry when she learns Abba is being held on suspicion of being involved with an illegal organization because he donated money to a local mosque. When Nadira and Aisha visit their lawyer, Mr. Rashid, he tells them they must wait and see, so Aisha tells Nadira they need to handle it themselves, but Nadira believes this is impossible.

Lonely at school the next day, Nadira realizes Aisha is the only one who can understand, and she tells her sister that maybe they can figure it out together. The sisters compose a letter to the head of immigration about how hard Abba works and about how the \$3000 he gave to the mosque was savings for his daughters' college tuition. Nadira accompanies Aisha to her Barnard interview, and talking to an Asian girl while Aisha is at the interview, Nadira sees herself at college for the first time. Back at school, Mr. Friedlander calls Nadira to the office to tell her that Aisha missed her interview at Barnard, and when Nadira asks Aisha why she did not go to the interview, Aisha admits she was scared; she thinks that maybe they cannot hurt her if she does not want so much. Learning that Abba's preliminary hearing is coming up, Nadira finds a mistake on his papers, but decides that she needs something bigger to save him. She calls Tareq to buy a fake ID but changes her mind as she recalls how Abba taught her to always choose right. Nadira takes a bus to Burlington and joins Ma for Abba's preliminary hearing in order to show the judge that Abba's name is spelled incorrectly and there is a case of mistaken identity. The judge releases Abba and promises that Immigration will hear the Hossains' final appeal for residency. After Aisha becomes depressed due to her belief that her family has no future in America, Nadira insists that Aisha needs to make people see her instead of blending in so much, so the girls talk to Mr. Friedlander about everything that has been going on. At the Hossains' final appeal for residency, the judge grants Abba permission to file the paperwork again, guaranteeing it will be processed correctly and accepted this time. Abba, Ma, Nadira, and Aisha go home.



Aisha Hossain

Aisha Hossain is Nadira's older sister. She is a seventeen-year-old Bangladeshi girl who illegally resides in America, but she is an exceptional student and is preparing to graduate high school and go to college. After the Hossains are denied asylum in Canada, Abba is arrested for violating his visa upon their return to America, so he sends Nadira and Aisha back to school in Queens, NY. Aisha tells her younger sister that they are alone now and must work together, but Nadira refuses because she has always been jealous of her perfect sister. Upon their return to school, Mr. Friedlander tells Aisha that he has arranged a college interview at Barnard for her. Uncle scares Nadira by telling her that becoming legal will not make people look at them differently, so when Aisha tells Nadira she is a candidate for valedictorian, Nadira tells her it does not matter since they will not be able to stay in America anyway. Nadira feels guilty for making her sister cry when she learns Abba is being held on suspicion of being involved with an illegal organization because he donated money to a local mosque. When Nadira and Aisha visit their lawyer, Mr. Rashid, he tells them they must wait and see, so Aisha tells Nadira they need to handle it themselves, but Nadira believes this is impossible.

Lonely at school the next day, Nadira realizes Aisha is the only one who can understand, and she tells her sister that maybe they can figure it out together. The sisters compose a letter to the head of immigration about how hard Abba works and about how the \$3000 he gave to the mosque was savings for his daughters' college tuition. When the police arrest Uncle for his expired visa, Aisha blames herself for being unable to convince the police to release him, and she becomes even more depressed when no one responds to her letter, beginning to act strange and avoid her friends. Nadira accompanies Aisha to her Barnard interview, and talking to an Asian girl while Aisha is at the interview, Nadira sees herself at college for the first time. Back at school, Mr. Friedlander calls Nadira to the office to tell her that Aisha missed her interview at Barnard, and when Nadira asks Aisha why she did not go to the interview, Aisha admits she was scared; she thinks that maybe they cannot hurt her if she does not want so much. Aisha helps Taslima run away to marry Tim since Uncle and Auntie are returning to Dhaka. Agreeing with her father that her family has no future in America, Aisha throws out her college acceptance letters when the Hossains receive their letter scheduling their residency hearing, saying there is no point since she will not be here. Nadira insists that Aisha needs to make people see her instead of blending in so much, so the girls talk to Mr. Friedlander about everything that has been going on. During her valedictorian speech, Aisha admits that she is an illegal immigrant, tells her peers about her family's trials and claims she wants the same thing they want, a future. At the Hossains' final appeal for residency, the judge grants Abba permission to file the paperwork again, guaranteeing it will be processed correctly and accepted this time. Abba, Ma, Nadira, and Aisha all go home.



Abba Hossain

Abba Hossain is Aisha and Nadira's father. After trying to seek asylum for his family in Canada, he is held in INS detention upon his return to America due to his expired visa. Nadira and Aisha work hard to try to save their father, but Abba is very depressed after his release, no longer believing his family has a future in America. He cries silently when the judge at the final appeal for his residency promises that his paperwork will be processed properly and accepted this time, and Abba happily returns home with his wife and daughters.

Ma Hossain

Ma Hossain is Aisha and Nadira's mother. She is quiet and afraid to go out much while they live in Queens. While Abba is detained by the INS, Ma stays at the Salvation Army shelter in Burlington, making friends and learning to take the bus. She is optimistic after Abba is released and begins leading him around like he is a much older man.

Taslima

Taslima is Nadira and Aisha's older cousin. She often angers Uncle, her father, because she is opinionated and acts like an American. She is involved in protests against the prosecution of immigrants. Taslima also fights with her parents about dating Tim, a white law student. When Uncle decides to return to Dhaka, Taslima runs away to marry Tim.

Uncle

Uncle is Taslima's father, and he is very old-fashioned. He is arrested by the INS for a short time due to possessing an expired visa. Aisha and Nadira live with Uncle and Auntie while Abba is detained. Uncle decides to return to Dhaka, preferring to live poor in a country where he is accepted.

Auntie

Auntie is Taslima's mother with whom Nadira and Aisha live while Abba is detained. She often fights with Taslima about staying out late and dating Tim. Auntie returns to Dhaka with Uncle.

Tareq

Tareq is a young Bangladeshi man who tries to sell Nadira a fake ID for Abba. Aisha thinks Tareq is trashy and refuses to deal with him.



Mr. Friedlander

Mr. Friedlander is a counselor at Flushing High who sets up Aisha's college interview at Barnard. Concerned by Aisha's odd behavior which could jeopardize her nomination for valedictorian, Mr. Friedlander questions Nadira, and later, Nadira convinces Aisha to confide in him about what has been going on with their family.

Tim

Tim is a white law student who Taslima dates and eventually marries. He tries to help Taslima's family understand the new immigrant laws.

Mr. Rashid

Mr. Rashid is the second lawyer that the Hossains hire to make them legal. Aisha and Nadira turn to him after Abba is detained, but he tells them they must wait and see. Mr. Rashid accompanies the Hossains to their final appeal for residency where they are permitted to submit their application again and promised it will be accepted this time.

Cassie David

Cassie David is a reporter friend that Mr. Friedlander calls after Aisha and Nadira confides in him about their family's problems. She writes an article about the Hossain family, omitting their identities.

Ali-uncle

Ali-uncle is Abba's friend who Nadira and Aisha call uncle as a sign of respect. Nadira often helps Ali-uncle in his newspaper store after school. Aisha asks Ali-uncle to write a letter explaining that Abba saved his \$3000 at the mosque for his daughters' college tuition. Nadira is very upset when she learns that Ali-uncle has disappeared.

Lily Yee

Lily Yee is Nadira's best friend who is often upset by her parents' fighting; however, Nadira does not discuss her family's problems with Lily. Nadira helps Lily by investigating and learning that Lily's father is cheating on her mother with a manicurist who works for him. Lily thanks Nadira for figuring it out, though the knowledge causes her to cry.



Objects/Places

Boston

At the beginning of the novel, the Hossains are driving through Boston on their way to Canada and this makes Aisha cry since she has always wanted to attend Harvard.

Dhaka

Dhaka is the small village in Bangladesh where the Hossains are from.

Queens, NY

The Hossains live in Queens, NY after immigrating to America.

Canada

This novel begins with the Hossains driving to Canada shortly after 9/11 to apply for asylum, but due to the influx of immigrants, they are denied asylum, and Abba is arrested upon their return to America.

Flushing High

Aisha and Nadira attend school at Flushing High.

Barnard

Aisha has a college interview at Barnard, but she skips the interview for fear they will tell her she does not belong and arrest her.

Burlington

Abba is incarcerated in Burlington, and Ma stays in Burlington during his detainment. Nadira runs away to Burlington to accompany Ma to Abba's trial, and she proves that Abba was mistaken for another man, so he is released.



Uncle and Auntie's Apartment

Aisha and Nadira live at Uncle and Auntie's apartment while Abba is detained. After Abba is released, Abba and Ma move in also, and the Hossains continue to live in the apartment after Uncle and Auntie return to Dhaka.

Ali-uncle's Shop

Nadira sometimes helps out after school at Ali-uncle's newsstand. She is upset when she finds it closed and learns Ali-Uncle has disappeared.

Valedictorian Speech

At her graduation ceremony, Aisha gives the valedictorian speech. She admits she is an illegal alien and tells her audience about Abba's arrest, explaining her family believed they belonged here and had a future, but the government took that away. She lives and goes to school with her peers and she wants what they want to have - a future.



Themes

Trials of Illegal Immigrants

The main theme of "Ask Me No Questions" is the trials that illegal immigrants face, especially following the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001. Before 9/11, these illegal immigrants are invisible to Americans, but they are all treated like dangerous terrorists after the attack. All Muslim men over the age of eighteen are required to register, and many who register are imprisoned or deported. The novel begins with the Hossain family travelling to Canada to apply for asylum because of the tightening restrictions on immigrants following 9/11. Unfortunately, they are denied asylum due to the recent influx of immigrants. Upon their return to America, Abba is arrested for possessing an expired visa. Just when his family expects him to be released, Abba's detainment is prolonged because he is suspected of being involved with an illegal organization.

Nadira tells about her family's issues in their quest to become legal which began with the first lawyer they hired who was investigated for fraud. The Hossains hired Mr. Rashid next, but he has not yet been able to properly process their residency paperwork. When Immigration comes to Uncle and Auntie's apartment, Uncle is also arrested for his expired visa. Aisha becomes despondent after her letter meant to save Abba goes unanswered, and she loses interest in school and her friends because she no longer has hope for a future in America. Abba also becomes depressed after he is released, not believing that his final appeal for residency will go well. Aisha spends her life trying to blend in with American kids, but Nadira tells her that sometimes she needs to make them see her, leading to Aisha's valedictorian speech in which she admits she is an illegal alien and tells her audience about her family's problems.

Courage

An important theme in this novel is courage. Abba and Ma demonstrate their courage by their decision to immigrate to America, and after the Special Registration law is enacted following 9/11, Abba decides to take his family to Canada to apply for asylum because he feels it is best for his family, despite the fact that he knows he will be arrested if Canada denies him asylum and he is forced to return to America. When Abba is first detained, Aisha is confident that she and Nadira can save him, but she loses her courage as things become more difficult. Meanwhile, Ma finds courage while Abba is detained, improving her English and learning how to take a bus.

Nadira also finds courage, and when she finds a mistake on Abba's paperwork, she runs away to Burlington to present her findings to the court, proving that Abba's case is one of mistaken identity. Nadira encourages her sister to have courage also, leading to Aisha giving a heartrending speech about her family's predicament at her graduation. The Hossains are terrified when they go to the final appeal for residency, but luckily, they are granted permission to file for residency again, and the judge promises the



paperwork will be processed properly and accepted this time. Taslima is never afraid and Auntie notes that Taslima will always fight, even when it is time to run.

Fitting In

One of the important themes that occurs in "Ask Me No Questions" is the concept of fitting in. Aisha always tries to blend in with her American peers, and the Hossain family attempts to blend in to American culture, fearing what will happen to them if they stand out. Nadira believes that it hurts Abba to hide so much, though. Nadira never feels like she belongs in her family because she is the only one that is overweight and she is not a star like Aisha. After Abba is arrested and her attempts to save him prove futile, Aisha loses interest in fitting in. She no longer wants to be a star and stand out, feeling they cannot hurt her if she does not want so much.

At Abba's preliminary hearing, Nadira forces the judge and the court to take a second look at Abba, and she is convinced that is at least part of the reason he is released. Because of this, she encourages Aisha to make people see her instead of blending in. Aisha's valedictorian speech is about her family's status as illegal immigrants and the trials they have faced as a result; she finally allow her peers to see her for who she truly is, though she is still like them because she also wants a future. The Hossains are finally granted residency at the end of the novel, showing that they fit in because they belong in the U. S., but they are only able to achieve this victory by making the court truly see them.

Style

Point of View

The point of view used in "Ask Me No Questions" is the first person and limited. This is proven by the fact that Nadira, the narrator, is only privy to her own thoughts and feelings, in addition to what she witnesses or is told. The narrator is also reliable as far as it is addressed in this novel. Nothing she says is ever disproven or questioned. The point of view that is used in this novel is important to the plot and its message because it focuses on the feelings of a young Muslim Bangladeshi girl who was mostly raised in America, and it explores how she and her family are affected by the post-9/11 strict immigrant laws and security measures. It allows readers to see the inequity and injustice of the situation as the government targeted immigrants based on race and religion.

The distribution of exposition and dialogue in this novel is fairly equal. This distribution is used to allow the reader to focus on Nadira and her surroundings, particularly her family. This is effective as the goal of the novel is to demonstrate the trials that immigrant families faced after the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001 when anyone of certain national backgrounds were seen as dangerous terrorists. The author focuses on how this affected individuals who were thus viewed. The novel is told from the viewpoint of Nadira, though she also shares the feelings of her family members.

Setting

"Ask Me No Questions" is set in the real world, in America. The novel occurs shortly after 9/11/2001, presumably in the first half of 2002. The main characters are illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, but some of the secondary characters are Americans. This serves to show the difference between the immigrants and their American-born neighbors and peers. Nadira and Aisha strongly feel this difference, especially after Abba is arrested when they realize America is not truly their home. Their goal throughout the novel is to become American citizens.

At the beginning of the novel, the Hossains are driving through Boston on their way to Canada, and this makes Aisha cry since she has always wanted to attend Harvard. Dhaka is the small village in Bangladesh where the Hossains are from. The Hossains live in Queens, NY after immigrating to America. This novel begins with the Hossains driving to Canada shortly after 9/11 to apply for asylum, but due to the influx of immigrants, they are denied asylum, and Abba is arrested upon their return to America. Aisha and Nadira attend school at Flushing High. Aisha has a college interview at Barnard, but she skips the interview for fear they will tell her she does not belong and arrest her. Abba is incarcerated in Burlington, and Ma stays in Burlington during his detention. Nadira runs away to Burlington to accompany Ma to Abba's trial, and she proves that Abba was mistaken for another man, so he is released. Aisha and Nadira

live at Uncle and Auntie's apartment while Abba is detained. After Abba is released, Abba and Ma move in also, and the Hossains continue to live in the apartment after Uncle and Auntie return to Dhaka. Nadira sometimes helps out after school at Ali-Uncle's newsstand. She is upset when she finds it closed and learns Ali-Uncle has disappeared.

Language and Meaning

The language used in this novel is casual and informal, though it is generally grammatically correct. The writing style used is that which would be familiar to an American teenager, and since Nadira is the narrator, this makes her sufferings more tangible to the target audience as it allows her to seem like a peer that could go to their school. The language also does a great job of conveying Nadira's mixed emotions and her feeling of losing her home after Abba is arrested. It allows teen readers to associate with Nadira and feel what she feels about her unjust situation. This novel's language characterizes the racist environment following the terrorist attacks on 9/11/2001, and it shows the differences between Americans and Bangladeshis, as well as the differences between the older generation of Bangladeshis and their children who were predominately raised in America.

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Structure

"Ask Me No Questions" is divided into eighteen chapters with the addition of a short Endnote detailing the actual events following 9/11 upon which the fictional novel is based. The novel is comprised of one hundred, sixty-two pages, and the chapters average approximately eight pages in length. The fairly short chapters are numbered sequentially, rather than being titled. They are somewhat vague about actual events, but they are quite detailed concerning Nadira's emotions about the way her family is affected by these events. Each chapter encompasses a short amount of time as the entire novel spans only a few months.

"Ask Me No Questions" by Marina Budhos is the story of a family of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and the trials they face in America after the tragedy of 9/11. When Abba is detained by the INS for violating his visa, Nadira and Aisha attempt to save their father as they struggled with the daily challenges of finding their place in a country they now



realize is not their home. "Ask Me No Questions" is a heartrending tale of the horrors one family is forced to endure after the U. S. tightens immigration regulations following 9/11. The pace of the novel is fairly quick, and it is easy to read textually, though the distressing nature of the content makes it challenging to get through at times. The novel contains frequent flashbacks to the Hossains' past in Bangladeshi as well as their early time in America. Overall, the novel is an enjoying read, despite the sad tone at times, and the heartwarming ending makes it worthwhile.

Quotes

"And in my head, words keep drumming: Special Registration. Deportation. Green card. Residency. Asylum. We live our lives by these words, but I don't understand them. All I know is we're driving straight through to that squiggle of a line on the map, the Canadian border, to apply for asylum" (Chapter 1, p. 1-2).

"Year after year we went on, not thinking about Abba's expired passport in the dresser drawer, or how the heat and the phone bills were in a second cousin's name. You forget. You forget you don't really exist here, that this really isn't your home. One day, we said, we'd get the paperwork right. In the meantime we kept going. It happens. All the time" (Chapter 1, p. 8).

"It hurts, this leaving. We weren't supposed to do this. We were supposed to stay and then one day roll the word in our mouths: home" (Chapter 2, p.12).

"Abba loves this country in his own way; it's like this bowl he carries in his heart- so full, so ready to trust. And right now, as we head to the highway, all I can hear is the sound of his heart shattering" (Chapter 2, p. 18).

"'Land disappears, land appears- this is our life.' That's why I'm fascinated with maps: They tell one story, yet no matter where people draw the borders, the land tells another. And I like putting the two parts together, figuring out the bigger story" (Chapter 3, p. 20).

"Oh, Nadira. It's just us now. Uncle and Auntie can only do so much. We're not in Canada, we're not in America, we're not in Bangladesh. We're on our own... So we have to stick together. Not fight" (Chapter 4, p. 28).

"There's places you can buy what you need. You think everyone gets a green card playing by the rules?" (Chapter 5, p. 34).

"In this country we are still only visitors. We must be very careful. If we offend or break the law, we may bring down the wrath of our hosts" (Chapter 5, p. 36).

"You don't have a good job, it's not so easy. That husband of yours, he's a dreamer, and one day his dreams are going to get him in trouble" (Chapter 6, p. 43).

"I've never made my sister cry before. It seems impossible. Aisha is too strong, too smart for me. But this is different. It's like having a new kind of power, black and ugly, like what Uncle did to me this morning. And the weird thing is: I like it" (Chapter 6, p. 52).

"None of that matters anymore. Not if Abba is in detention. They've hauled him off as if he's a criminal or terrorist or has something to hide. We have to clear up this whole business. So Ma doesn't have to live in a shelter, and I can go to college, and we can just get on with our life" (Chapter 8, p. 63).



"Mr. Rashid, we hired you because we trusted you to do the best job you can. My parents may not be as educated or rich or as desirable as you other clients over there. But we count too" (Chapter 8, p. 65).

"This is my education, Aisha. That's what you should be doing. Not some little letter. This is political. And the only way to fight a political situation is to be political." (Chapter 9, p. 75).

"If you're going to fight an enemy, you have to understand their argument. You can't just demand. That's not how you're going to win, Taslima. You have to make a good case. Like, if they let my family stay, I'll be going to college and making a contribution. Or that your Abba contributes all the time. Think of all those big fancy dinners that get pulled off in the city because of him. You have to speak to their fears. You can't harangue them into letting you in" (Chapter 9, p. 76).

"Honey, your uncle don't even have his papers right. What kind of liberties you think he has? Save it. You want to talk about rights, you don't have a right to sit in this area. We're just tryin' to make it easier for you folks" (Chapter 10, p. 85).

"There's plenty of room, Nadira. You just have to learn how to grab it" (Chapter 11, p. 89).

"I could get thrown out of this country any day now." (Chapter 11, p. 95).

"What is there to tell? They humiliated me. A grown man. They put lights on my face for hours. They gave me no food. They treated me like a liar. I was lucky. So many, they stayed for a long time now." (Chapter 11, p. 102).

"Aisha, you've got to forget about everything that's going on at home. Abba would be upset if you let it get to you." (Chapter 12, p. 105).

"I look at her, amazed. She's American-born. I can tell by her accent and the way she holds herself. I didn't even know you could do something like that. I sure didn't know a girl could do something like that." (Chapter 12, p. 106).

"Nadira, I've always been like these guys out here, running. You know me. I'll run in any weather. You give me a test, I'll do ten times better than you expect. I'll do anything. But what if I put myself forward, and then they take everything away? And then I realized. I can't do this anymore. It's too hard. Too big. Nothing's working. Not the letters. Nothing. Maybe if I just stop wanting so much, they can't hurt me. I don't want to stand out anymore, Nadira. It hurts too much. I don't want to stand out. Not anymore" (Chapter 12, p. 112-113).

"If you know how to breathe, you can get through anything." (Chapter 13, p. 116).

"This isn't one of those fake social security cards you can buy for not much. This is the real thing. A real social security number, a green card or a U. S. passport. Maybe it's from someone who won a green card in the Diversity Lottery and decided to sell it. Or



someone who left for back home, never came back. You can't get busted with this stuff" (Chapter 14, p. 121).

"My family doesn't seem to be so close anymore...Maybe that's what living in America does to you: It spreads you into far distances until you're just little bits rolling apart. It hurts me even to have a thought like that." (Chapter 15, p. 126).

"I want to say that sometimes you can't know who a person is. Sometimes they don't know who they are either. They can appear to be one thing- like me, fat and slow and lazy- but you can look at them another way too- and see something else" (Chapter 15, p. 132).

"Mr. and Mrs. Hossain, there does appear to be a mistake in identification. I apologize, Mr. Hossain. You see how it is here. We're coordinating with so many agencies, and there's so many cases- we're overwhelmed... The situation here is very serious. A named mix-up can't clear up all the other discrepancies. You are still in violation of your visa and could face deportation proceedings... However it's clear you've been given quite the runaround these past few years. And in light of your unnecessary and prolonged detainment, I've suggested that Immigration hear your appeal for residency one more time" (Chapter 15, p. 135).

"Because I've decided we should go back to Bangladesh. Better I am poor in a country where I can feel at home. Where I am wanted, than to live like this" (Chapter 16, p. 140).

"I think it's because the two of them hoped so hard; when things started going wrong for us they broke inside" (Chapter 16, p. 143).

"It wasn't just that I showed them their mistake. It was more than that. I let them see us. And maybe that's not the only reason Abba was released. But it made a difference. I know it did... I always thought you were the brave one. But now I think you're a coward, Aisha. You gave up because everything stopped being easy. Just because you couldn't conquer this thing like you always did. I think, Aisha, that you're always thinking about doing or saying the right thing. Wearing the right clothes. Blending in. But sometimes...sometimes you have to tell them who you are. What you really think. You have to make them see us" (Chapter 16, p. 147).

"I tell none of this to make you pity me. I understand there are bad people in the world. But you have to understand what happened to my father. Because for all those years, my Abba- all of us- believed. They let us in, and they let us believe that we belonged. That we could hope for a future here. That one day I could go to college and carry on. And then they took that hope away. They broke my father's heart. And they broke mine, too. All I ask of you is to see me for who I am. Aisha. I spell my name not with a y or an e, but with an i. See me. I live with you. I live near you. I go to your school; I eat in your cafeteria; I take the same classes. Now I am your valedictorian. I want what you want. I want a future" (Chapter 17, p. 152).

"This is an unusual case. I grant you permission to file a new application for residency. Your papers will be accepted and processed. Correctly this time" (Chapter 18, p. 158).



Topics for Discussion

Compare and contrast Aisha and Nadira.

Why do the Hossains go to Canada?

Why is Abba arrested?

How does Abba's arrest affect Nadira and Aisha?

Who is Taslima, and how does she cause her family grief?

Why does Aisha skip her interview at Barnard?

How does Nadira save Abba?

What is the significance of Aisha's valedictorian speech?

What happens at the Hossains' final appeal for residency?