

# *Red, White, and Whole* by Rajani LaRocca—Chapter Summaries

## Chapter 1: "Two"

Reha opens the novel by describing the fundamental division of her life. She has two lives—one that is Indian and one that is not. This duality extends to her friendships: she has two best friends, one who is Indian and one who is not. During the week, she inhabits the American world at school, and on the weekends, she lives in the Indian world with her family and their community. She observes that both worlds contain the same basic human elements—"gossip and laughter / music and silence / friendship"—but only one of them contains her parents, the Indian one. This opening poem immediately establishes the central tension of the novel: Reha does not feel fully whole because her life is split down the middle.

## Chapter 2: "Give and Take"

This chapter reaches back to Reha's birth. Her mother nearly died bringing her into the world, and the poem poetically describes how her mother chose to stay alive, telling the Lord of Death to "wait a while longer." Because of the severity and trauma of Reha's birth, her mother was left unable to have any more children. Reha is therefore her parents' only child—a fact that will carry enormous emotional and thematic weight throughout the novel. This chapter also introduces, very subtly and early, the specter of death hovering near the mother, which foreshadows the central tragedy of the story.

## Chapter 3: "Girls Just Want to Have Fun"

The year is 1983, and Reha is 13 years old. She listens to Cyndi Lauper's pop anthem "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" and identifies with it deeply—she wants to be like everyone else. Her mother, Amma, explains the family's difference from American families: they work hard, dress modestly, and focus on what matters for success. Reha listens, but she is deeply conflicted. America is the only home she has ever known—she was born here—and yet she is consistently made to feel that her family's Indian values set her apart. This conflict between who she is at home and who she wants to be in the wider world is one of the novel's primary engines.

## Chapter 4: "First Memory"

Reha shares her earliest memory, from when she was three years old. She and her parents are outside together, looking up at the moon. Her father tells her that her mother is named after the moon—Amma's name, Punam, means "moon" in their language. Amma then tells little Reha that her own name means "star." This gentle, luminous memory establishes the warmth and

tenderness of Reha's family life and introduces the celestial imagery—moon and star—that will recur in the novel.

### **Chapter 5: "Our Home"**

Reha describes her parents' immigration story. Before she was born, they lived in New York City. Life was difficult financially, but they were happy and now look back on those early years with fondness. By the time the novel takes place, they have settled in a "small, midwestern city" where they are more financially stable. There are not many other Indian families in their city, but Reha and her parents are friends with every one of them, "regardless of language or religion." This detail subtly points toward the diversity within Indian culture itself, and to the way immigrant communities form bonds of solidarity across cultural boundaries.

### **Chapter 6: "The Star"**

Reha reflects on what kind of star she is. She wonders whether she is cold and distant, like a faraway star that gives no warmth, or warm and life-giving, like the sun. Her parents rarely call her by her given name, Reha. Instead, they call her *kanna*, which is a Tamil term of endearment meaning "darling" or "dear one." This chapter is brief but quietly emotional, revealing how deeply Reha craves a sense of her own identity and worth.

### **Chapter 7: "Sunny"**

This chapter introduces Sunny, whose real name is Sunita. Sunny is Reha's best Indian friend. The two girls have known each other since they were two years old and are only a month apart in age. Despite their closeness, they are very different people: Sunny "wears the latest clothes," has her own phone line in her bedroom, and dreams of becoming an actress. Reha attends a private school, while Sunny goes to a different, public school. Reha sometimes wishes she could attend the same school as Sunny, because it would make the two halves of her life feel "whole for once." Yet despite their differences, Reha says they are as close as twins and never fight.

### **Chapter 8: "Red and White"**

Reha recalls being six years old and watching her mother prepare for a party. Amma is putting on a beautiful sari, and Reha asks whether she wore white to her wedding. Amma explains that she wore red, because "red is an auspicious color—lucky—for brides" in Hindu culture. Christians wear white for weddings, Amma explains, but Hindus wear white for funerals. Amma wore white to her own mother's funeral. She was not, however, able to attend her father's funeral, because by then she was already living in America. This conversation introduces the important symbolic contrast between the colors red and white that will run through the entire novel, and it also foreshadows grief and loss—Amma's own experience of losing her mother, and the losses still to come.

## **Chapter 9: "Rachel"**

Rachel is introduced as Reha's best friend at school. She wears glasses and does not wear makeup. She is described as very funny, smart, and self-assured in a way that Reha admires and wishes she could emulate. The two girls are always together at school. Near the end of the chapter, Reha mentions that in English class she has been assigned a new project partner—a boy whose "face is as still as stone." This is the reader's first glimpse of Pete, though he is not yet named.

## **Chapter 10: "Bindi"**

Reha recalls a memory from when she was seven. Her mother had recently started a new job in a hospital laboratory. One morning, as Amma is getting ready for work, she tries on different bindis—small decorative dots worn by many Hindu women in the center of the forehead. She explains to Reha that at work, people often ask her about the bindi "because there aren't that many people here who are Hindu." More troublingly, her boss has asked her not to wear her bindi at work, because it makes coworkers and patients uncomfortable. When Reha asks whether this makes her sad, Amma says yes—and wipes the bindi away. This is one of the novel's most quietly devastating moments, illustrating the way immigrant women are pressured to erase visible markers of their cultural and religious identity in order to be accepted.

## **Chapter 11: "Amma's Orbit"**

This chapter is a loving portrait of Amma's extraordinary daily labor. She is "always in motion," waking early to make hot breakfasts for Reha and her father, going to work, picking Reha up from school, preparing snacks, cooking dinner, and then hand-repairing or embroidering clothes in the evenings. Every night, she tucks Reha in with the same words: "Take rest, study hard, make us proud." Reha is trying, she says, to follow her mother's instructions. This chapter establishes Amma as the emotional and practical center of the household—which makes her eventual absence all the more devastating.

## **Chapter 12: "The Discovery"**

Reha is eight years old. One day, she falls and badly skins her shin. The wound is serious, but strangely, it does not hurt—she is simply dazed by the shocking sight of her own blood. Her parents take her to the emergency room. There, a doctor patches her up and, crucially, takes the time to explain everything to her: how the scrape will heal from the inside out, how blood brings oxygen and white blood cells to fight germs, how skin will grow back over the wound. Reha is captivated. "And I know in that moment what I want to be when I grow up." Despite the fact that the sight of blood makes her faint, this is the moment Reha decides she wants to become a doctor—a dream that will shape the rest of the novel.

## **Chapter 13: "Daddy"**

Reha describes her father. He is an engineer—logical, precise, and kind. Amma calls him Daddy, and so does Reha. He tells his daughter that although she is smart, the most important quality in life is the willingness to work hard. He believes, firmly and lovingly, that Reha can be anything she wants to be. This chapter establishes Daddy as a gentle, supportive presence, though one whose domestic incompetence (revealed later) stands in sharp contrast to Amma's all-encompassing management of the household.

### **Chapter 14: "Drowning"**

Reha is ten. She becomes very ill—she has a rattle in her lungs and a pain in her chest. Her mother takes her to the doctor, and they discover she has pneumonia. Amma takes care of her as she drifts in and out of consciousness. This memory of illness foreshadows Amma's own illness later in the novel and also establishes a pattern: when Reha is sick, her mother is the one who is always there. The vulnerability of illness—both physical and emotional—is a thread that runs through the story.

### **Chapter 15: "Everyone Else"**

Reha compares herself to her peers. The other girls at school are nice, but recently they have started to care about different things: hair, fashion, makeup, and boys. Reha and Rachel are the only girls who still raise their hands in class and who are not (yet) preoccupied with those things—"at least not much," Reha admits honestly. While other kids spend their weekends at the mall, Reha and Rachel spend theirs with their families and with friends—"not the ones from school." This chapter highlights the social isolation that comes from being caught between worlds.

### **Chapter 16: "Red, White, and Whole"**

This is the chapter that provides context for the novel's title. Reha describes her mother's work in the hematology lab at the hospital, where Amma "spins the blood and counts the cells / in the Complete Blood Count." The chapter explains the components of blood: red blood cells, white blood cells, and plasma, which together make up "whole blood." This is why the book is titled *Red, White, and Whole*—it refers both to the components of blood and to the divided and then unified parts of Reha's identity.

### **Chapter 17: "Courtly Love"**

Reha and Pete are working together in English class. They are studying *The Sword in the Stone* and exploring the theme of courtly love. Reha shares a memory of Pete from when they were younger: he once fell off the playground equipment and cut his face on his glasses. What struck Reha at the time was that Pete did not cry at all. Now, Pete no longer wears glasses. Reha finds herself noticing his eyes and how they seem to change color. She tries not to stare at him. The pairing of Reha and Pete for the project sets in motion one of the novel's central relationships.

## Chapter 18: "Do You Speak Indian?"

In French class, another student asks Reha whether she speaks "Indian." The girl means it innocuously—Reha is so good at languages—but Reha is frustrated and somewhat hurt by the question. Inside, she wants to explain that India is a vast country with dozens of languages, cultures, and religions, and that she never studied Tamil or Kannada, her parents' languages, because "they only talk to me in English." But she does not say any of this. She simply says, "no." This chapter captures the exhausting experience of being reduced to a monolithic cultural identity and the emotional labor of navigating microaggressions in silence.

## Chapter 19: "When You Are Different"

Reha reflects on what it feels like to be visibly different at school. Her eyes, hair, and skin are "different from everyone else's," and she is acutely aware of the way people seem smug about noticing that difference. This is a short, painful chapter about the experience of being othered—of walking through a space and knowing that you do not look like you belong there, and that others notice.

## Chapter 20: "Sisters"

Reha describes how happy her mother is in America, despite the fact that she deeply misses her older sister, Prema, who still lives in Bangalore. Reha calls her aunt "Prema Auntie." Amma and Prema Auntie speak on the phone every Sunday without fail. Because Prema Auntie and her husband, Vinod Uncle, have no children, Reha feels the weight of being the family's only child—she is the one who "carries / everyone's hope / everyone's expectations."

## Chapter 21: "Brothers"

Reha's father has three brothers, and each of those brothers has two sons. Reha is the only girl among her six cousins. She gets to see them only every few years when the family makes the long journey to India. Her cousins all call her "sister," and when she and her parents return to America, Reha is left feeling profoundly lonely. She is the only girl in a sprawling male-dominated extended family, and the distance means she cannot form close bonds with them.

## Chapter 22: "Only"

Being an only child means Reha's house is quiet, and her parents focus all of their attention on her—which is both a blessing and a burden. She contrasts her home with Sunny's, which is loud and chaotic, full of siblings competing for attention. At Sunny's house, there are so many kids that Sunny's parents "don't notice if she wears lip gloss / or spends too much time on the phone." Reha envies this freedom, even as she understands that being an only child means she is deeply loved.

## **Chapter 23: "Birthday Parties"**

Birthday parties, once simple pleasures, have become more complicated now that Reha is a teenager. There are boys, and Reha feels awkward. Practically speaking, the vegetarian food is always the first to run out, leaving her with only cake and ice cream. She is self-conscious about her homemade clothes and worries she does not look right compared to other kids in their jeans and T-shirts. And sometimes, she is not invited to parties at all—which is, she says, the worst.

## **Chapter 24: "Embarrassing Things"**

Reha catalogs the things about her parents that embarrass her. Because they pay for her private school education, they are frugal elsewhere—they look for bargains on food and clothing. She is embarrassed by Amma's attempts to haggle at the grocery store, by her parents bragging about her grades and her desire to be a doctor, and by Amma's old, unreliable car. Yet there is one exception: when she and her mother are in that clunky car together and a song comes on the radio, Reha forgets her embarrassment entirely. Music, even here, is a bridge.

## **Chapter 25: "Rules"**

Reha and Rachel both have dietary restrictions, which forms a bond between them. Reha does not eat meat; Rachel cannot eat pork, bacon, or meat combined with dairy, in accordance with Jewish dietary laws. They both like eggs, however, and Amma makes a delicious egg curry for them "at least once a month." This chapter gently illustrates how different religious and cultural traditions can create unexpected points of connection.

## **Chapter 26: "Mustard Seeds"**

Mustard seeds are the foundation of Amma's cooking. Every dish she makes "starts and ends with mustard seeds." Amma is teaching Reha the difficult art of cooking them just right—they need to be heated until they pop but not so long that they burn. Reha has not yet mastered it, but she is "stunned by the world of taste / in something so tiny." This chapter establishes mustard seeds as a symbol of home, heritage, and the knowledge passed between mothers and daughters—a symbol that will return with great emotional weight later.

## **Chapter 27: "Pop Music"**

Reha loves pop music. She listens to it on the radio constantly. There is something almost magical, she says, about when a DJ plays the exact song she was hoping to hear without her having to request it. She reflects on how pop music is one of the few things that connects everyone in her life—"all my friends, / everyone I know, / Indian and not." Music transcends cultural boundaries, making it one of the most consistent symbols of unity in the novel.

## **Chapter 28: "Grandparents, Part 1"**

Reha has only one memory of her maternal grandfather, who died when she was four. They were on a train together in India. He spoke to her in Tamil, and even though she couldn't understand the words, she remembers his voice filling her with love. She has no memory at all of her maternal grandmother, who died of an illness when Amma was still a teenager. Reha has seen a few photographs of her grandmother—a woman with "a hint of laughter in her eyes." The parallel between Amma losing her mother to illness as a teenager and what Reha will face is left implicit but quietly present.

### **Chapter 29: "Everywhere"**

Amma maintains a small Hindu shrine in the basement of their home. She lights lamps and burns incense to honor God. Reha sometimes participates in these rituals, especially for holidays like Krishna Jayanti and Ganesha Puja. There are no Hindu temples in their city, so they keep the temples in their hearts. When Reha asks where God is, Amma says God is everywhere—and Reha believes her. She says she sees God in both of her parents. This chapter portrays faith not as an institution but as something personal, familial, and daily.

### **Chapter 30: "Expectations"**

Reha is keenly aware of her parents' expectations. She is expected to work hard, not waste the opportunities her parents sacrificed to give her, and not date boys. When she listens to love songs on the radio—songs about hearts breaking and mending—she wonders what it would feel like "to follow mine." This chapter distills the tension between cultural obligation and personal desire that Reha experiences every day.

### **Chapter 31: "Hero"**

In English class, Reha and her classmates discuss the concept of the literary hero. They study King Arthur and are told he was destined to be a king, a hero, a leader. Pete challenges this, asking whether being the king's son actually guarantees he will be the best leader for his people. Everyone stares at him. Reha wants to ask why only men can be heroes in these stories—but she stays silent and just takes notes. This moment establishes the gendered question of heroism that Pete will help Reha resolve later.

### **Chapter 32: "Separate"**

Reha describes her weekends with the local Indian community. Indian parents, she notices, do not go on date nights the way American parents seem to. Although she knows her parents love each other, she has never seen them hold hands or kiss like parents on television or like the parents of her American friends. They seem, to her young eyes, more like roommates than lovers. She wonders what her own romantic future might look like. This chapter sets up a misunderstanding that Reha will not correct until much later, when Amma gets sick and she witnesses the full depth of her father's love.

### **Chapter 33: "Grandparents, Part 2"**

Reha thinks about her paternal grandparents. They never expected to have a granddaughter—all three of their other sons had sons. When Reha was born, and her parents subsequently moved to America, Reha believes her grandparents "missed them even more." She is a source of joy for them but also a symbol of distance—she is the granddaughter they rarely get to see.

### **Chapter 34: "After School"**

Reha has a regular weekly routine with Rachel: on Mondays, Rachel comes to Reha's house; on Wednesdays, Reha goes to Rachel's. They eat snacks, do homework, and dance to pop music on the radio. It is during one of these afternoons that Rachel mentions a school dance that is coming up. Reha has never been to a school dance before. She knows Amma would not want her to go—but then she thinks about Pete's eyes, and she realizes she really, truly wants to go. She resolves to ask her parents for permission.

### **Chapter 35: "MTV"**

Reha and Sunny watch MTV at Sunny's house—a world of music videos and pop culture that thrills them both. Reha tells Sunny about the dance, and Sunny is immediately excited and encouraging. She tells Reha she absolutely must go and that she will help her do her hair. Reha is worried about Amma's reaction, but Sunny is optimistic. Reha reflects that her parents seem to "live in the past," while she has "entered the future."

### **Chapter 36: "Star Wars"**

In English class, Reha and her classmates discuss the original *Star Wars* trilogy. When asked which film is their favorite, Pete is the only one to choose *The Empire Strikes Back*. His reasoning: it is "the most interesting of the trilogy because it's about learning how to be a hero in spite of the fact / that your dad is the most evil guy in the universe." Reha cannot stop thinking about the expression on Pete's face when he says this. The reader, who will later learn about Pete's own difficult relationship with his absent father, understands why this film resonates so deeply with him.

### **Chapter 37: "Aerogrammes"**

In addition to their weekly phone calls, Amma and Prema Auntie exchange aerogrammes—thin, fold-up international letters. Amma always reads them to herself first, privately, before reading them aloud to Reha. Reha loves these letters. They are like "a small piece of home" flying across the world to land in their hands. This chapter establishes the aerogramme as a powerful

symbol of love across distances—a symbol that will return with devastating emotional force at the end of the novel.

### **Chapter 38: "Here and There"**

Most of Reha's peers have extended family nearby whom they see regularly. Reha describes the long and exhausting journey she and her parents must make to visit family in India. The trip takes days and crosses multiple time zones. When they arrive, her Indian relatives always make her feel warmly welcomed—but Reha still feels different, foreign. People can tell she is not really from there: "how I talk, and walk, / and breathe." She does not fit in America or in India. "No matter where I go," she says, "I don't quite fit."

### **Chapter 39: "Accents"**

Although Reha's parents speak excellent English, their accents mean that American people sometimes pretend not to understand them. Reha is often put in the awkward position of acting as a "translator"—repeating the exact words her parents just said, in the same language, simply because her own voice sounds more American. This is a humiliating dynamic for everyone involved, and Reha finds it exhausting and unjust.

### **Chapter 40: "On the Threshold"**

Reha works up her courage and asks her parents if she can go to the school dance. Her father's response is warm and immediate: yes, Reha should go and have fun with her friends. But Amma says no. Amma believes that Reha is now a young woman and should not be "spending time with boys outside of school." Reha desperately wants to tell her mother that she just wants to have fun and do the same things her American friends get to do—but she says nothing and the moment passes in silence.

### **Chapter 41: "Hot and Cold"**

This chapter describes the different ways Reha's parents express anger. Daddy's anger is hot and loud—he shouts, but then it is over quickly and forgotten. Amma's anger is the opposite: cold, slow, and long-lasting. When Reha asks about the dance, Amma becomes cold and "folds into herself." The tension in the house is palpable, and Reha is left in an agonizing in-between state.

### **Chapter 42: "Amar Chitra Kathas"**

When Reha visits India in the summer, she immerses herself in reading. She reads Agatha Christie and Judy Blume, but she also reads the Amar Chitra Kathas—a beloved Indian comic book series published in English that retells stories from Indian mythology and history. Through these comics, Reha learns about where her family comes from and connects with a cultural heritage that she has not been able to access through language alone. The author herself,

Rajani LaRocca, has noted in her author's note that she too connected with her Indian heritage through these same comics.

### **Chapter 43: "Savitri, Part 1"**

Reha introduces her favorite story from the Amar Chitra Kathas: the tale of Savitri. In this first installment of the story (which will be told in installments throughout the novel), Savitri is a virtuous princess whose parents feel unworthy of choosing a husband for her. So they allow her to choose for herself. She chooses Satyavan—"a prince without a kingdom" who lives with his blind father in the forest. Despite being warned that Satyavan is "fated to die in just a year's time," Savitri chooses him anyway. This story will become an allegory for Reha's relationship with her mother's illness and her own understanding of heroism, love, and death.

### **Chapter 44: "Cells"**

Science is Reha's favorite subject at school. She especially loves learning about cells and biology. She wishes she could "fast-forward to medical school" and spend all her time thinking about biology. Amma, who works in the hematology lab, teaches Reha about blood cells. Reha observes that Amma could have been a doctor herself. Amma explains that when she first came to America, she wanted to be an English teacher—but that required expensive continuing education, so instead she got certified to draw blood. Much of what Reha wishes she could say to her mother, she says, remains unsaid. This chapter is dense with quiet tragedy.

### **Chapter 45: "My Aerogramme"**

Reha writes a letter to her mother—a letter she will never send. In it, she pours out everything she cannot say out loud: that she wishes her parents would tell her she does not have to live in two worlds, and that they will love her "no matter what my choices are." She seals the letter in an envelope and hides it in her desk drawer. This private letter is a crucial emblem of the communication gap between Reha and Amma, and it mirrors the aerogramme that Amma will later send Reha from beyond the grave.

### **Chapter 46: "The Project"**

Reha and Pete are assigned a heroes project for English class. Pete asks if Reha would like to come to his house after school to work on it together. Reha asks her parents' permission. Amma agrees—because it is a school project and Pete's mother will be present. At Pete's house, Reha is struck by how different it feels from her own Indian home. When Pete's mother pronounces Reha's name correctly on the first try—without fumbling or anglicizing it—Reha feels her "awkwardness has melted away." This small detail speaks volumes about how rarely Reha's name, and by extension her identity, is treated with effortless respect.

### **Chapter 47: "Smart"**

As Reha and Pete work on their project, she is struck by how genuinely intelligent he is. He does not simply accept what teachers tell him; he questions, probes, and forms his own conclusions. He feels the same way about Reha. Together, they discuss what it truly means to be a hero and arrive at a definition that will echo throughout the rest of the novel. A hero, they decide, is "brave, but not without fear," "says what they believe is right," "works to make the world better," and "acts out of love for others." As she thinks through these criteria, Reha's mind goes immediately to Savitri, who embodies all of them.

### **Chapter 48: "Savitri, Part 2"**

The story of Savitri continues. Savitri and Satyavan are married and happy—until the day arrives that was foretold. Yama, the Lord of Death, comes to collect Satyavan's soul. Savitri pleads with Yama and begs him not to take her husband. Lord Yama tells her she may ask for anything except the soul of her husband. Savitri asks that he restore her father-in-law's eyesight and his kingdom. Yama agrees—but this has not saved Satyavan. Savitri's bargaining with death is a clear parallel to Reha's own coming attempts to bargain for her mother's life through virtue and diligence.

### **Chapter 49: "What Rachel Thinks"**

Rachel, perceptive as always, asks Reha what it was like working with Pete—and correctly guesses that Reha has a crush on him. She also asks whether Reha's parents will let her go to the dance. Reha explains her father said yes but her mother said no. Rachel thoughtfully suggests that Amma is "just trying to protect" Reha. Rachel's calm, rational perspective is a counterbalance to Reha's emotional confusion.

### **Chapter 50: "Deepavali"**

Reha's family is hosting the Deepavali celebrations this year. Amma has "spent all week cooking," and other Indian families bring more food to contribute. Their house is decorated with twinkling lights and lanterns. Amma wears a beautiful silver sari; Daddy wears "a cream kurta that glimmers." Together, Reha, her parents, and the whole Indian community feast together, and then they go outside and light sparklers. This is one of the most joyful scenes in the novel—a rare moment of pure, uncomplicated happiness before the darkness sets in.

### **Chapter 51: "Always Something There to Remind Me"**

Reha often listens to a song called "Always Something There to Remind Me," a pop song that makes her feel "like something wonderful is going to happen." She and Amma sing along to it together in the car. This small, intimate moment between mother and daughter is tender and perfect. During this drive, Amma mentions that her own objection to the dance doesn't really matter, because Reha and Daddy have "both made up your minds." Reha insists, sincerely, that it does matter to her what her mother thinks. This is also the chapter where Amma finally,

quietly, gives her grudging permission. Reha reflects privately that sometimes a mother's love "feels like it is too much."

### **Chapter 52: "The Dress"**

Amma offers to sew Reha a dress for the dance—but she never takes Reha to the fabric store. The chapter reveals that Amma has been showing strange symptoms: severe fatigue, nosebleeds, and a persistent feeling of cold. She insists to Reha that she just has a cold. As the dance approaches, Reha asks if she can simply buy a dress instead, and Amma says yes. Reha is relieved and excited—she will finally "look like everyone else." But the chapter ends on an ominous note: Reha does not dwell on "how strange it is / that Amma hasn't sewn anything / in weeks."

### **Chapter 53: "At the Mall"**

Reha and Sunny go to the mall together. Reha buys a drop-waist dress for the dance. Afterward, they go to the food court—and the server there loudly and rudely asks Reha if she speaks English. Reha is too stunned to respond. Sunny steps in and defends her. They leave and eat somewhere else. Later, Reha is frustrated with herself for not speaking up. This scene of casual, humiliating racism precedes the emotional high of the dance, underlining the fact that no joy in Reha's American life is entirely uncomplicated.

### **Chapter 54: "Down the Stairs"**

The day of the dance arrives. Amma is still unwell, but she and Daddy watch as Reha comes down the stairs in her new dress, wearing earrings and "a bit of makeup—/ eyeliner and lip gloss." Daddy takes photographs eagerly. But Reha notices something disturbing: Amma barely looks at her. She can tell her mother does not want her to go. What she cannot understand is why her mother looks so sad—not just disapproving, but genuinely sorrowful. The reader, with the benefit of dramatic irony, begins to understand that Amma already knows something is seriously wrong with her.

### **Chapter 55: "Come Dancing"**

Reha and Rachel are at the dance. They dance together to all their favorite pop songs. Pete is there too. Every time a slow song comes on, Reha panics and drags Rachel to the bathroom—she is terrified that Pete might ask her to dance, which is both thrilling and terrifying in equal measure.

### **Chapter 56: "Time After Time"**

Finally, near the end of the night, Pete asks Reha to dance. The song is "Faithfully." They dance through one slow song—and then another begins to play and they keep dancing. When the music finally ends, Reha and Pete go outside together to get some air. This is Reha's

long-anticipated American teenage moment—the moment she has been both dreaming of and afraid of.

### **Chapter 57: "Hands"**

Outside the dance, Pete and Reha sit together in the quiet night air. They talk about school, and then—they hold hands. Reha feels her "skin tingle all the way up my arm." It is a small, perfect moment of connection, charged with all the nervousness and sweetness of early adolescent feeling.

### **Chapter 58: "The End of the Dance"**

When the dance ends, Rachel finds Reha and Pete outside. Pete leaves, and the two girls wait for their parents to come and pick them up. But Reha's parents never arrive. Instead, it is Sunny and her mother, Rupa Auntie, who come. Reha finds out that Amma is in the hospital and is gravely ill. Rupa Auntie gently suggests that Reha come back to her house to wait for news—but Reha refuses. The chapter ends with one of her most decisive moments: "All my life, I have listened to adults. / All my life, I have done what they wanted." But she is changing now. Quietly and respectfully, she demands to go to the hospital. And Rupa Auntie listens.

### **Chapter 59: "What's Wrong"**

Reha arrives at the hospital with Rupa Auntie and Sunny. She finds her mother and father "tucked away in a corner" of the hospital. She asks, desperately, what is wrong with Amma. She notices, as if for the first time, how tired her mother has been. Amma, characteristically, asks Reha how the dance was.

### **Chapter 60: "The Diagnosis"**

A doctor tells the family that they need to keep Amma in the hospital for further tests. But Amma cuts the uncertainty short. She already knows what is wrong with her—she has spent her working life in a hematology lab. She already diagnosed herself. She has leukemia: cancer of the blood.

### **Chapter 61: "The River"**

Reha describes blood as "the river of life." She asks, quietly and devastatingly, what happens "when your own blood / betrays you."

### **Chapter 62: "The Moon"**

Reha reflects on her mother's name, Punam, which means "moon." Like the moon, Amma is "always gentle / always changing, but / predictable." She only ever shows people "one face. /

The strong one." This chapter reframes the celestial imagery from earlier in the book—Amma the moon, Reha the star—in the new, frightening light of illness.

### **Chapter 63: "Waiting"**

The weekend becomes a long, agonizing wait as doctors work to determine what kind of leukemia Amma has. While her mother and father stay at the hospital, Reha goes to stay with Sunny and her family. On Sunday, Reha and her father go to visit Amma together. Reha stays with Sunny for a few days so that Daddy does not have to leave work early to pick her up from school on top of everything else. The women in the local Indian community have already begun bringing food—an act of collective care and solidarity.

### **Chapter 64: "The First Day Back"**

On her first day back at school after the diagnosis, Reha arrives late to class. Rachel pulls her aside immediately, worried—she had tried to call over the weekend and no one answered. Reha explains what has happened. The news spreads quickly. Reha is overwhelmed to find that her classmates—even the girls she had always thought were too consumed with hair and nails and fashion—reach out to hug her and offer words of support. In this moment, Reha realizes that she has "yet another family, / one I never thought to call my own."

### **Chapter 65: "The Treatment"**

Reha and her parents meet Amma's doctor, Dr. Andrews—young, kind, brown-haired, wearing black-framed glasses. Dr. Andrews explains that Amma has acute myeloid leukemia (AML) and will require chemotherapy. The treatment will make her sick, and she will need to remain in the hospital throughout. Dr. Andrews answers every question that Reha and her family have with patience and clarity. Reha immediately thinks of her as "another kind of hero."

### **Chapter 66: "Savitri, Part 3"**

The story of Savitri continues. Lord Yama tries again to take Satyavan's soul. Savitri pleads with him again. Yama, recognizing her virtue, tells her she may ask for anything except her husband's soul. This time, Savitri asks for more sons for her mother-in-law and father-in-law, so that their kingdom will have heirs. Yama agrees—but Satyavan is still not saved. Savitri is patient and clever, working methodically toward her goal.

### **Chapter 67: "The Phone Call"**

Reha's father calls the family in India to deliver the terrible news. When Prema Auntie hears about Amma's illness, she immediately declares that she will come to America to help. Daddy tells her he will pay for her plane ticket. The family across the ocean mobilizes in love.

### **Chapter 68: "Lost"**

With Amma in the hospital, Reha's father is profoundly lost. He does not cry—but his "pursed lips / tired eyes / ceaseless pacing" are worse than tears, Reha says. She realizes, for the first time with full clarity, how much her mother held together in their home—"especially Daddy." And she realizes, too, how much her parents love each other. The misapprehension from Chapter 32—that they were like roommates—is quietly, painfully corrected.

### **Chapter 69: "Two"**

Reha's sense of living two lives has shifted. Now, her two lives are no longer Indian and American—they are the life inside the hospital and the life outside it. She visits her mother and watches the toll that chemotherapy is taking: Amma's hair has begun to fall out. Amma tells her, with gentle steadiness, that it is "just hair" and that it will grow back.

### **Chapter 70: "Thanksgiving"**

Thanksgiving arrives. Reha and her parents usually celebrate with their Indian community, eating their own festive foods: "spicy pulao and tart cranberry chutney, / samosas, stuffed parathas, / aloo chole," and tandoori turkey for those who eat meat. This year, Reha and Daddy bring food from the feast to Amma in the hospital—but Amma is too nauseous from chemotherapy to eat. The holiday celebration that once brought joy has been hollowed out by illness.

### **Chapter 71: "Guilt"**

Reha is consumed by guilt. She feels guilty for having been so caught up in her own small problems—the dance, Pete, fitting in—while her mother was silently getting sicker. She destroys the aerogramme she wrote to Amma, tearing it up. She thinks about Savitri, who "tried to save the one she loved / with courage and cleverness," and who bargained with the Lord of Death himself. Reha resolves to be more virtuous—to become the daughter her "parents want me to be"—as though her goodness might somehow tip the scales in her mother's favor.

### **Chapter 72: "Dutiful"**

Reha throws herself into being the perfect daughter. She works harder at school. She "stops passing notes to Rachel in math class." She begins avoiding Pete, since their heroes project is finished and they are no longer partners. Pete tries to talk to her, but she ignores him, and eventually he stops trying. Reha is bargaining with the universe through discipline and sacrifice.

### **Chapter 73: "Under Hospital Lights"**

Reha spends long afternoons under the harsh fluorescent lights of the hospital, visiting her mother. Amma, even sick, tells the doctors that Reha wants to be a doctor someday. But Reha still faints at the sight of blood, and under the hospital lights, surrounded by needles and

medical procedures, she begins to seriously question whether she truly has the constitution to pursue medicine.

### **Chapter 74: "Not Allowed"**

Prema Auntie's visa application is denied. She is not allowed to enter America. Dr. Andrews takes action, writing a letter to the embassy explaining why Prema needs to come urgently, describing Amma as "gravely ill." The bureaucracy of immigration law becomes another obstacle the family must navigate during an already impossible time.

### **Chapter 75: "The New Routine"**

Reha and her father develop a painful new routine. He leaves work early to pick her up from school; he is exhausted all the time. They visit Amma frequently, and the women of the Indian community continue to bring food for their dinners. This community support quietly sustains them.

### **Chapter 76: "Mustard Seeds, Part 2"**

Determined not to be helpless, Reha and her father attempt to cook for themselves using Amma's recipes. They burn the mustard seeds—the very foundation of everything Amma cooks. Reha feels like "everything is ruined." The burned mustard seeds are not just a cooking failure; they are a symbol of all the things that can go wrong when the person who held everything together is gone.

### **Chapter 77: "Two Weeks"**

Two weeks after chemotherapy began, all of Amma's hair is gone. The doctors perform a bone marrow biopsy to see whether the treatment is working—and find that it has not. The cancer cells are still there. The first round of chemotherapy has failed.

### **Chapter 78: "Won't Make Her Come Home"**

Pete finally corners Reha and demands to know why she has been avoiding him. He says directly that avoiding him "won't make her come home any faster." It is a blunt but kind observation—Pete sees through her self-imposed isolation and names it for what it is. This moment begins Reha's slow return toward the people who care about her.

### **Chapter 79: "Please"**

Amma grows even sicker. She develops pneumonia and can no longer breathe on her own. She is moved to the Intensive Care Unit. Reha prays with desperate, aching hope—thinking again of Savitri—that she can be virtuous enough to save her mother.

## **Chapter 80: "The Color of Virtue"**

Reha wonders what color virtue is. She decides it must be auspicious—and therefore red. "Blood red." The symbolic colors of the novel converge in this short, intense chapter.

## **Chapter 81: "Wednesday"**

Wednesday afternoons at Rachel's house become Reha's only reliable escape from the new reality of her life. They still listen to pop music together—but Reha no longer feels like dancing. The music is there, but the joy has drained from it temporarily.

## **Chapter 82: "School Daze"**

Reha's teachers and classmates ask after Amma and are consistently kind. Reha lies when they ask how her mother is, saying she is "Better. / Good." One afternoon, Pete's mother makes a generous offer: Reha can come to their house every day after school, so that Daddy does not have to leave work early. Both Reha and her father are deeply relieved by this arrangement.

## **Chapter 83: "Afternoons"**

Reha begins spending her afternoons at Pete's house. His mother makes them snacks. Reha also meets Penelope, Pete's older sister. Reha immediately decides that "Penelope" is a hero's name—and the two girls get along immediately and warmly.

## **Chapter 84: "True"**

Reha finally works up the courage to ask her friends what they believe happens after someone dies. She is afraid to ask her father, worried that asking the question "might make it come true." Sunny says Amma might be reincarnated or "become one with God." Pete says he has been taught that good people go to heaven. Rachel offers the most grounded and tender answer: she says no one knows for certain, but that every year on the anniversary of her grandfather's death, her family lights a candle and spends the whole day talking about him. "This way, he is still with them." Rachel then gently tells Reha that she does not need to think about this right now.

## **Chapter 85: "The Promise"**

Reha remembers a moment from when she was seven and her father had to have his appendix removed. She had been terrified he might die. Amma promised her that if Daddy died, she would still be there to take care of Reha, always. The memory of that promise is bittersweet—Amma made a vow to always be there. Now Reha is the one who needs her.

## **Chapter 86: "Rapids"**

Reha stays for dinner at Pete's house one evening. The family gathers, but Pete's father is conspicuously absent. When Reha asks where he is, Pete's mother simply explains: "He doesn't live here anymore." Later, Pete tells Reha that he never cries because his father does not like it. Pete and Reha hold hands—not romantically, but with the simple comfort of two friends who are both navigating the turbulent rapids of their separate but equally painful lives. "We are friends," Reha realizes, "both / living two lives, / both / rushing over rapids / in separate boats."

### **Chapter 87: "The Arrival"**

Reha and Sunny are listening to "Always Something There to Remind Me" when Daddy comes downstairs with a surprise: after all the visa complications, Prema Auntie has finally arrived in America.

### **Chapter 88: "Another Surprise"**

Reha, her father, and Prema Auntie go together to the hospital. Amma is still in the ICU—but she is awake. The reunion of the two sisters is deeply emotional. Seeing them together, Reha begins to hope that "maybe now, / everything will / be all right."

### **Chapter 89: "My Mother's Sister"**

Reha and Daddy leave Amma and Prema Auntie alone to talk and catch up. Later, despite the exhaustion of her long journey, Prema Auntie insists on going to the grocery store immediately. She cooks for them that night, and their home is once again "filled with familiar smells." Prema Auntie's arrival restores something essential to the household.

### **Chapter 90: "Roommates"**

Reha and Prema Auntie become roommates, sleeping in the same bed. Reha is comforted by her aunt's presence—the way she looks, the way she sounds, the way she moves through the house all remind Reha of Amma.

### **Chapter 91: "The New Rhythm"**

A new, more hopeful rhythm settles over the household. Prema Auntie cooks; Reha goes to school and spends afternoons at Pete's or Rachel's. They visit Amma often. Though Amma must now begin a second round of chemotherapy, she is slowly regaining some strength, sustained in part by the specially prepared food Prema Auntie brings her.

### **Chapter 92: "Pop or Alternative"**

At Pete's house, Reha and Pete continue to do homework and listen to music together. Penelope has introduced them to alternative music, which they sometimes listen to instead of

pop. Reha and Pete never talk about the dance—about the slow dances, about holding hands. They don't need to. Something has settled between them into simple, steady friendship.

### **Chapter 93: "Every Breath You Take"**

It is Christmas. Reha's family celebrates even though they are not Christian—exchanging gifts and spending time together. Daddy gives Reha a Walkman. The family brings food to Amma in the hospital. Reha reflects that spending time with her mother is "the best Christmas present."

### **Chapter 94: "Mix Tape"**

Pete gives Reha a mix tape filled with all their favorite songs. It is a deeply thoughtful gift—a collection of music that represents everything they share, a curated piece of his care for her.

### **Chapter 95: "Prema Auntie's Little Sister"**

Prema Auntie tells Reha things about Amma that Reha did not know. She reveals that when their mother died, Amma changed profoundly. She also reveals that Amma did not drop out of university because she was forced to—she chose to leave when she heard that Reha's father wanted to move to America. She made a deliberate choice, out of love. Reha is stunned. She has always assumed her mother's path was imposed on her. Now she wonders whether, if Amma had stayed in India, she might have been healthy. Prema Auntie gently closes the door on that guilt: if Amma had not come to America, she would not have had Reha. "And that would have been the greatest loss of all."

### **Chapter 96: "What Amma Needs Next"**

Chemotherapy has not achieved remission. Dr. Andrews explains that Amma needs a bone marrow transplant. The best chance of success would be a sibling donor. Prema Auntie immediately volunteers.

### **Chapter 97: "The Surprise"**

Two pieces of news arrive at once. Prema Auntie is not a bone marrow match for Amma. And—Prema Auntie is pregnant.

### **Chapter 98: "Shock"**

Prema Auntie, who is 37 and had never thought she would have children, is in shock—but it is joyful shock. Reha is happy for her aunt but terrified for her mother. Dr. Andrews reassures them that another donor can be sought, but adds that "it is unlikely that anyone who is not Indian will be a match."

### **Chapter 99: "No One"**

Reha and her father rally the Indian community in their city, asking everyone to be tested as potential bone marrow donors. No one is a match. Reha asks whether she herself can be tested. Dr. Andrews explains that Reha is only "half my mother, / half my father"—making her likely only a half-match. Reha insists on trying anyway.

### **Chapter 100: "But If"**

Amma, Daddy, and Prema Auntie all tell Reha she is too young to take on the risk. But Dr. Andrews says that because Reha is almost 14 and the risk to her is low, she is willing to test her—if her parents agree. Reha wants to try with everything she has.

### **Chapter 101: "Hero"**

Pete asks Reha about the bone marrow donation. She explains what she is trying to do. He goes through their list—their jointly authored definition of heroism—and tells her she checks every box. Then he kisses her. It is a brief, sweet, courtly moment. Reha feels the kiss like "a token—/ to help prepare me for the battle ahead," just as ladies in the stories of courtly love would give tokens to knights before battle.

### **Chapter 102: "The Needle"**

Reha goes to have her blood drawn for testing. She is frightened—but she is resolute. She forces herself, deliberately, to watch the blood leave her arm. She does not feel "even one bit / faint."

### **Chapter 103: "Close Enough"**

Reha prays with every part of herself that she is close enough of a match to donate to Amma. She remembers the promise her mother made when she was small and her father was in the hospital—that no matter what happened, Amma would always be there for her.

### **Chapter 104: "Savitri, Part 4"**

The story of Savitri reaches its climax. Lord Yama tries a third time to take Satyavan's soul. Savitri pleads with him once more. For the third time, Yama says she can ask for anything except her husband. This time, Savitri asks for many children. When Yama agrees, Savitri reminds him that she will only ever marry Satyavan—and without him, she cannot have the children he just promised her. Yama smiles, recognizing that he has been outwitted with love and cleverness. He releases Satyavan. They live happily ever after.

### **Chapter 105: "The Story I Want to Tell"**

Reha learns the results of her testing. She is not a close enough match. She cannot donate bone marrow to her mother. This is the story she does not want to tell—the story of her failure to

save Amma through a heroic act. But there is good news: the second round of chemotherapy has worked. Amma is in remission. After three months in the hospital, she is coming home.

### **Chapter 106: "Watching"**

Amma comes home. Life slowly, tentatively begins to return to something resembling normal. Prema Auntie takes care of Amma, who gradually grows stronger. Reha turns 14. Eventually, Prema Auntie must return to India. Reha begins to watch her mother carefully, vigilantly—and she is the first one to see it when "Amma begins to feel sick again." The cancer has returned.

### **Chapter 107: "Dr. Andrews"**

In a conversation that is implied to take place after Amma's death, Reha asks Dr. Andrews if caring for such sick patients is hard. Dr. Andrews confirms that it is very difficult. She apologizes—there was nothing more she could do. Reha tells her that the important thing is that she tried, because trying "is another part of being a hero."

### **Chapter 108: "The River"**

Reha reflects on her mother's death. The chapter is brief and quiet, like the moment after something enormous has happened and the world is still processing it.

### **Chapter 109: "Goodbye"**

Reha and her father say goodbye to Amma. There is no formal funeral—instead, they hold a puja, a Hindu ritual of worship and celebration of her life. They invite everyone. And for the first time, Reha sees "all the pieces of my life, / the streams that seemed so separate, / have flowed together." Everyone is there: Indian friends, American friends, colleagues, doctors, neighbors. Reha feels she has been saying goodbye for months.

### **Chapter 110: "Jealous"**

Reha finds that grief has split her life again—but differently this time. There is the time before Amma's death, and the time after. She is furious at the "unfairness of what has happened / to Amma / to my family / to me." She is jealous of her friends who still have their mothers. She acknowledges she does not wish anyone ill—"I want my friends to be happy"—but the jealousy is real and raw.

### **Chapter 111: "Total Eclipse of the Heart"**

Reha withdraws entirely from the world. She stops talking to friends. She stops participating in school. Life continues around her while she is numb, hollowed out, absent. She misses her mother with an intensity that cannot be described.

## **Chapter 112: "Comfortably Numb"**

Reha becomes physically ill—a bad cough, a high fever. She drifts in and out of consciousness, dreaming of Amma. When she surfaces, she finds her father at her side, taking care of her. He gives her medicine and antibiotics and tells her: "I promise I will be both father and mother to you. / I will take care of you, kanna. / Always." He is repeating, unconsciously, the same promise Amma once made to Reha about him.

## **Chapter 113: "The Phone Call"**

Prema Auntie calls with news: her baby has been born. A little girl. Her name is Chandra, which means "moon"—the same meaning as Amma's name, Punam. The parallel is quiet and profound: a new moon-named girl has entered the world.

## **Chapter 114: "Savitri, Part 5"**

Reha imagines a continuation of the Savitri story beyond the happy ending. She pictures Savitri and Satyavan at the very end of their long, joyful lives—and this time, when Lord Yama comes for them, they take his hand willingly. Reha understands now that death is not always to be outwitted or avoided. It is "the end / of every person's story." This marks a profound shift in her relationship with grief and loss.

## **Chapter 115: "Aerogramme"**

One month after Amma's death, an aerogramme arrives. Amma wrote it before she died and asked Dr. Andrews to send it to Reha a month after her passing. In the letter, Amma tells Reha how sorry she is that she had to leave. She says her death is nobody's fault. She tells Reha how proud she is of her—that Reha is "everything I ever hoped for in a child." She says she always saw Reha's struggle to fit into her two worlds, and she tells her: "you belong. You belong to this country, where you are growing up. And you belong to India, where your blood is from." She urges Reha to make "those two streams one" and to write her own story. She tells her it will be beautiful because it is hers. Reha feels like "a small piece of Amma has flown across time / and landed in my hands."

## **Chapter 116: "Family Ties"**

Reha reads Amma's aerogramme aloud to her father. They read it together, weeping and holding on to each other. Reha realizes that her mother always understood her—always "believed I didn't need to be split in two, / that I could be whole." For the first time, Reha begins to believe it too.

## **Chapter 117: "Start"**

Reha takes a step back toward the world. She invites all three of her friends—Sunny, Rachel, and Pete—to her house at the same time. They sit together and listen to the radio. It is a small thing. It is everything.

### **Chapter 118: "Always Something There to Remind Me"**

The novel's final chapter. Reha and her father are preparing to travel to India to bring Amma's ashes home. Reha looks at her father and sees God in him—in their life together, in everything they share. She has arrived at a new understanding of herself. She has "one life, / a stream with many tributaries." She will try to merge all the places she comes from: India and America, mother and father, past and present and future. She knows she will find her way. "For all rivers lead to the same ocean, / we all look upon the same sky." And she carries Amma with her always—in her heart, in her veins, in her blood. "She is everywhere."