

Chapter Nineteen

Cyrus Shams meets Zee Novak at a Brooklyn café called Daylight, braving the cold for an outdoor conversation. His mind races after a puzzling encounter with Orkideh, who inexplicably referenced his mother's death in a plane crash—a detail he never shared with her. The café patio buzzes with activity: a woman smokes elegantly, bearded men ignore their drinks, and a waiter navigates the chaos. Cyrus hopes Zee will help him break his cyclical thoughts about Orkideh's cryptic knowledge, signaling urgency through their coded text exchange for a "quick chat."

While waiting, Cyrus exchanges texts with his sponsor, Gabe, confirming his sobriety and grappling with unresolved anger. He reflects on how children of deceased parents often test the remaining caregiver's loyalty, realizing he's projected this dynamic onto Gabe, a "grizzled midwestern John Wayne" figure. The irony isn't lost on him—his mother's absence is abstract, yet he clings to Gabe as a stabilizing force. Scrolling news, he sees President Invective (a mocking nickname he and Zee use) shaking hands with businessmen, reigniting his disdain for the leader's performative infallibility.

Cyrus critiques Western leadership's obsession with godlike certainty, drawing parallels to religious figures like Jesus and Muhammad, who openly doubted. He imagines a leader who admits fallibility—a radical concept in a culture that rewards unwavering conviction. This ties to his personal struggle: his "martyr book" project reflects a desire to live perfectly, leaving no emotional wreckage. The irony is palpable; he resists the very systems he's internalized, yearning for authenticity in a world that glorifies rigid certainty.

As Zee remains absent, Cyrus recalls his father's stories about his mother's insatiable curiosity—her notebook filled with answers researched at the library. The memory contrasts sharply with his present turmoil, underscoring his longing for clarity.

Surrounded by Brooklyn's bustling beauty, he waits, suspended between past grief and present uncertainty, the aroma of coffee and bread a fleeting comfort in his unraveling thoughts.