The Kite Runner Passage #1:

 Ali and Baba grew up together as childhood playmates—at least until polio crippled Ali’s leg—just like Hassan and I grew up a generation later. Babe was always telling us about the mischief he and Ali used to cause, and Ali would shake his head and say, “But Agha sahib, tell them who was the architect of the mischief and who the poor laborer?” Baba would laugh and throw his arm around Ali.

 But in none of his stories did Baba ever refer to Ali as his friend.

 The curious thing was, I never thought of Hassan and me as friends either. Not in the usual sense, anyhow. Never mind that we taught each other to ride a bicycle with no hands, or to build a fully functional homemade camera out of a cardboard box. Never mind that we spent entire winters flying kites, running kites. Never mind that to me, the face of Afghanistan is that of a boy with a thin-boned frame, a shaved head, and low-set ears, a boy with a Chinese doll face perpetually lit by a harelipped smile.

 Never mind any of those things. Because history isn’t easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi’a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing.

The Kite Runner Passage #2

 The next morning, as he brewed black tea for breakfast, Hassan told me he’d had a dream. “We were at Ghargha Lake, you, me, Father, Agha sahib, Rahim Khan, and thousands of other people,” he said. “It was warm and sunny, and the lake was clear like a mirror. But no one was swimming because they said a monster had come to the lake. It was swimming at the bottom, waiting.”

 He poured me a cup and added sugar, blew on it a few times. Put it before me. “So everyone is scared to get in the water, and suddenly you kick off your shoes, Amir agha, and take off your shirt. ‘There’s no monster,’ you say. ‘I’ll show you all.’ And before anyone can stop you, you dive into the water, start swimming away. I follow you in and we’re both swimming.

 “But you can’t swim.”

 Hassan laughed. “It’s a dream, Amir agha, you can do anything. Anyway, everyone is screaming, ‘Get out! Get out!’ but we just swim in the cold water. We make it way out to the middle of the lake and we stop swimming. We turn toward the shore and wave to the people. They look small like ants, but we can hear them clapping. They see now. There is no monster, just water. They change the name of the lake after that, and call it the ‘Lake of Amir and Hassan, Sultans of Kabul,’ and we get to charge people money for swimming in it.”

 “So what does it mean?” I said.

 He coated my *naan* with marmalade, placed it on a plate. “I don’t know. I was hoping you could tell me.”

 “Well, it’s a dumb dream. Nothing happens in it.”

 “Father says dreams always mean something.”

 I sipped some tea. “Why don’t you ask him, then? He’s so smart,” I said, more curtly than I had intended. I hadn’t slept all night. My neck and back were like coiled springs, and my eyes stung. Still, I had been mean to Hassan. I almost apologized, then didn’t. Hassan understood I was just nervous. Hassan always understood about me.

The Kite Runner Passage #3

 We had picked a dozen pomegranates from the tree. I unfolded the story I’d brought along, turned to the first page, then put it down. I stood up and picked an overripe pomegranate that had fallen to the ground.

 “What would you do if I hit you with this?” I said, tossing the fruit up and down.

 Hassan’s smile wilted. He looked older than I’d remembered. No, not older, *old*. Was that possible? Lines had etched into his tanned face and creases framed his eyes, his mouth. I might as well have taken a knife and carved those lines myself.

 “What would you do?” I repeated.

 The color fell from his face. Next to him, the stapled pages of the story I’d promised to read to him fluttered in the breeze. I hurled the pomegranate at him. It struck him in the chest, exploded in a spray of red pulp. Hassan’s cry was pregnant with surprise and pain.

 “Hit me back!” I snapped. Hassan looked from the stain on his chest to me.

 “Get up! Hit me!” I said. Hassan *did* get up, but he just stood there, looking dazed like a man dragged into the ocean by a riptide when, just a moment ago, he was enjoying a nice stroll on the beach.

 I hit him with another pomegranate, in the shoulder this time. The juice splattered his face. “Hit me back!” I spat. “Hit me back, goddamn you!” I wished he would. I wished he’d give me the punishment I craved, so maybe I’d finally sleep at night. Maybe then things could return to how they used to be between us. But Hassan did nothing as I pelted him again and again. “You’re a coward!” I said. “Nothing but a goddamned coward!”

 I don’t know how many times I hit him. All I know is that, when I finally stopped, exhausted and panting, Hassan was smeared in red like he’d been shot by a firing squad. I feel to my knees, tired, spent, frustrated.

 Then Hassan *did* pick up a pomegranate. He walked toward me. He opened it and crushed it against his own forehead. “There,” he croaked, red dripping down his face like blood. “Are you satisfied? Do you feel better?” He turned around and started down the hill.

 I let the tears break free, rocked back and forth on my knees. “What am I going to do with you Hassan? What am I going to do with you?” But by the time the tears dried up and I trudged down the hill, I knew the answer to that question.

The Kite Runner Passage #4

 They’d both been crying; I could tell from their red, puffed-up eyes. They stood before Baba, hand in hand, and I wondered how and when I’d become capable of causing this kind of pain.

 Baba came right out and asked. “Did you steal that money? Did you steal Amir’s watch, Hassan?”

 Hassan’s reply was a single word, delivered in a thin, raspy voice: “Yes.”

 I flinched, like I’d been slapped. My heart sank and I almost blurted out the truth. Then I understood: This was Hassan’s final sacrifice for me. If he’d said no, Baba would have believed him, then I’d be the accused; I would have to explain and I would be revealed for what I really was. Baba would never, ever forgive me. And that led to another understating: Hassan knew. He knew I’d seen everything in that alley, that I’d stood there and done nothing. He knew I had betrayed him and yet he was rescuing me once again, maybe for the last time. I loved him in that moment, loved him more than I’d ever loved anyone, and I wanted to tell them all that *I* was the snake in the grass, the monster in the lake. I wasn’t worthy of this sacrifice; I was a liar, a cheat, and a thief. And I *would* have told, except that a part of me was glad. Glad that this would all be over with soon. Baba would dismiss them, there would be some pain, but life would move on. I wanted that, to move on, to forget, to start with a clean slate. I wanted to be able to breathe again.

 Except Baba stunned me by saying, “I forgive you.”

 *Forgive?* But theft was the one unforgivable sin, the common denominator of all sins. *When you kill a man, you steal a life. You steal his wife’s right to a husband, rob his children of a father. When you tell a lie, you steal someone’s right to the truth. When you cheat, you steal the right to fairness. There is no act more wretched than stealing.* Hadn’t Baba sat me on his lap and said those words to me? Then how could he just forgive Hassan? And if Baba could forgive that, then why couldn’t he forgive me for not being the son he’d always wanted? Why—

The Kite Runner Passage #5

 The young woman pulled the shawl down over her face. Burst into tears. The toddler sitting in her husband’s lap started crying too. The husband’s face had become as pale as the moon hovering above. He told Karim to ask “Mister Soldier Sahib” to show a little mercy, maybe he had a sister or a mother, maybe he had a wife too. The Russian listened to Karim and barked a series of words.

 “It’s his price for letting us pass,” Karim said. He couldn’t bring himself to look the husband in the eye.

 “But we’ve paid a fair price already. He’s getting paid good money,” the husband said.

 Karim and the Russian soldier spoke. “He says…he says every price has a tax.”

 That was when Baba stood up. It was my turn to clamp a hand on his thigh, but Baba pried it loose, snatched his leg away. When he stood, he eclipsed the moonlight. “I want you to ask this man something,” Baba said. He said it to Karim, but looked directly at the Russian officer. “Ask him where his shame is.”

 They spoke. “He says this is war. There is no shame in war.”

 “Tell him he’s wrong. War doesn’t negate decency. It *demands* it, even more than in times of peace.”

 *Do you have to always be the hero?*  I thought, my heart fluttering. *Can’t you just let it go for once?* But I knew he couldn’t—it wasn’t in his nature. The problem was, his nature was going to get us all killed.

 The Russian soldier said something to Karim, a smile creasing his lips. “Agha sahib,” Karim said, “these *Roussi* are not like us. They understand nothing about respect, honor.”

 “What did he say?”

 “He says he’ll enjoy putting a bullet in you almost as much as…” Karim trailed off, but nodded his head toward the young woman who had caught the guard’s eye. The soldier flicked his unfinished cigarette and unholstered his handgun. *So this is where Baba dies,* I thought. *This is how it is going to happen.* In my head, I said a prayer I had learned in school.

 “Tell him I’ll take a thousand of his bullets before I let this indecency take place,” Baba said. My mind flashed back to that winter day six years ago. Me, peering around the corner in the alley. Kamal and Wali holding Kassan down.Assef’s buttock muscles clenching and unclenching, his hips thrusting back and forth. Some hero I had been, fretting about the kite. Sometimes, I too wondered if I was really Baba’s son.

The Kite Runner Passage # 6

 “Listen,” she said, “I want to tell you something. Something you have to know before…”

 “I don’t care what it is.”

 “You need to know. I don’t want us to start with secrets. And I’d rather you hear it from me.”

 “If it will make you feel better, tell me. But it won’t change anything.”

 There was a long pause at the other end. “When we lived in Virginia, I ran away with an Afghan man. I was eighteen at the time…rebellious…stupid, and…he was into drugs…We lived together for almost a month. All the Afghans in Virginia were talking about it.

 “Padar eventually found us. He showed up at the door and…made me come home. I was hysterical. Yelling. Screaming. Saying I hated him…

 “Anyway, I came home and—” She was crying. “Excuse me.” I heard her put the phone down. Blow her nose. “Sorry,” she came back on, sounding hoarse. “When I came home, I saw my mother had had a stroke, the right side of her face was paralyzed and…I felt so guilty. She didn’t deserve that.

 “Padar moved us to California shortly after.” A silence followed.

 “How are you and your father now?” I said.

 “We’ve always had our differences, we still do, but I’m grateful he came for me that day. I really believe he saved me.” She paused. “So, does what I told you bother you?”

 “A little,” I said. I owed her the truth on this one. I couldn’t lie to her and say that my pride, my *iftikhar*, wasn’t stung at all that she had been with a man, whereas I had never taken a woman to bed. It did bother me a bit, but I had pondered this quite a lot in the weeks before I asked Baba to go to *khastegari*. And in the end the question that always came back to me what this: How could I, or all people, chatise someone for their past?

 “Does it bother you enough to change your mind?”

 “No, Soraya. Not even close,” I said. “Nothing you said changes anything. I want us to marry.”

 She broke into fresh tears.

 I envied her. Her secret was out. Spoken. Dealt with. I opened my mouth and almost told her how I’d betrayed Hassan, lied, driven him out, and destroyed a forty-year relationship between Baba and Ali. But I didn’t. I suspected there were many ways in which Soraya Taheri was a better person than me. Courage was just one of them.

The Kite Runner Passage #7

…I dream that my son will grow up to be a good person, a free person, and an important person. I dream that *lawla* flowers will bloom in the streets of Kabul again and *rubab* music will play in the samovar houses and kites will fly in the skies. And I dream that someday you will return to Kabul to revisit the land of our childhood. If you do, you will find an old faithful friend waiting for you.

May Allah be with you always,

Hassan

 I read the letter twice. I folded the note and looked at the photograph for another minute. I pocketed both. “How is he?” I asked.

 “That letter was written six months ago, a few days before I left for Peshawar,” Rahim Khan said. “I took the Polaroid the day before I left. A month after I arrived in Peshawar, I received a telephone call from one of my neighbors in Kabus. He told me this story: Soon after I took my leave, a rumor spread that a Hazara family was living alone in the big house in Wazir Akbar Khan, or so the Taliban claim. A pair of Talib officials came to investigate and interrogated Hassan. They accused him of lying when Hassan told them he was living with me even though many of the neighbors, including the one who called me, supported Hassan’s story. The Talibs said he was a liar and a theif like all Hazaras and ordered him to get his family out of the house by sundown. Hassan protested. But my neighbor said the Talibs were looking at the big house like—how did he say it?—yes, like ‘wolves looking at a flock of sheep.’ They told Hassan they would be moving in to supposedly keep it safe until I return. Hassan protested again. So they took him to the street—“

 “No,” I breathed.

 “—and order him to kneel—”

 “No. God, no.”

 “—and shot him in the back of the head.”

 “No.”

 “—Farzana came screaming and attacked them—”

 “No.”

 “—shot her too. Self-defense, they claimed later—”

 But all I could manage was to whisper “No. No. No” over and over again.

The Kite Runner Passage #8

…“But there’s something else. Something you don’t know.”

 “Please, Rahim Khan—”

 “Sanaubar wasn’t Ali’s first wife.”

 Now I looked up.

 “He was married once before, to a Hazara woman from the Jaghori area. This was long before you were born. They were married for three years.”

 “What does this have to do with anything?”

 “She left him childless after three years and married a man in Khost. She bore *him* three daughters. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

 I began to see where he was going. But I didn’t want to hear the rest of it. I had a good life in California, pretty Victorian home with a peaked roof, a good marriage, a promising writing career, in-laws who loved me. I didn’t need any of this shit.

 “Ali was sterile,” Rahim Khan said.

 “No he wasn’t. He and Sanaubar had Hassan, didn’t they? They had Hassan—”

 “No they didn’t,” Rahim Khan said.

 “Yes they did!”

 “No they didn’t, Amir.”

 “Then who—”

 “I think you know who.”

 I felt like a man sliding down a steep cliff, clutching at shrubs and tangles of brambles and coming up empty-handed. The room was swooping up and down, swaying side to side. “Did Hassan know?” I said through lips that didn’t feel like my own. Rahim Khan closed his eyes. Shook his head.

The Kite Runner Passage #9

 “Do you think Father is disappointed in me?”

 “I know he’s not,” I said. “You saved my life in Kabul. I know he is very proud of you for that.”

 He wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt. It burst a bubble of spittle that had formed on his lips. He buried his face in his hands and wept a long time before he spoke again. “I miss Father, and Mother too,” he croaked. “And I miss Sasa and Rahim Khan sahib. But sometimes I’m glad they’re not…they’re not here anymore.”

 “Why?” I touched his arm. He drew back.

 “Because—” he said, gasping and hitching between sobs, “because I don’t want them to see me…I’m so dirty.” He sucked in his breath and let it out in a long, wheezy cry. “I’m so dirty and full of sin.”

 “You’re not dirty, Sohrab,” I said.

 “Those men—”

 “You’re not dirty at all.”

 “—they did things…the bad man and the other two…they did things…did things to me.”

 “You’re not dirty, and you’re not full of sin.” I touched his arm again and he drew away. I reached again, gently, and pulled him to me. “I won’t hurt you,” I whispered. “I promise.” He resisted a little. Slackened. He let me draw him to me and rested his head on my chest. His little body convulsed in my arms with each sob.

 A kinship exists between people who’ve fed from the same breast. Now, as the boy’s pain soaked through my shirt, I saw that a kinship had taken root between us too. What had happened in that room with Assef had irrevocably bound us.

 I’d been looking for the right time, the right moment, to ask the question that had been buzzing around in my head and keeping me up at night. I decided the moment was now, right here, right now, with the bright lights of the house of God shining on us.

 “Would you like to come live in America with me and my wife?”

 He didn’t answer. He sobbed into my shirt and I let him.

The Kite Runner Passage # 12

 Sometime in the middle of the night, I slid out of bed and went to Sohrab’s room. I stood over him, looking down, and saw something protruding from under his pillow. I picked it up. Saw it was Rahim Khan’s Poloroid, the one I had given to Sohrab the night we had sat by the Shah Faisal Mosque. The one of Hassan and Sohrab standing side by side, squinting in the light of the sun, and smiling like the world was a good and just place. I wondered how long Sohrab had lain in bed staring at the photo, turning it in his hands.

I looked at the photo. *Your father was a man torn between two halves*, Rahim Khan had said in his letter. I had been the entitled half, the society-approved, legitimate half, the unwitting embodiment of Baba’s guilt. I looked at Hassan, showing those two missing front teeth, sunlight slanting on his face. Baba’s other half. The unentitled, unprivileged half. The half who had inherited what had been pure and noble in Baba. The half that, maybe, in the most secret recesses of his heart, Baba had thought of as his true son.

 I slipped the picture back where I had found it. Then I realized something: That last thought had brought no sting with it. Closing Sohrab’s door, I wondered if that was how forgiveness budded, not with the fanfare of epiphany, but with pain gathering its things, packing up, and slipping away unannounced in the middle of the night.

The Kite Runner Passage # 11

 I open my eyes again and I know what I have to do. I look around, my heart a jackhammer in my chest, blood thudding in my ears. There is a dark little supply room to my left. In it, I find what I need. It will do. I grab a white bedsheet from the pile of folded linens and carry it back to the corridor. I see a nurse talking to a policeman near the restroom. I take the nurse’s elbow and pull, I want to know which way is west. She doesn’t understand and the lines on her face deepen when she frowns. My throat aches and my eyes sting with sweat, each breath is like inhaling fire, and I think I am weeping. I ask again. I beg. The policeman is the one who points.

 I throw my makeshift *jai-namaz*, my prayer rug, on the floor and I get on my knees, lower my forehead to the ground, my tears soaking through the sheet. I bow to the west. Then I remember I haven’t prayed for over fifteen years. I have long forgotten the words. But it doesn’t matter, I will utter those few words I still remember: *La illaha il Allah, Muhammad u rasul ullah*. There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger. I see now that Baba was wrong, there is a God, there always had been. I see Him here, in the eyes of the people in this corridor of desperation. This is the real house of God, this is where those who have lost God will find Him, not the white *masjid* with its bright diamond lights and towering minarets. There is a God, there has to be, and now I will pray, I will pray that He forgive that I have neglected Him all of these years, forgive that I have betrayed, lied, and sinned with impunity only to turn to Him now in my house of need, I pray that He is as merciful, benevolent, and gracious as His book says He is. I bow to the west and kiss the ground and promise that I will do *zakat*, I will do *namaz*, I will fast during Ramadan and when Ramadan has passed I will go on fasting, I will commit to memory every last word of His holy book, and I will set on a pilgrimage to that sweltering city in the desert and bow before the Ka’bah too. I will do all of this and I will think of Him every day form this day on if He only grants me this one wish: My hands are stained with Hassan’s blood; I pray God doesn’t let them get stained with the blood of his boy too.

 I hear a whimpering and realize it is mine, my lips are salty with the tears trickling down my face. I feel the eyes of everyone in this corridor on my and still I bow to the west. I pray. I pray that my sins have not caught up with me the way I’d always feared they would.

The Kite Runner Passage # 10

 “You promised you’d never put me in one of those places, Amir agha,” he said. His voice was breaking, tears pooling in his eyes. I felt like a prick.

 “This is different. It would be here, in Islamabad, not in Kabul. And I’d visit you all the time until we can get you out and take you to America.”

 “Please! Please, no!” he croaked. “I’m scared of that place. They’ll hurt me! I don’t want to go.”

 “No one is going to hurt you. Not ever again.”

 “Yes they will! They always say they won’t but they lie. They lie! Please, God!”

 I wiped the tear streaking down his cheek with my thumb. “Sour apples, remember? It’s just like the sour apples,” I said softly.

 “No it’s not. Not that place. God, oh God. Please, no!” He was trembling, snot and tears mixing on his face.

 “*Shhh.*” I pulled him close, wrapped my arms around his shaking little body. “*Shhh*. It’ll be all right. We’ll go home together. You’ll see, it’ll be all right.”

 His voice was muffled against my chest, but I heard the panic in it. “Please promise you won’t! Oh God, Amir agha! Please promise you won’t!”

 How could I promise? I held him against me, held him tightly, and rocked back and forth. He wept into my shirt until his tears dried, until his shaking stopped and his frantic pleas dwindled to indecipherable mumbles. I waited, rocked him until his breathing slowed and his body slackened. I remembered something gI had read somewhere a long time ago: *That’s how children deal with terror. They fall asleep*.

 I carried him to his bed, set him down. Then I lay in my own bed, looking out the window at the purple sky over Islamabad.

 THE SKY WAS A DEEP BLACK when the phone jolted me from sleep. I rubbed my eyes and turned on the bedside lamp. It was a little past 10:30 PM; I’d been sleeping for almost three hours. I picked up the phone. “Hello?”

 “Call from America.” Mr. Fayyaz’s bored voice.

 “Thank you,” I said. The bathroom light was on; Sohrab was taking his nightly bath. A couple of clicks and then Soraya: “*Salaam!”* She sounded excited.

 “Hi.”

 “How did the meeting go with the lawyer?”

 I told her what Omar Faisal had suggested. “Well you can forget about it,” she said. “We won’t have to do that.”

 I sat up. “*Rawsti*? Why, what’s up?”

 “I heard back from Kaka Sharif. He said the key was getting Sohrab into the country. Once he’s in, there are ways of keeping him here. So he made a few calls to his INS friends. He called me back tonight and said he was almost certain he could get Sohrab a humanitarian visa.”

 “No kidding?” I said. “Oh thank God! Good ol’ Sharif jan!”

 “I know. Anyway, we’ll serve as the sponsors. It should all happen pretty quickly. He said the visa would be good for a year, plenty of time to apply for an adoption petition.”

 “It’s really going to happen, Soraya, huh?”

 “It looks like it,” she said. She sounded happy. I told her I loved her and she said she loved me back. I hung up.

 “Sohrab!” I called, rising from my bed. “I have great news.” I knocked on the bathroom door. “Sohrab! Soraya jan just called from California. We won’t have to put you in the orphanage, Sohrab. We’re going to America, you and I. Did you hear me? We’re going to America!”

 I pushed the door open. Stepped into the bathroom.

 Suddenly I was on my knees, screaming. Screaming through my clenched teeth. Screaming until I thought my throat would rip and my chest explode.

 Later, they said I was still screaming when the ambulance arrived.