Pgs 1-33

The novel starts from Josef’s perspective in Berlin, Germany 1938. Josef Landau wakes up feeling as if someone has broken into his apartment, and hearing loud bangs. His family has just relocated into a smaller apartment, due to Nazi laws. Shadowy hands break into the room he shares with his sister Ruthie. Josef, “kicked and flailed in a panic, but one of the shadows caught his ankle and dragged him face-first across the bed” (2).The shadows drag them into the living room, where they see their parents lying on the floor, and seven strangers. One of them explains that since their father had continued to practice law, and as he was Jewish this was forbidden, they were taking him into “protective custody” (3). In the next few days, they learned their family was not alone, and part of the “Kristallnacht” or “Night of Broken Glass” when Jewish families and synagogues were attacked (5). His father is taken to a concentration camp called Dachau, but six months later he is released on the condition that they leave Germany at once.

The perspective changes to Isabel Fernandez’s perspective, in Havana Cuba 1994. Isabel is coaxing a stray kitten out from hiding with some beans. Her next door neighbor and best friend Ivan calls out to her, wearing his favorite baseball hat with an I on it for the team the “Industriales” (9). His father calls out to him and he has to go, telling Isabel he is building a doghouse. But Isabel knows he is actually building a boat to sail to the United States. She sees her grandfather and father walking to Havana and she follows after them, bringing her trumpet. As she plays she listens for the clave underneath her music but instead starts to hear breaking glass.

The next perspective changes to Mahmoud Bishara in Aleppo Syria, in 2015. Mahmoud sits in class, trying to be invisible. When class is over he tries to find his brother Waleed. Mahmoud is nervous because of the war, but Waleed is a robot without emotion. They walk home, taking a new route. They see two large boys taking a bag of bread from another boy and they hide. Mahmoud remembers one day he had protected his friend Khalid from bullies, but it had ended badly for both of them. He thinks watching the boys, “I should do something” but he and his brother walk away (17).

The perspective changes back to Josef in Berlin, but now it is 1939. Josef, his mother, and sister walk through the busy train station as if they are invisible - everyone ignoring them because of their Star of David armbands. On the train they sit in the compartment for Jews. Their mother has booked them all passage on a ship to Cuba, since most countries were not accepting any more Jewish refugees. They hoped eventually from there they could get to the United States. Ruthie wants to take her coat off but her mother stops her. Ruthie carries with her her stuffed rabbit Bitsy. Once on the train, Ruthie and Josef’s mother start to nap. Josef slides off his armband and walks into the other compartment. He buys a paper, but as he goes to pay his armband slips out of his pocket and is stomped on by a Hitler Youth. The boy grabs him and starts to drag him away.

The perspective changes back to Isabel as she lowers her trumpet. She hears a gunshot and people start rushing the streets. The whole city erupts into a riot. She calls out for her father and grandfather. Her grandfather finds her, but she runs into the fray to find her father. She watches her father throw a glass bottle at the police, and they respond by arresting people. A police officer starts beating him with a nightstick and Isabel rushes in to save him. The police officer stops and tells her father he will find him and arrest him. Isabel realizes they have to leave Cuba immediately.

The last perspective of this section is from Mahmoud in Aleppo. He is at home doing his homework while his brother watches Teenage Mutant Ninja turtles on TV. He and his brother hear the call to prayer and start to pray. Suddenly, they hear a roar and an incoming missile. The walls explode and glass shatters everywhere. Mahmoud is thrown to a wall, and for a moment he cannot breathe. His head is bleeding and he realizes the outside wall of the entire side outer wall of the apartment is now gone.

Pgs. 34-73

Page 34 starts where Josef’s story left off, as he is dragged on the train by the Hitler Youth. He takes Josef to the Jewish compartment and tells him not to take off his armband, then marches away. They arrive at the Hamburg train station to board their ship the MS St. Louis. They meet their father, but he is not the same. He is gaunt and thin; looking “like an escapee from a mental asylum” (36). They walk to the ship and their father races inside, convinced the authorities will try to stop them. His mother gives the sailor their tickets and they board the boat. Amidst the celebration of leaving, Josef is concerned about his father.

The perspective changes to Isabel as she returns home with her father and grandfather, and they start cleaning her father’s wounds. Her father and grandfather start fighting about leaving Cuba, but Fidel Castro interrupts the baseball game on TV for an announcement saying that all who wish to leave Cuba may do so immediately, and legally. The family starts to fight again about leaving, especially since her mother is very pregnant, and Isabel suggests they all leave together. Her father says he does not have a boat, so Isabel goes to Ivan’s house to ask if they can go with him and his family in their homemade boat. Ivan says they do not have gasoline, so Isabel runs home, grabs her trumpet and the kitten and runs to a fisherman’s house whom she knows owns a gas powered boat. She gives him the trumpet in exchange for gas. She also asks him to take care of the kitten.

The perspective changes back to Mahmoud as he finds his brother where he left him. His mother calls out for them, as she carries Hana. She tells them to go outside while she gathers a few things. As they get outside the building collapses. His mother emerges from the rubble with backpacks. Their father comes running towards them from work. He tells them they must take the car and go to Germany immediately.

The perspective changes back to Josef, now somewhere on the Atlantic ocean, the subtitle “6 days from home” (56). Ruthie and Josef play on the deck of the boat, loving their new life on the MS St.Louis. Ruthie tells the other little girls they meet that Josef is almost about to have his bar mitzvah. The girls tell them their father is waiting for them in Cuba. The four of them decide to play a trick on one of the servers on the boat, laughing and playing.

The perspective returns to Isabel as she carries the boat to the water. She thinks, “Nothing was more important than making it to Florida” (60). On the beach they see a crowd, including CNN and a reporter. They also see many boats and rafts. Once on the boat they start to push away but see two police officers running towards them. Papi starts to yell that they are coming for him, but when they get to the boat Ivan and his father pull them in and Isabel realizes they are Ivan’s brother and his girlfriend, in their police uniforms escaping. They are shot at by other police, since police are not allowed to be deserters. They turn on the engine but start to argue, worried that they will be chased with police officers in the boat, but Isabel is mostly worried about the gunshot hole now in the side of the boat, leaking water into it.

The final perspective for this chapter is Mahmoud as he is “just outside Aleppo . . . 1 day from home” (66). His father goes to get gas, and he sees a mural with President Assad’s face outside. His mother finds a route on the iPhone and they begin to drive, but are soon stopped by soldiers. They cannot tell whose side the soldiers are on, and the soldiers ask them which side they support. His father hesitates as the soldiers cock their guns. Waleed speaks up saying “We’re against whoever is dropping the bombs on us” (69). The soldiers laugh and everyone feels relieved. The soldiers open the door and slide inside, giving Mahmoud’s father directions, telling him where to go to avoid fighting. His father starts to drive and is almost to a highway when they hear gunfire, and it starts hitting the car. They pull over and Mahmoud drags Waleed out into a ditch. His father scrambles back up into the car to grab the phone and charger. They wait until they stop hearing bullets then leave the car.

Pgs. 74-109

This section starts with Josef’s perspective, somewhere on the Atlantic in 1939, “8 days from home” (74). It is shabbos and time for Josef’s Bar Mitzvah, the Jewish religious ceremony when a Jewish boy turns 13 years old. Josef’s father is convinced there is a trap, so Josef and his mother go without him. Though Josef is devastated, he wonders if this is what becoming a man means - not relying on your father. Before the ceremony begins, the Rabbi asks the captain to take down the portrait of Hitler, which the captain does. Josef recites the blessing and after the ceremony everyone congratulates him. While walking on the boat afterwards, a newly minted man, he overhears the stewards discussing how the ship’s engines are maxed out - in order to beat the other ships to Cuba. Josef wonders what this means for getting into the new country for him and his family.

The next section switches to Isabel in the straits of Florida, somewhere north of Cuba, “1 day from home” (81). As they sit on the boat, Isabel’s grandfather reveals what is at the bottom of the boat: Castro’s face. The face is literally holding up the bottom of the boat. Everyone laughs, as they reminisce about their former life in Cuba and wonder what America will be like. They start to fantasize about food, new jobs, and television. Her Grandfather suggests a song and asks Isabel to play her trumpet, but she explains that she traded it. They start to sing a song instead, but suddenly the motor dies “and the music stopped” (86).

The next perspective is Mahmoud in Kilis Turkey, 2015 “2 days from home” (87). The chapter starts with “Mahmoud could hear music beyond the fence” (87). His family had walked from Syria to the Turkish border, using their iPhone map for directions. Mahmoud and his family are among hundreds of other refugees. At the Turkish border they receive temporary visas, and walk into a sea of white canvas tents. Mahmoud’s father goes to find a bus so they can get on their way to Greece. He knows a smuggler who can get them into the European Union. Mahmoud finds a teenage mutant ninja turtle in a box of toys which he buys for Waleed. A car drives by with a wedding procession, but soon Mahmoud’s father is back telling him they need to leave immediately.

The perspective changes back to Josef who is “Somewhere on the Atlantic Ocean - 1939; 10 days from home” (93). Josef joins the other children in a tour of the ship, and asks Captain Schroeder about why the ship is moving at full speed. The captain is upset that Josef knows about the other ships, but claims they just have calm seas. They walk down below deck into the crew room, and overhear the crew members singing the Nazi party anthem. They call the kids “jewish rats” and sing about Jewish blood flowing (97). Josef tries to enjoy the rest of the tour but he and the other children are upset.

Isabel is still in the straits of Florida, north of Cuba, on the boat and the motor is still broken. Lito explains that Isabel has an uncle in the United States who left in the 1970s, and that Lito could have left too, if he had tried. Lito starts to speak negatively about Isabel’s father, calling him a fool and claiming he has no plan for the family. Lito says they should go back to Cuba, but up ahead they see an enormous tanker coming towards them.

Mahmoud is now in “Izmir, Turkey” now “4 days from home” (104). Mahmoud and his family stand in a parking lot talking to the smuggler who says there is no boat today, and tells them to come back tomorrow. His family goes to a hotel for the night, but each room is already full - with three families apiece in each room. They try the park, but the park is also packed with people. A Turkish boy comes over to Mahmoud offering tissues and life vests, and offers to take the family to a place to sleep for the night, for a price. The family walks with him to an abandoned mall. The boy offers to sell them life vests and their father at first refuses, but the boy suggests the boat will flip or they will crash on the rocks, so Mahmoud’s father relents.

Pgs 110-163

This section starts with Josef still in the Atlantic “11 days from home” as his father flails around the room panicking because the ship is slowing down. Josef explains the ship is slowing for a funeral, and Josef’s father says he wants to go. They go to the deck, and one of the stewards insists German law mandates they wrap the body in the Nazi flag. In anger, Josef’s father spits at the feet of the steward, and the captain intervenes and stops the steward telling him to leave. They perform the ceremony and throw the body overboard, and the ship starts again.

The next section is Isabel, still 1 day from home in the boat. The motor still will not start as the tanker charges towards them. Lito and Isabel’s father start to fight about if they want to be rescued by this tanker - since if they are discovered they will have to go back to Cuba. Just in time, the engine starts again and they zoom forward. However they realize Ivan’s father is in the ocean. The section in with Isabel diving into the ocean to save Ivan’s father.

The next section is Mahmoud still in Izmir “11 days from home” (121). The smuggler tells the family there is no boat today, come back tomorrow and Mahmoud and his family are upset. The smuggler has told them this every day for a week. Exasperated, they return to the mall, but they Turkish men stop them and insist they must pay to stay there. They find another place but the police make them move. A car comes down the road and Mahmoud stops in front of it waving the life vests. An elderly man with a headscarf stops to listen to Mahmoud. The man speaks to them in Arabic and says they can stay at his business. Mahmoud’s father tries to refuse but they get into the car. The man is also a refugee, from Palestine. Mahmoud’s father gets a text that the boat is there, and they turn around. The boat is there waiting for them.

Josef is still in the Atlantic headed towards Cuba, however he is now “14 days from home” (129). The ship is a day away from Cuba and they throw a party. The stewards smile but Josef thinks how they could not understand until “their shop windows had been smashed and their businesses had been shut down” (129). The next day the anchors come down, but they are still kilometers from shore. Another passenger tells Josef they are checking them all for the medical quarantine. When they all line up in the dining hall, Josef’s father panics, and this makes him worry they will not let them inside Cuba if he is mentally unfit. Josef slaps his father hard and tells him if he does not do as he says the Nazis will send him back. His father snaps to attention, “like a prisoner” (134). The doctor passes over them, but they realize it was a sham as it was not a regular medical inspection. They ask the police when they will be let into Cuba and the policeman says “manana” (135). Another passenger explains that means tomorrow.

The perspective changes back to Isabel as she dives into the water, still “1 day from home” (136). Isabel feels Senor Castillo in the water and dives down to grab him. They turn the boat around and pull Isabel and Ivan’s father into the boat. The engine stops again. They take turns sleeping and bailing out the sinking boat all night. The section ends with Lito telling everyone there is a storm coming.

Mahmoud is still in Izmir, “11 days from home” looking at the boat. They realize it is an inflatable raft. Though afraid and unsure, the family puts on their life vests. Their phones are sealed in plastic bags and they think it will take a few hours to cross. The motor starts and everyone cheers, but the raft is very unsteady. It starts raining hard. Suddenly someone shouts about rocks and “POOM! Like a bomb exploding, and Mahmoud went tumbling into the sea” (146).

Josef is still in the ship outside Cuba, now “17 days from home” (147). The ship has been there for three days, yet other ships from Europe have let off passengers and left. The steward who Josef’s father had spit on grabs Josef and tells him his parent's cabin must be searched. Josef is forced to take the men to his family’s cabin and then tear it apart. Afterwards, the stewards spits on the floor and says, “that’s what I think of you and your race” (151). Josef’s father is upset, accusing Josef of lying to him earlier and Josef feels guilty.

Isabel is now 2 days from home, and the rain is coming down hard. She scoops the water out of the boat as fast as she can. Isabel thinks about her grandmother, and how she had been washed away in the tide. She and her grandfather talk and think about her grandmother together.

Mahmoud is now “Somewhere on the Mediterranean Sea . . . 11 days from home” (157). Mahmoud is in the water and he sees the glowing cell phone and swims towards it. He sees his mother and her pink headscarf. He realizes his baby sister Hana is crying, and his mother is struggling to keep both herself and Hana above water. He hears his father call out that the life vests are fakes. He thinks to himself how they are all going to die in the water. He fights to breathe. Time passes, but soon another dinghy zooms by but does not stop. Mahmoud grabs onto the side and pulls his mother along. A woman yells at them, and Mahmoud begs for help. Mahmoud begs that they at least take his sister. Mahmoud’s mother lifts Hana into the arms of a woman on the dinghy saying her name. The boat speeds off with Hana, as his mother weeps.

Pgs.164-215

This section starts with Josef’s perspective outside Havana Harbor, “18 days from home” (164). Josef’s father is panicking and tearing their cabin apart again, after they had just put it back together since the stewards had trashed it. Ruthie is crying and holding Bitsy. Josef’s mother sends Bitsy to the pool and goes to the doctor to ask for sleeping medication for their father. However, she soon returns, staggering, explaining the doctor had forced her to take the sleeping draught right there. She falls asleep, and after relating his nightmares at the concentration camp Josef’s father falls asleep too. Josef goes to find his sister but when he comes back his father is gone. The chapter ends as Josef searches for his father and realizes his father has jumped overboard.

Isabel wakes up, still in the boat, now 3 days from home, and her mother is worried about her pregnancy. She and Ivan chat about America, and she notices that Castro’s face at the bottom of the boat is even more submerged. Suddenly they see land. They see beaches and white people in bikinis. Papi asks an officer where they are, and he explains they are in the Bahamas, which cannot accept illegal aliens. If they land they will be deported to Cuba. He offers to give Isabel’s mother medical attention but explains she will eventually be returned to Cuba. They decide to leave the Bahamas to try again for Florida, and the tourists give them food, water, and medical supplies.

The perspective returns to Mahmoud, still in the Mediterranean Sea, 11 days from home. Mahmoud’s mother weeps over losing Hana. Mahmoud struggles to keep his head above water and help his mother. He sees a working life jacket on a dead man and takes it, reciting a prayer. He puts the life jacket on his mother and clings to it, both of them floating, trying to survive the night.

Josef starts crying out for help for his father who is overboard. One of the Cuban policemen on the ship jumps in to save him. Meanwhile, Josef starts to see two sharks circling. The policeman rescues Josef’s father while another police officer shoots the sharks. Josef’s father screams “Let me die,” struggling on the lifeboat (185). Josef thinks about how the father he knew is gone.

Isabel is 4 days from home. She realizes the boat is falling apart, with the exception of Castro’s face that remains uncracked. The family works tirelessly to keep bailing out water while the boat powers on, but the water is filling the boat too quickly. Isabel’s grandfather starts whispering that they will get to Florida “manana” (188). Everyone starts to fight until Amara suggests they take a water break. They decide someone should swim outside the boat to lighten it while they steer towards Florida.

Mahmoud is still in the Mediterranean, 11 days from home. He hears a motor boat, and remembering the phone in his pocket waves it at the oncoming boat. It is the Greek Coast Guard, and they scoop up Mahmoud and the rest of his family. His father weeps when he finds out about Hana but tells Mahmoud that he saved her. When they get to the Greek shore they see endless piles of life jackets, and lifeless bodies. His mother starts frantically searching for Hana, but she is not among the dead. Mahmoud’s father tells Mahmoud to look among the dead bodies for shoes, as they kicked theirs off while struggling to stay afloat in the water.

Josef is now 19 days from home in the Havana harbor. Everyone is treating him differently after his father jumped ship. Later that day the policeman who had saved Josef’s father comes on board. The passengers applaud him and give him money. He flirts with Josef’s mother. She asks about her husband and he tells her he is in the hospital, sedated. The officer plays tag with Ruthie having fun, until he plays that he is on the ship and they are the officer, and he ironically demands when he can leave the ship. Awkwardly, in unison they say, “manana” (202).

Isabel is somewhere between the Bahamas and Florida, now 5 days from home. She swims alongside the boat, and Ivan is on the other side. Her mother starts to have contractions, though not severe, and everyone starts to chat idly about what to name the boat. Isabel’s grandfather murmurs “The St. Louis” (207). Suddenly Isabel’s grandfather shouts “shark!” and the water becomes dark with Ivan’s blood, as Isabel scrambles out of the water (208). They pull Ivan into the boat and his leg is a bloody mess, and he dies quickly. More sharks start to surround the boat.

Mahmoud is now in Lesbos, Greece, 12 days from home. It is a tent city and Mahmoud’s mother has looked everywhere for Hana. Mahmoud feels guilty over losing Hana. The ferry to Athens comes to get them, and it is a fancy ship filled with tourists. The tourists look annoyed and Mahmoud thinks, “They only see us when we do something they don’t want us to do” (214). He realizes that other people only care when the refugees are unavoidable, inconveniencing them. In Athens, they have trouble with paperwork, and decide to avoid it by taking a train to sneak across the border to Macedonia, while Mahmoud’s mother still searches for Hana.

Pgs 216-269

Josef is still outside the Havana Harbor, 21 days from home. He watches his friends’ father, whom had already sought asylum in Cuba, come to pick up his daughters on the boat. The rest of the passengers grow angry. Officer Padron insists they had the right papers but the crowd gets mad insisting they also have the right papers. The engines start to rumble and the crowd gets more angry. Officer Padron raises his gun but soon the Captain yells to drop their weapons. He explains to the crowd that he has been to see the President of Cuba, but the President refused his visit. And now, the government is insisting they leave the harbor. The Captain insists they will ask the American government for refuge. Josef asks the officer about his father but they tell him he is too sick to board, and the ship will leave without him. Josef watches the boat pull away, and tears his shirt out of respect, knowing he will never see his father alive again.

Isabel is in the ocean, somewhere between the Bahamas and Florida, 5 days from home. Everyone is crying over Ivan, and Isabel notices, “Fidel Castro had Ivan’s blood all over him” (224). They have to abandon his body. They say a prayer, and Isabel’s grandfather shoots the shark on the other side of the boat. They then slip Ivan’s body into the ocean on the other side. Isabel remembers his Industriales cap and finds it, and holds it. Soon they see the lights of Miami.

Mahmoud is about to cross into Macedonia - 14-15 days from home. They hope to cross into Macedonia, to go to Serbia, and then Hungary. They do not wait for the right papers, so they have to cross in the forest in the middle of the night. When they get to the train station in the middle of the night it is packed with people sleeping everywhere. They take a taxi instead into Serbia. When they get to the next train station it is even more packed with people. They decide to take another taxi into Hungary until the driver stops in the middle of nowhere and points a gun at them.

Josef is now looking at Miami, but 21 days from home. They can see the buildings and roads, while a plane circles around them overhead. After a brief mourning period, his mother seems to have recovered and is now dancing alone in the dance hall. She tells him he was named after her brother who died fighting in World War I. They hear that there will be an announcement on the deck. When they get there they see Adolf Hitler’s face in the front room. The Captain tells them the United States has refused them, and they are going back to Europe. The crowd is immediately outraged. One man named Pozner pulls Josef aside and asks him to help them take the Captain and crew hostage to force the ship to go aground in the U.S.

Everyone on the boat with Isabel is now looking at the Miami coast. But their thoughts are interrupted by a loud sound meaning the boat was officially cracking. Everyone starts to bail out the boat as fast as possible. Isabel and her family push the engine into the sea in order to make the boat lighter. Suddenly they hear a loud siren and realize the U.S. Coast Guard is upon them.

Mahmoud and his family stare at the gun. The driver tells them to pay 300 Euros and then to get out of the car. The taxi drives off, and Mahmoud starts crying and apologizing to his mother for making her give Hana away. His mother soothes him, telling him he saved her. They start walking towards the Hungarian border but see a fence. There is a crowd of refugees and people start shouting and screaming, upset. A tear gas canister explodes near Mahmoud and he thinks he is about to die.

Josef is back on the Atlantic headed towards Europe, watching his sister play on the ship’s pool. Pozner tells Josef it’s time, and Josef realizes they have 10 men - a minyan. Josef leads them up to the bridge, and the men soon surround the crew, successfully holding the bridge. Pozner tells them to call for the Captain. The Captain is calm and explains they are committing piracy. He says if they continue with this mutiny they return to Germany. The Captain promises them that he will do everything in his power to not go to Germany, including running the ship aground in England, and the men agree to drop the mutiny.

Isabel is still thinking about the Coast Guard, when suddenly her mother goes into labor. At the same time, they notice how the Coast Guard has started to watch a different raft of refugees. They start paddling and rowing as fast as they can, while Isabel’s mother tries not to scream out while her contractions start in earnest.

Mahmoud is now in Hungary, 16 days from home. He hears sirens and soldiers shouting. He realizes he is in a van with his father, handcuffed. One of the other men in the van tells them they are all going to prison. They are separated from Waleed and Mahmoud’s mother. The prison guards insist they get processed, and Mahmoud’s father protests and then is beaten. An officer asks Mahmoud’s father if he wants to claim asylum in Hungary, and his father is outraged. The officer tells him, “I’m just doing my job” (269). The officer tells them if he is not processed they will send him back to Serbia. Mahmoud tells the officer all the family’s information.