

# Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARJANE SATRAPI

As Satrapi explains in her graphic memoirs, she was born in Rasht, Iran to middle-class parents. Her mother and father were liberal and politically active. They sent young Satrapi to a French language school in Tehran until the Iranian Revolution began in 1979. Over the course of the Revolution, many of the Satrapis' family friends were killed by the various regimes that ruled Iran. Fearing for her safety, her parents sent Satrapi to Vienna to study in 1984 (this is when the events of *Persepolis 2* begin). After four years, Satrapi returned to Iran, was married briefly to a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, and obtained her master's degree from Islamic Azad University. Finally, when Satrapi was 23, she returned to Europe to reside in Strasbourg, France. In 2000, she began publishing her series of *Persepolis* novels in French, which catapulted her to fame. After publishing several other award-winning graphic novels, Satrapi turned to filmmaking. She directed the film adaptation of *Persepolis*, which was met with exceptional reviews when it debuted at the Cannes Film Festival. Satrapi also directed the live-action horror film *The Voices*, for which she and actor Ryan Reynolds won several awards. Satrapi lives in Paris.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During her time in Vienna, Marjane confronts a Western world that, to her, seems impossibly modern and progressive. She specifically notes the consequences of the 1960s sexual revolution (namely, the increasing availability of the birth control pill) and the increase in demand for recreational drugs like cannabis, heroin, and cocaine. Many of Marjane's friends in Vienna are very interested in anarchist philosophy and idolize Mikhail Bakunin. Simply put, Bakunin (1814–1876) rejected all forms of authority and took issue with Marxism—he believed that a Marxist-style revolution would never result in a free, egalitarian, and leaderless society, which is ostensibly the goal of both anarchism and Marxism. Once back in Iran, Marjane has to confront the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War and Iran's oppressive, fundamentalist government. The Iran-Iraq War, which ended in 1988, resulted in the deaths of up to 500,000 soldiers and civilians from both sides, and it devastated Iran's culture and economy. The Islamic fundamentalist government, meanwhile, mandated that women wear full veils in public and barred women from studying a number of subjects at universities.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Persepolis 2* is a follow-up to *Persepolis*, the first installment of Satrapi's illustrated memoir series. Since the publication of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (which inspired Satrapi to use the form for her own books), graphic novels have risen in status. Like Satrapi, many authors have used the medium to tell their own memoirs, as Alison Bechdel does in *Fun Home* and Craig Thompson does in *Blankets*. Other authors and cartoonists have used graphic novels to explore complex ideas in a format that makes those ideas more accessible, particularly for students who are reluctant readers. *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang is one of the most well-known examples of a graphic novel that's been used extensively in classrooms for this purpose. In addition, due to graphic novels' unique ability to engage reluctant readers, many classic novels—from *Beowulf* to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*—have been adapted into a graphic novel form. Finally, though not a graphic novel, it's worth mentioning the memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which takes place around the same time and place as *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* do. In this book, Iranian professor Azar Nafisi details her experience of the Islamic Revolution and the women's book club she started after resigning from her teaching position. Like Satrapi, Nafisi ultimately left Iran in the 1990s.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return
- **When Written:** 2002–2003
- **Where Written:** France
- **When Published:** Two French volumes in 2002 and 2003; English translation in 2004
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Graphic Novel; Memoir
- **Setting:** Vienna, Austria and Tehran, Iran; 1984–1993
- **Climax:** Marjane decides to divorce Reza and move back to Europe.
- **Antagonist:** Marjane's Viennese landlords; Iran's Islamic fundamentalist government; bigotry and sexism
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Call it What it Is.** Satrapi acknowledges that calling *Persepolis*, *Persepolis 2*, and other graphic novels “comic books” can dredge up unflattering stereotypes and make the books seem less literary. However, she insists that her novels are indeed comic books.

**Proud Parents.** Satrapi has said that her parents are very proud of her for writing *Persepolis*. She credits her mother and father's good-natured reception of the book to the fact that they're open-minded and willing to change their perspectives when presented with new information.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Marjane is 14 when she arrives in Vienna, thrilled that she escaped the Iran-Iraq War and the religious fundamentalism of her home country, Iran. She expects to live with a family friend named Zozo and attend school at the local French school. But after 11 days together, Zozo drops Marjane off at a Catholic boarding house. This living situation is okay with Marjane, because it makes her feel independent and more like an adult. But when Marjane meets her roommate, Lucia, the girls realize they have a problem: Marjane doesn't speak German, while Lucia doesn't speak French or Persian.

School is a challenge. Marjane hasn't spoken French in a few years, so students either tease her for her rusty language skills or ignore her altogether. Eventually, an older girl named Julie takes an interest in Marjane and introduces her to her friends Momo, Thierry, and Olivier. Momo is obsessed with death and war, so Marjane is an intriguing addition to their friend group. When Christmas vacation rolls around, none of Marjane's friends care that she doesn't celebrate Christmas. Fortunately, Lucia invites Marjane to join her and her family in the Tyrol. Lucia's parents make Marjane feel welcome and loved. However, Marjane isn't thrilled when weeks later, she learns that there's going to be yet another vacation. Momo insists that Marjane should learn to enjoy vacation and take the opportunity to educate herself. Though Marjane thinks Momo is a jerk, she knows she needs to learn more so she can fit in in Europe. She spends the entire vacation reading. Near the end, though, the Mother Superior catches Marjane eating pasta out of a pot and comments that Iranians don't have manners. When Marjane insults the Mother Superior in return, the Mother Superior kicks Marjane out.

Marjane moves in with Julie and Julie's mother, Armelle. Julie explains sex to Marjane and is rude to her mother, which are behaviors that Marjane finds shocking—in Iran, parents are considered sacred, while sex is taboo. When Armelle leaves on a work trip, Julie throws a party. Marjane doesn't enjoy the party and is shocked when she hears Julie and her latest partner having sex. After this, Marjane tries to impress her friends by pretending to smoke joints, but she feels like she's betraying her culture and values.

Marjane then moves to a communal house inhabited by eight young gay men. Around this time, she also undergoes puberty at a shocking speed. When Mom comes for visit a visit, she doesn't even recognize Marjane because she's grown so much.

And to Marjane's surprise, Mom's hair is gray. They spend their visit walking and talking, and Mom helps Marjane rent an apartment from an ugly woman named Frau Doctor Heller. Marjane realizes that her parents have no idea how difficult life is for her in Vienna.

Living with Frau Doctor Heller is a challenge—for one thing, she doesn't think it's a problem that her dog poops in Marjane's bed. By this time, Marjane's friends have all moved away. Fortunately, she has an older boyfriend named Enrique. He's a real anarchist and invites her to a party at a commune. Marjane is excited until she discovers that the anarchists play games like hide-and-seek. That night, she decides to lose her virginity, but nothing happens between her and Enrique. In the morning, Enrique tells Marjane a secret: he's gay.

Following the breakup, Marjane spends more time with her friend Ingrid and the anarchists at the commune. To cope with her loneliness, she starts doing more drugs and throws herself into finding someone to have sex with her. Just as she's ready to give up, Marjane meets Markus. Things are rocky from the start. Markus's mother is racist and refuses to allow Markus and Marjane to spend time together in her home. Meanwhile, Frau Doctor Heller accuses Marjane of prostitution. Marjane and Markus spend a lot of time smoking in Markus's car. When Markus asks Marjane to purchase drugs for him, she complies—and becomes her school's drug dealer. The next school year is difficult for Marjane. Though she stops selling drugs, she takes more drugs herself and barely passes her final exams. She's disappointed and knows her parents would be, too.

On her 18th birthday, Marjane discovers Markus in bed with another woman. Later that morning, when Frau Doctor Heller accuses Marjane of stealing, Marjane walks out and spends the next two months on the streets. It's winter, so Marjane develops bronchitis and ends up in the hospital. She decides it's silly that she almost let love kill her when she survived war and revolution in Iran. After the doctor gives her a clean bill of health, Marjane arranges with her parents for her to come home, as long as they promise not to ask about what happened.

Mom and Dad don't recognize Marjane when she finds them at the airport. On her first day back in Tehran, Marjane walks the streets and is disturbed—now, the streets are named for martyrs. That evening, Dad explains what happened in the final weeks of the war: after Iranian militants tried to overthrow the Iranian regime, the government executed thousands of imprisoned intellectuals. This makes Marjane feel like what happened to her in Vienna was inconsequential. She vows to never talk about her "Viennese misadventures." Grudgingly, Marjane agrees to see family members and friends. Her grandmother is the only family member she really wants to see. After most of Marjane's friends turn out to be shallow, Marjane seeks out Kia, one of her best childhood friends. He served in the war and is now disabled, but he's as funny as ever. After Kia

leaves Iran to seek medical treatment in the United States, Marjane's depression worsens. She wants to tell everyone what happened in Vienna so they'll pity her, but she stays silent. Eventually, Mom forces Marjane to join her friends on a skiing trip. Her friends make her depression even worse when they learn she's had sex with more than one man. They ask if she's any different from a whore. Thus, Marjane returns home more depressed than ever. When antidepressants and counseling fail to help, attempts suicide. When she survives, she decides it's a sign that she's supposed to live. Marjane remakes herself into a coiffed, sophisticated woman.

Not long after, Marjane meets her future husband, Reza, at a friend's party. They're both painters—and Reza served in the Iran-Iraq War. Despite their many differences, they complement each other. They quickly begin planning a future together. Though Reza wants to leave Iran, the couple decides instead to attend art school in Iran. They study hard for their entrance exams and both get in. Once they receive their admissions decisions, their future together seems secure. This sense of security leads Marjane and Reza to start picking on each other. Because Reza doesn't think Marjane wears enough **makeup**, Marjane makes herself up heavily for one of their dates. But as she waits for Reza, she sees the Guardians of the Revolution coming—and knows they'll arrest her for wearing makeup. To save herself, she accuses a strange man of yelling obscene things at her. When she tells Reza about it, he thinks this is hilarious. Later, when Marjane tells her grandmother, her grandmother calls Marjane a “selfish bitch.”

At school, Marjane befriends several female classmates. Several weeks into the school year, all university students gather for a lecture on “moral and religious conduct.” The speaker insists that women must dress conservatively to honor the martyrs, but Marjane pushes back—the university seems obsessed with policing women's clothing, not with ensuring its students' morality. Fortunately, a religious school administrator allows Marjane to design uniforms for the female art students that follow the dress code and give art students more freedom to move around. This project helps Marjane make up with her grandmother. Meanwhile, the administration and the Guardians of the Revolution constantly police women and arrest them for silly things like wearing socks, laughing loudly, or running. This, Marjane knows, is by design—women who are concerned about the dress code are too preoccupied to think about their education or the political situation. Around this time, Marjane makes friends with her more liberal classmates and they begin throwing parties. The Guardians of the Revolution regularly break these up, but it doesn't worry Marjane much until one friend dies during a raid.

By Marjane's second year of college, Marjane and Reza decide to marry. Marjane talks her decision over with Dad, who she learns later knew that Marjane and Reza would go on to get divorced. The wedding is a huge, lavish affair. Marjane

immediately regrets getting married—but it's too late. It only takes a month before Marjane and Reza are at each other's throats. They set up separate bedrooms and never go out together. Around the same time, Marjane's friends and parents acquire satellite dishes that allow them to watch Western television. Marjane spends most of her time watching TV on her parents' couch until Dad suggests that Marjane is wasting her life. Marjane sees that Dad is right. She makes new friends and reapplies herself to her education.

One of Marjane and Reza's advisors assigns them a joint **final thesis**. They spend seven months designing a theme park inspired by Iranian mythology and don't fight at all. Though their thesis earns full marks, Tehran's deputy mayor refuses to let Marjane and Reza take the project past the design stage—the government only cares about religious symbols, not Iranian mythology. After this failure, Marjane begins to think seriously about getting a divorce. One friend tells Marjane to stay married unless Reza is abusive, while Marjane's grandmother (who's been divorced herself) insists that divorce is a good thing.

Around this time, Marjane gets a job as an illustrator for a magazine. Like most of her colleagues, she's enraged when the government arrests one coworker for a supposedly offensive cartoon. She thinks of her coworker as a hero. But when Marjane goes to visit him and sees how he talks over his wife, she realizes she can't simply live in Iran anymore. Marjane divorces Reza and applies to an art college in France. She spends her final months in Iran with her parents and her grandmother, who are supportive of her move. Though leaving Iran gives Marjane her freedom, that freedom comes at a cost—Marjane only sees her grandmother once more before her grandmother's death.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Marjane Satrapi** – Marjane is the graphic novel's protagonist; it follows her from age 14 to age 24. Marjane is proud of her Iranian identity, but she's also very liberal and independent, which sometimes makes her feel like an outsider in Tehran. This is why she attends high school in Vienna; her parents feared for her safety in Iran. In Vienna, though, Marjane is shocked to find out that her new friends are all sexually active and do drugs. Although Marjane initially pretends to smoke joints just to fit in, she eventually becomes a heavy drug user. Using drugs helps Marjane ignore how unhappy she is and the fact that she knows her parents wouldn't be proud of her. She has several boyfriends in Vienna and has sex with Markus, her last and most serious European boyfriend. But when Marjane realizes that Markus is cheating on her, Marjane gives up on life. After a period of homelessness and a bout of bronchitis, Marjane

returns to Tehran. She expects to feel at home there, but instead, Marjane feels even more out of place than she did in Vienna. When she learns about what her parents experienced over the course of the recently concluded Iran-Iraq War, Marjane is overcome with guilt and vows not to speak about what happened to her in Vienna, since it feels insignificant by comparison. However, Marjane becomes depressed and attempts suicide. When she fails, she decides she's supposed to live and reinvents herself entirely. Her future husband, Reza, falls in love with this version of Marjane that wears **makeup**, fancy clothes, and seems European. To Marjane, Reza represents a connection to the Iran-Iraq War, since he's a veteran. Though Marjane feels compelled to marry Reza two years after they meet, she regrets it immediately. They ultimately divorce when Marjane decides she can't live in Iran anymore. Throughout the graphic novel, Marjane is rebellious and unafraid to stand up for herself. But she also cares deeply about pleasing her parents. Leaving Iran is the only way she believes she'll be able to combine her Iranian upbringing with her Western sensibilities, and she describes her departure at the end of the novel as finally achieving freedom.

**Reza** – Reza is Marjane's first boyfriend in Tehran and her eventual husband. As a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, Reza is able to make Marjane feel connected to the war in a way no one and nothing else is. Being somehow connected to the war is so important to Marjane that she overlooks all the other ways that she and Reza are incompatible. Though Reza is as liberal as Marjane in many ways, he also dreams of having a traditional family with children and has a close relationship with his parents. He's neat and introverted, which contrasts greatly with Marjane's messiness and extroversion. For his part, Reza falls in love with a version of Marjane that Marjane suggests isn't really her—when they meet, Marjane has reinvented herself to be more sophisticated. Reza doesn't appreciate the real Marjane, who isn't as interested in fashionable clothes and **makeup** and who is a sullen smoker. Like Marjane, Reza refuses to see that their relationship isn't going to work out. He asks Marjane to marry him so they can rent an apartment together, which they can't do if they're not married. Their marriage is one of convenience; they don't get married because they know they want to spend the rest of their lives together. As a husband, Reza becomes cruel and mean. He consistently picks on Marjane, though they pretend to love each other in public. The best time in their marriage is when they work together on their **final thesis**. But when Tehran's local government turns down their designs for a theme park based on Iranian mythology, Marjane realizes she doesn't love Reza anymore. This is a shock for Reza, as he wants to work harder on their marriage. Marjane doesn't share what happens to Reza after they divorce, but it's implied that he stays in Tehran while Marjane travels to France.

**Marjane's Father/Dad** – Marjane and her father are very close.

Like Marjane's mother, Dad went to great lengths throughout Marjane's childhood to raise her to be independent, critical, and self-sufficient. However, despite his belief that Marjane should be able to make her own decisions and her own mistakes, Marjane knows that her parents would be disappointed by her choices in Vienna. In this sense, Marjane's parents remain one of her most important influences, even if they're not with her in person—she constantly thinks about what they'd say or think of her. Readers first meet Dad in person when Marjane returns home to Tehran. Dad seems to have no issue accepting that his daughter is no longer a child. He's willing to answer all her questions about the Iran-Iraq War and his experience of it, and he expects her to be able to handle the truth and think critically about it. And like his wife, Dad respects Marjane's request that he not ask about her time in Vienna—though this has major consequences, as Marjane's self-imposed silence causes her to struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts (and even attempt suicide) without anyone knowing. Throughout the novel, Dad remains unwaveringly supportive of his daughter. Even when she announces that she's going to marry Reza, Dad hides the fact that he doesn't think this is a good idea. Later, he even reveals to Marjane that he knew Marjane and Reza would eventually divorce. But instead of questioning Marjane, he shows his support by helping write the terms of her marriage so that she has power and agency and will be able to get a divorce if that's what she wants. Later, as Marjane's marriage begins to fail, Dad encourages Marjane to throw herself into education and learning about Iran's history. When Marjane finally announces her impending divorce, Dad is thrilled. He makes Marjane promise to go to Europe and not come back—he believes that Marjane is too independent to live successfully and happily in Iran.

**Marjane's Mother/Mom** – Marjane's mother is a kind, sensible, and liberal Iranian woman. She raised Marjane to think for herself and be independent, which leads her and her husband (Marjane's father) to send Marjane to school in Vienna. While Marjane is in Vienna, Mom and Marjane's father don't grasp what Marjane is going through. Mom believes that Marjane is distinguishing herself in school and doing what is expected of her. However, during Mom's one visit to Vienna to see Marjane, she suspects that Marjane is in worse shape than Marjane lets on. At this point, Mom begins to treat Marjane like an adult by smoking cigarettes with her. Both of Marjane's parents are mostly respectful of Marjane's autonomy and privacy. Thus, when Marjane unexpectedly asks to come home, they agree not to ask about what happened to her in Vienna that made her want to leave. However, this does have its downsides: it means that Mom has no idea that Marjane is seriously depressed and even suicidal, and so Marjane's parents don't seem to question why Marjane turned herself around so quickly when she begins to act and look better. Throughout the novel, Mom is unwaveringly supportive of Marjane and her goals. The only place she ever pushes back is when Marjane announces her

engagement to Reza. In Mom's opinion, 21 is too young to get married, though she also recognizes that she doesn't have the kind of relationship with Marjane that would allow her to stop the marriage from happening. Later, Mom is thrilled when Marjane and Reza divorce and Marjane moves back to Europe.

**Markus** – Marjane describes Markus as “the first great love of [her] life.” He’s a charming blonde boy about a year older than she is. They meet in Vienna when Marjane is 16, at a time when Marjane sees no point anymore in going out of her way to try to impress boys. But Markus insists he’s blown away by her nonchalant, uncaring attitude and rebelliousness. Though their relationship is intense, they soon begin experiencing problems when Markus’s mother expresses racist, anti-immigrant sentiments about Marjane. But as this happens, Marjane notices that Markus doesn’t stand up to his mother. He also knowingly puts Marjane in potentially dangerous situations, as when he sends her to purchase drugs from a notorious cafe. Eventually, as Markus begins to study theater, the couple grows further apart. Markus ignores the political turmoil going on around him and insists that he protests by writing his play, an attitude that Marjane considers privileged, misguided, and naïve. They break up when Marjane finds Markus in bed with another woman, and they never see each other again. In retrospect, Marjane understands that she expected too much from Markus—she expected a 19-year-old boy to be able to be everything to her, from a parental figure to a friend to a lover.

**Marjane’s Grandmother** – Marjane’s grandmother is an important guiding force in Marjane’s life. Though she doesn’t appear in the graphic novel at all while Marjane lives in Vienna, Marjane sees her grandmother often once she returns to Tehran. Like Marjane’s parents, Marjane’s grandmother is very liberal. She’s sharp with a cutting sense of humor, and she dotes on her granddaughter. However, Marjane’s grandmother also holds tightly to her values. She’s a firm believer in integrity and honor, so when Marjane makes choices that call her integrity into question, Marjane’s grandmother is deeply disappointed. Her frank and uncensored scolding makes an impression on Marjane and encourages Marjane to make better choices in the future. She’s also pivotal in helping Marjane navigate her failing marriage with Reza. Marjane’s grandmother got a divorce 50 years ago, when divorce was very uncommon in Iran. She’s therefore able to make the case that divorce isn’t the end of the world and is actually a good thing, a viewpoint that goes against what Marjane’s friends think. Marjane’s grandmother passes away two years after Marjane leaves for Europe. In Marjane’s estimation, the price of her personal freedom was giving up proximity with her grandmother in the final years of her grandmother’s life.

**Frau Doctor Heller** – Frau Doctor Heller is Marjane’s fourth and final landlord in Vienna. Both Marjane and Marjane’s mother laugh about Frau Doctor Heller behind her back, as Frau Doctor Heller looks vaguely like a horse and makes bad

tea that tastes like horse urine. Marjane finds that living with her is wonderful for a while, as her villa is beautiful. However, Frau Doctor Heller ultimately turns out to be racist and mean. She doesn’t think it’s a problem that her dog poops on Marjane’s bed and eventually accuses Marjane of theft and prostitution. Fed up, Marjane walks out and lives on the streets. When Marjane eventually returns for her belongings in preparation for her return to Iran, Frau Doctor Heller won’t return many of Marjane’s things—she insists on keeping them as payment for Marjane’s supposed theft of a brooch.

**Kia** – Kia is a childhood friend of Marjane’s. As a kid, Kia often got into trouble, and Marjane’s mother thought he was a bad influence. The two reconnect as adults when Marjane returns to Tehran. Kia is one of the few people Marjane wants to see, but their first meeting is difficult. Like most young men, Kia fought in the Iran-Iraq war and was injured. In the novel’s present, Kia is in a wheelchair and only has the use of one arm. This, however, doesn’t affect his sense of humor, which is as sharp as ever. He and Marjane hang out several times before losing contact when Kia travels to the U.S. for medical reasons.

**Julie** – Julie is a young French woman in Marjane’s classes at school. She’s the first student to take an interest in Marjane and becomes Marjane’s first friend. All of Julie’s friends are older than Marjane, and they all are self-professed anarchists who are attracted to independent people who have faced adversity of some sort. Thus, Julie’s interest in Marjane stems from the fact that Marjane is from war-torn Iran and that she’s is living in Vienna without her parents. At 18 years old, Julie seems impossibly mature to Marjane. Though Marjane finds Julie’s behavior shocking in a variety of ways—Julie is rude to her mother, uses drugs, and is sexually active—Marjane also aspires to be more like her.

**Momo** – Momo is one of Julie’s friends. He’s “obsessed with death,” so he accepts Marjane into his friend group when he learns she came from war-torn Iran. Though Marjane is pleased to have friends, she finds Momo annoying and rude. He cares only about the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin and makes a point to make Marjane feel bad for not having read Bakunin’s theories. Momo also treats Marjane like she’s uncultured and oppressed, just because she’s Iranian. When Marjane finally does read Bakunin’s work, she decides that Momo probably doesn’t understand much of it—she believes he’s excited by the idea of rejecting authority and latches onto that exclusively.

**Armelle** – Armelle is Julie’s mother. She works for the United Nations and is divorced, so she often leaves Julie home by herself. After Marjane moves in with Julie, she quickly comes to adore Armelle. Armelle is fairly knowledgeable about Iran, and so she is the one person Marjane can talk to about her home country without explaining everything. Because of this, Marjane often sits and listens to Armelle talk about her favorite psychoanalyst, Lacan, out of politeness. In Julie’s estimation, though, her mother is controlling and sad. Julie insists that

Armelle is annoying because she's not sexually active.

**Ingrid** – Ingrid is one of Enrique's friends at the anarchist commune. Though Marjane initially hates Ingrid (she thinks Ingrid is in love with Enrique), they soon become close friends. They spend most of their time together meditating or doing drugs. Ingrid also supplies Marjane with some of the drugs that she sells at school. Eventually, Marjane and Ingrid grow apart when Marjane's relationship with Markus gets more serious. Though Marjane doesn't give a lot of details about their process of growing apart, she feels unable to ask Ingrid for help when Marjane becomes homeless.

**Lucia** – Lucia is Marjane's roommate at the religious boarding house in Vienna. Though the girls struggle to communicate due to a language barrier—Lucia speaks only German, while Marjane only speaks French and Persian—they soon become friends. She invites Marjane to join her in the Tyrol for Christmas, and after this, Marjane begins to see Lucia as her sister. After Marjane leaves the boarding house, she never sees Lucia again.

**The Mother Superior** – The Mother Superior at Marjane's first boarding house is one of the story's antagonists. She's old, strict, and is immediately put off when she learns that Marjane isn't a Christian. Several months later, the Mother Superior shows that she's also bigoted and cruel—she insists that all Iranians have bad manners. When she kicks Marjane out of the boarding house, the Mother Superior lies to Marjane's parents about why Marjane left in order to make herself look better.

**Zozo** – Zozo, Houshang's wife, is a friend of Marjane's mother. Zozo is supposed to house and care for Marjane in Vienna, but she takes Marjane to a boarding house after just 11 days together. When she lived in Tehran, Zozo had been her husband's secretary, but in Vienna, Zozo is a hairdresser. She's bitter about her family's trajectory and shouts at Houshang every night.

**Enrique** – Enrique is Marjane's first boyfriend. He's 20 and is half Austrian, half Spanish. In Marjane's opinion, however, the best part of Enrique is that he's an anarchist and knows lots of other anarchists. Their relationship is mostly chaste, but Marjane eventually decides she'd like to have sex with him. The pair never go through with it, though, as Enrique realizes that he's gay.

**Lucia's Parents** – Lucia's parents invite Marjane to spend her first Christmas in Europe with them in the Tyrol. They're devout Catholics, but they nevertheless make Marjane feel at home and loved. By the time Marjane leaves, she feels as though she's found a new family—though she never sees them or Lucia again after she leaves the boarding house.

**Olivier** – Olivier and his brother, Thierry, are Swiss orphans living in Vienna. They're a part of Julie and Momo's friend group and, like Momo, idolize the anarchist Bakunin. Despite being orphans, Thierry and Olivier are very privileged—they

spend every school vacation skiing, they live with their diplomat uncle, and they insist that they're always bored on vacation.

**Thierry** – Thierry and his brother, Olivier, are Swiss orphans living in Vienna. They're a part of Julie and Momo's friend group and, like Momo, idolize the anarchist Bakunin. Despite being orphans, Thierry and Olivier are very privileged—they spend every school vacation skiing, they live with their diplomat uncle, and they insist that they're always bored on vacation.

**Shirin** – Shirin, Zozo and Houshang's daughter, is a childhood friend of Marjane's. She and Marjane were friends in Tehran, before Shirin's family moved to Vienna. Though it's unclear how long she's been living in Vienna, Shirin has no concept of the war waging in Vienna. To Marjane, Shirin seems shallow and embarrassingly Western.

**Niyoosha** – Niyoosha is one of Marjane's friends in college in Tehran. She has bright green eyes, which makes her very popular among their male classmates. Though she and Marjane are close friends while they're in school, Niyoosha's husband eventually forbids Niyoosha from spending time with Marjane, considering her a bad influence.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Houshang** – Houshang is Zozo's husband. He used to be a high-powered CEO when he and Zozo lived in Iran, but in Vienna, Houshang is "nothing." Marjane sees Houshang as an ally at Zozo's house, as he's kind to her.

**Farnaz** – Farnaz is one of Marjane's childhood friends. When Marjane confides in Farnaz that she's thinking about getting a divorce, Farnaz warns her against it. In her experience, men don't think divorced women have a reason to refuse sex, and so they harass divorced women incessantly.

**Martin** – Martin is Armelle's next-door neighbor. Like Armelle, Martin is divorced, and he and Armelle have a strictly platonic relationship.

**Yonnel Arrouas** – Yonnel is Marjane's physics teacher in Vienna. He's a kindhearted man who notices when Marjane begins using drugs heavily. To try to help, he invites her over for lunch one weekend.

**Roxana** – Roxana is one of Marjane's friends in Tehran; she introduces Marjane to Reza. This turns out to be the end of their friendship, because Roxana had hoped to set Reza up with another friend.

**Jean-Paul** – Jean-Paul is a new student at Marjane's school in Vienna. Marjane has a crush on him, but he doesn't share her feelings.

**Svetlana** – Svetlana is a Yugoslavian cook at a cafe where Marjane works. When male customers pinch Marjane's rear, Svetlana spits in their food.

**Shouka** – Shouka is one of Marjane's friends in college.

**Dr. M** – Dr. M is an older intellectual in Tehran. Marjane joins his monthly discussion groups.

**Gila** – Gila is one of Marjane’s coworkers in her first job after college.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### GROWING UP AND GROWING OLD

*Persepolis 2* picks up where *Persepolis* left off: 14-year-old Marjane’s parents have decided that their outspoken daughter isn’t safe in their home

country of Iran. Because of this, they send her to a French school in Vienna, Austria. During Marjane’s four years in Europe, she comes of age in important ways—for instance, she undergoes puberty and experiments with drugs and sex. However, Marjane must also confront the fact that while she’s busy with her own life in Vienna for four years, she ignores the political turmoil happening in Iran. And all the while, her parents and beloved grandmother are also getting old. By showing these twin processes of coming of age and growing old, *Persepolis 2* makes the case that maturation—no matter one’s age—entails realizing that all people are aging, all the time. And within families, this means that grandparents, parents, and children must reevaluate how they interact with one another to accommodate their advancing ages and changing relationships.

In many cases, the realization that everyone is getting older is difficult to come to terms with. It’s especially difficult for Marjane and her parents, as Marjane spends four years (from age 14 through 18) away from her family while she studies in Vienna. Her mother only visits once during these four years, and she and Marjane are both shocked to see the dramatic changes that have taken place in the interim. In the year and a half between when Marjane leaves for Vienna and when her mother comes to visit, Marjane rapidly undergoes puberty—she grows seven inches in a year. When her mother arrives at the airport, her beloved daughter looks unrecognizably mature. But Marjane also experiences a shock of her own: since she’s been gone, her mother’s hair has turned gray. These swift changes provide the physical proof that Marjane is no longer a child and that her parents are no longer young—and their relationships with each other must evolve to reflect the physical changes that have taken place.

As Marjane and her family members mature, they must face the ensuing personal and interpersonal changes head-on. Marjane,

for instance, must adjust to the fact that her mother is well aware of the fact that Marjane smokes cigarettes—something that Marjane initially tries to hide to avoid being scolded. To Marjane’s shock, her mother turns out to be more than willing to share cigarettes and smoke in front of Marjane, something she never did when Marjane was a child. In this sense, the shared cigarettes reflect the fact that everyone in the family is, by this point in time, an adult—and everyone must respect their other family members’ autonomy. But while the cigarettes offer Marjane and her parents something over which to connect, after Marjane returns to Tehran at age 18, she turns down her parents’ invitations to family vacations and social functions. She avoids these outings in part because they throw her newfound adulthood and independence into sharp relief. In other words, they make obvious how every member has or hasn’t changed—which means that Marjane has to face up to how much she’s changed in comparison. This is uncomfortable for her, especially since she feels guilty about experimenting with sex and drugs in Vienna. Marjane doesn’t necessarily like herself, and so these comparisons become even more uncomfortable for her.

Marjane and her family members’ transformations become especially clear a few years later, when Marjane gets engaged to Reza, a fellow student at the Islamic Azad University in Tehran. The events surrounding the marriage make it clear that while everyone is moving into new phases of life, these changes aren’t as linear as one might expect. In describing her engagement and marriage, Marjane makes it clear to readers that the marriage was a bad idea from the start. In retrospect, her choice to get married reads as a childish mistake, not as a mature adult choice. Further, Marjane shares that her father knew her marriage with Reza would end in divorce, but he still felt it was important to allow young Marjane to make her own choices and learn this for herself. The act of getting married represents a kind of regression for Marjane but a leap forward for her parents, as this is seemingly the first time they allow Marjane to make a mistake of this magnitude. Then, when Marjane decides to get divorced less than three years later, it’s an opportunity for her to bring herself onto equal footing with her parents and her grandmother. Everyone recognizes that Marjane made a mistake, but her parents and grandmother choose not to make a fuss over it or shame Marjane. Instead, they support Marjane in her divorce and subsequent move to Europe. This gives everyone in the family the opportunity to celebrate their increasingly mature and open relationships with one another.

Marjane’s marriage creates a high point of sorts in her relationships with her parents and her grandparents, but the memoir ends with news of her grandmother’s death two years after Marjane leaves Tehran. The book thus closes on the idea that while relationships between aging grandparents, parents, and adult children can improve and become increasingly

fulfilling as everyone gets older, the relationships all inevitably end as family members age and die. As fulfilling as these relationships may be for everyone involved, they nevertheless come to an end—another inevitable reality of aging that everyone must face.



### IDENTITY, CULTURE, AND SELF-EXPRESSION

Iranian-born Marjane believes that “I would always be an Iranian in the West, and a Westerner in Iran.”

This encapsulates one of the memoir’s central conflicts: as Marjane moves back and forth between Iran (her home country) and Austria (where she goes to school), she must constantly adjust her understanding of social norms—often with only limited success. As Marjane comes of age and attempts to figure out who she is, she must also figure out whether she feels more comfortable in Europe or in Iran. The memoir makes the case that to some degree, this is a black and white decision—a person must decide where to live, after all—but it’s also possible to bridge the gaps between cultures and form a multicultural identity.

No matter where in the world Marjane is, she consistently finds that her friends—if not she herself—view her identity as oppositional to the dominant culture. For instance, in Vienna, Marjane is shocked by her friends’ sexual activity and their openness about it—in Iran, people who have premarital sex go to great lengths to hide it. Thus, although Marjane came from Iran believing that she was liberal in her thinking about gender relations and sex, her friends find her embarrassingly innocent and conservative. Marjane ends up having several sexual experiences of her own while in Vienna—though when she returns to Iran years later, she doesn’t necessarily think of herself as being as promiscuous as many of her European friends. But even to her sexually curious friends in Tehran, Marjane finds that she’s an outsider—they ask, for instance, whether Marjane is any better than a sex worker given that she’s had sex with more than one man. This issue with sex is only one area in which Marjane finds herself on the outs, both in Vienna and in Tehran. This sends the message that no matter where Marjane goes, she can’t win: she’ll always be too liberal or too conservative in at least one regard.

Marjane also discovers that no matter where a young person lives, the desire to fit in is often overwhelming. But to someone from a different culture, those attempts can look wildly misguided. In Vienna, this desire to fit in leads Marjane to study political theory and philosophy, to experiment with drugs, and to alter her appearance so as to stand out less. Marjane immerses herself in the works of Sartre, cuts her hair and begins wearing heavy eyeliner, and even becomes her school’s resident drug supplier. Nevertheless, she recognizes that her intellectual and physical experiments don’t always help her be the person she wants to be. Indeed, Marjane takes issue in

particular with her own heavy drug use. Using drugs and procuring them for her friends might make Marjane popular, but her parents’ warning that drugs turn people into vegetables rings in Marjane’s head. She feels ashamed about using drugs, though she simultaneously relies on them more and more to escape this shame. In this sense, then, Marjane’s attempt to fit in turns her into someone she knows she doesn’t like and who she knows her parents wouldn’t appreciate either—and Marjane still deeply craves her parents’ approval. She thus realizes the importance of bridging the part of her that wants to fit in with the part of her that wants to remain true to who she is: a proud Iranian Muslim woman and a believer in women’s independence.

Once Marjane moves back home, she learns how a person can combine different aspects of their identity into a cohesive whole: they should simply discover and pursue what makes them happy. Marjane does this by pursuing her degree in art from the local university and by marrying a fellow student named Reza. But while her art gives her the opportunity to express herself and be happy, Marjane also realizes this pursuit isn’t something she can successfully pursue in Iran. This becomes abundantly clear when Marjane and Reza’s joint final **thesis** (plans and designs for a theme park using Iranian mythology as inspiration) receives high marks but is turned down by the local government. The government official points out to Marjane that while their designs are beautiful and well-researched, they have no place in Iran’s fundamentalist culture. For instance, he notes that it’s impossible (and illegal) in this culture to portray a woman without a **veil** riding a mythical creature as Marjane and Reza did in their designs. The kind of art Marjane wants to make (including this graphic novel and its predecessor, *Persepolis*) can only find an audience outside of Iran. This ultimately leads to Marjane divorcing Reza and once again moving to Europe. But this doesn’t mean that Marjane leaves behind her identity as a proud Iranian woman simply because she chooses to leave—rather, *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* symbolize a merging of cultures within Marjane’s identity. The books allow Marjane to express her love for and her frustrations with her home country, and to introduce its intricacies to others.



### GENDER AND OPPRESSION

Marjane leaves her home country of Iran for Austria to escape the oppression that women suffer under Iran’s Islamic fundamentalist regime—yet she finds that she faces some level of sexism everywhere she goes. While the particulars of how Marjane experiences sexism differ from country to country and culture to culture, some elements remain the same. Namely, Marjane recognizes that no matter the culture, women are harassed and policed—and that this treatment prevents them from living fulfilling lives or reaching their full potential.



In theory, Marjane leaves Tehran for Vienna specifically to escape persecution because of her sex—but she soon discovers that sexism isn't unique to Iran. Marjane arrives in Europe believing that she'll be safe from having her femininity and her outspoken nature policed by the Guardians of the Revolution. These are the men and women who patrol cities in Iran to scold and punish people—mostly women—who violate the country's laws about behavior, dress, and interactions with the opposite sex. But instead of the Guardians, Marjane encounters many European men who sexually harass her—such as when she gets a job at a cafe and has to put up with male patrons pinching her bottom. Others, mostly women, accuse her of prostitution or general sexual deviancy. Marjane faces a unique form of discrimination as both a woman and a racial minority in Austria. Her white, European female friends don't experience the same type of insults or assumptions about their sexual activities—even though Marjane knows that her friends are far more promiscuous and sexually liberated than she is. Rather, what Marjane experiences in Vienna is a combination of sexism and prejudice because she's Iranian. In the eyes of many, she's an uncivilized, promiscuous foreigner. But while the sexism, catcalling, and shaming that Marjane experiences in Vienna are awful and dehumanizing, these experiences don't come with the same threat of violence or imprisonment that being stopped by the Guardians of the Revolution does. Rather, sexist people in Vienna insult and alienate Marjane for the imagined offenses of being female and Iranian. While the danger of state-sanctioned violence is unique to Iran, leaving the country doesn't guarantee fair treatment.

Upon Marjane's return to Tehran at age 18, she recognizes that in addition to formally policing women through the Guardians of the Revolution, Iran has also created a culture of fear in which civilian women police one another—and themselves. Especially once Marjane begins studying art at the Islamic Azad University, she finds herself among other young women who have spent their entire lives in Iran. They police Marjane's private life in a way that the Guardians of the Revolution cannot, as they're her friends with whom she shares personal things. For instance, they express horror when Marjane admits that she takes birth control because she and her boyfriend have sex. The guardians of the Revolution would have no way of knowing this (though they do, at many points, demand entry to private homes to break up illegal mixed-gender parties). But the organization's sexist agenda is bolstered by civilians, as women socially shame their peers who have premarital sex.

Though Marjane finds herself at odds with her classmates in this regard, she does find common ground with them when it comes to the university uniforms that they all dislike. The uniforms—which include a long **veil** and unfashionable pants that are tripping hazards—make it hard for the women to move around easily and create the artwork that they're ostensibly there to make. But Marjane recognizes that these

uniforms—and the wider societal pressure for women to dress a certain way—have a purpose beyond just controlling what women look like. She notes at one point that “The regime had understood that one person leaving her house while asking herself: ‘Are my trousers long enough? Is my veil in place?’ [...] No longer asks herself: ‘Where is my freedom of thought? Where is my freedom of speech?’” Essentially, policing women's clothing is an effective way to keep them in a constant state of fear, thereby distracting them from asking questions that might threaten the regime's authority. It also distracts them from their schoolwork, preventing them from fully immersing themselves in their passions and fulfilling their potential.

Marjane offers few remedies for the issues that women face in Iran. At the end of the memoir, she leaves Iran for Europe once again—this time, permanently. This implies that at least for an outspoken, independent woman like Marjane, it's impossible to find safety or fulfillment in a country that systematically oppresses women and makes them fear for their lives. *Persepolis 2* makes it abundantly clear to readers that in some form or another, the oppression of women exists everywhere. But through speaking out and educating others—and in particular, by writing firsthand accounts like *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*—it's possible to raise awareness about the issues women face and make subtler forms of oppression easier to identify and call out.



## SUFFERING AND TRAUMA

At age 14, Marjane's parents send her to Vienna to attend school. This is, in part, to protect her from the Iran-Iraq war raging in their home country, as well as the religious extremism of the Islamic Revolution. She leaves, in other words, to escape trauma. However, what Marjane experiences in Vienna isn't as idyllic as her parents might have hoped. Bigotry and sexism plague her everywhere she goes, and she ends up becoming homeless in the winter and almost dying from bronchitis. But upon returning to Iran in the aftermath of her hospitalization, Marjane vows not to tell her parents anything about what she experienced in Vienna. In her mind, she both squandered an opportunity and didn't suffer nearly as badly as anyone who spent those four years in Iran. Through her memoir, however, Marjane makes it clear that the personal traumas she experiences in Vienna and in Tehran are no less meaningful than the large-scale traumas of war that individuals who stayed put in Iran experienced. In both cases, it's unhelpful and even unhealthy to try to compare one's trauma to that of others.

The trauma that Marjane experiences in Vienna is especially meaningful for her because she has to suffer all of it more or less alone. Because of this, Marjane is forced to come of age much more quickly than she might have otherwise. In Vienna, Marjane experiences small-scale indignities like mistreatment at school, racism from landlords (and even a boyfriend's

mother), and her period of homelessness. None of these things would be easy for anyone—being bullied, discriminated against, and displaced are universally traumatic experiences. However, Marjane recognizes that at the same time as she’s grappling with racist landlords and careless boyfriends, her friends and family at home are dealing with a war. As a result, she makes a concerted effort to distance herself from any news of the war or the political situation in Iran. This is, in part, an attempt to protect herself from more trauma—but this falls apart as soon as Marjane returns home to Tehran.

Marjane is ashamed when she returns to Tehran and learns more about what happened there in the last four years—she believes that her experiences in Vienna are trivial compared to the atrocities that took place in Iran. But her attempt to protect others by refusing to talk about her own experiences is both unproductive and unhealthy. Marjane vows to never talk about what she terms her “Viennese misadventures” that seem “like little anecdotes of no importance” to anyone in Iran. In Marjane’s opinion, being called a “dirty foreigner” who’s dating her boyfriend to obtain an Austrian passport pales in comparison to the experiences of more than a million people who were injured or killed as a result of the conflict in Iran. Marjane’s silence, however, doesn’t achieve what she hoped it would. She has to face friends who want to hear about a glittery European city, not how difficult Marjane’s time there was. Marjane’s self-imposed silence about the hard times she faced in Austria leads her to become depressed and attempt suicide twice. She ultimately fails to kill herself and, deciding her failures must be a sign that she should live, changes her outlook—but the fact that she gets to this point at all speaks to the dangerous, unfruitful nature of trying to compare one’s own traumatic experiences to those of others.

Marjane also makes the case that curiosity about others’ trauma is a natural part of being human—but that in far too many cases, people (including her) pursue the trauma of others in ways that are unhealthy or offensive. Marjane deals with this during her first year in Vienna, when she befriends a boy named Momo who’s “obsessed with death.” To him, Marjane is cool and worthy of his attention because she’s seen war and death firsthand—but from Marjane’s perspective, Momo is insensitive and offensive. He refuses to see that Marjane is more than her brushes with violence. But even though Marjane finds Momo irritating and rude, this doesn’t stop her from doing much the same thing that he did years later, when she meets Reza (the man she eventually marries). A veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, Reza offers Marjane a connection to a conflict that she mostly got to ignore and allows her to feel like she’s part of the larger cultural experience of the war. But this comes at the expense of ignoring who Reza really is, and what each of them actually wants out of their marriage. Ultimately, they divorce because Marjane finally accepts that although Reza can connect her to the war, their marriage can’t make her happy in any other

way—it’s impossible to build a healthy, strong marriage solely on Marjane’s interest in Reza as a veteran. Through this, Marjane seems to propose that while a person’s suffering may be an important part of their identity, it’s narrow-minded and disrespectful to see someone only in terms of their past trauma. Trauma doesn’t define a person, Marjane suggests; what’s important is how a person handles those experiences, and how they treat others with traumas very different from their own.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### MAKEUP AND THE VEIL

Both makeup and the veil represent assimilation and conformity. Marjane begins wearing makeup not long after arriving in Vienna for school, having fled her home country of Iran to escape its oppressive regime. Her look of heavy, dark eyeliner—which her friend Julie comes up with—helps her feel like she belongs in Europe. However, while wearing makeup in Vienna is a choice that Marjane makes to help her fit in, the veil represents the way that Iran forces women to assimilate by making them all dress the same. When Marjane returns to Tehran at age 18, she and her female classmates at Islamic Azad University are forced to wear uniforms that include a long veil—a marker of modesty and submission under Iran’s Islamic fundamentalist laws. In Tehran, wearing makeup isn’t how a young woman fits in—it makes Marjane stand out, and in some situations it’s a dangerous liability. Marjane’s shifts between wearing makeup and wearing the veil, then, represent her ongoing struggle to figure out who she is and where she fits in the world.



### MARJANE AND REZA’S FINAL THESIS

Marjane and Reza’s collaborative final thesis project represents Marjane’s sense of alienation in her home country of Iran. The thesis (plans and designs for a theme park based on Iranian mythological heroes) allows Marjane to show exactly what she can do as an artist. Over the year that Marjane and Reza work on it, their marriage also improves, offering hope that they won’t end up divorcing. At first, then, it seems like the thesis will help Marjane settle in and express herself freely in Tehran. However, although the thesis is well-received by the dissertation committee and even a local government official in Tehran, the government worker makes it clear to Marjane that the theme park will never come to fruition as designed. It’s impossible, he notes, to portray women without a **veil**—let alone mythical creatures—in Iran’s

fundamentalist culture. The thesis, then, ultimately comes to represent Marjane's realization that she'll never feel at home in Tehran. In order for her to pursue the life she wants and make kind of artwork she wants, she must divorce Reza and leave Iran altogether.

thereby reliving her prior traumatic experiences.

## Pasta Quotes

☛ For me, not going to school was synonymous with solitude, especially now that Lucia was spending all her time with her boyfriend, Klaus.

"Do you have a problem with vacation?"

"No! But you see, at home, we had two weeks of rest for the new year and after that we had to wait until summer."

"You'll get used to it. Thanks to the left, there are holidays in Europe. We are not forced to work all the time [...] Come on, relax, take advantage! You don't even know Bakunin!"

[...]

This cretin Momo wasn't altogether wrong. I needed to fit in, and for that I needed to educate myself.

**Related Characters:** Momo, Julie, Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Lucia

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

Marjane isn't pleased that school is letting out for another vacation so soon after the holiday break, and in this passage she discusses it with her school friends. She currently lives at a Catholic boarding house and her roommate, Lucia, doesn't have much time for her anymore. Her friends at school—namely Julie and Momo—are the only people willing to hang out with her.

Part of Marjane's reaction has to do with the fact that she's coming from a culture that treats vacation very differently. She's used to only having a few vacations per year—so Europe's multiple vacations seem excessive. And since she's so lonely and doesn't have the funds to travel like most of her classmates, vacation lonely rather than fun and exciting. For Momo, though, Marjane's reaction isn't just culture shock—it's evidence that she's comes from a less developed country and therefore needs his expert guidance. The way he speaks to Marjane implies that he thinks all Iranians are forced to work themselves to the bone. If he took the time to get to know Marjane and learn about her life in Tehran, he'd know this isn't true. Instead, Momo picks and chooses to focus on the parts of Marjane's identity that make him feel knowledgeable and superior. This is why he brings up Mikael Bakunin, his favorite Russian anarchist



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Pantheon Books edition of *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* published in 2004.

### Tyrol Quotes

☛ She introduced me to Momo. He was two years older.

"This is Marjane. She's Iranian. She's known war."

"War?"



"Delighted!"

"You've already seen lots of dead people?"

"Um... a few."

"Cool!"

**Related Characters:** Momo, Julie, Marjane Satrapi (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 12

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Marjane's first friend in Vienna, Julie, introduces her to Momo, an edgy, wannabe anarchist who's very interested in death and idolizes anarchists. Marjane has been lonely since arriving in Vienna. It takes several months for her to connect with Julie and then Momo, so Marjane is happy for any companionship she can get. Momo, on the other hand, has very specific ideas about what he wants out of a friendship. To him, it's most important that he befriends people who are interested in the same things he is—namely, death and war. So Marjane isn't interesting to him as a full person in her own right. Rather, Momo finds Marjane intriguing because she's from Iran (which is currently in the middle of the Iran-Iraq war) and has had brushes with violence and death. In other words, Momo cares only about Marjane's traumatic experiences.

Because Marjane wants friends so badly, she's willing to put up with this for now. But as time goes on, she realizes how difficult it is to be friends with people who don't see her as a full person. And for that matter, Momo's interest in death and war means that Marjane has to talk about it all the time,

philosopher—to Momo, Marjane not being familiar with his work is proof that she's not as smart as Momo is.

Though Marjane thinks Momo is a jerk for this, she also acknowledges that he's right about one thing: she doesn't know enough about Europe to fit in. Even if she doesn't care about Bakunin or his theories, she needs to know enough about what Momo and her other friends like if she wants them to accept her.

☛ In every religion, you find the same extremists.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), The Mother Superior

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 19



### Explanation and Analysis

After the Mother Superior at Marjane's boarding house kicks her out, Marjane comes to an important conclusion: that religious extremism isn't unique to Iran. The Mother Superior kicks Marjane out for the twin offenses of eating pasta straight from the pot and then insulting the Mother Superior when the Mother Superior expressed racist, xenophobic comments. As far as Marjane is concerned, she was just standing up for herself when she insulted the Mother Superior. Her parents have raised her to be an independent young woman who doesn't allow others to be rude to her. But the Mother Superior—like the Guardians of the Revolution in Iran—doesn't believe that young women like Marjane should have any agency. Rather, they draw on the power of their religion to impose their beliefs on people, particularly young women. With this realization, Marjane accepts that Europe isn't as open and secular as she once thought. While the Mother Superior's actions aren't sanctioned by the state (as they might be if this took place in Iran), Marjane will still have to contend with religious extremism in addition to bigotry.

### The Pill Quotes

☛ That night, I really understood the meaning of “the sexual revolution.” It was my first big step toward assimilating into Western culture.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Julie

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 34

### Explanation and Analysis

Julie's party is eye-opening for Marjane—over the course of the night, Marjane sees public displays of affection, listens to Julie and her latest partner have sex, and even sees Julie's male partner in his underwear. Up until this point, Marjane has held fast to the more conservative customs that she grew up with surrounding sex and romantic relationships. Those conservative beliefs set Marjane apart from her friends and make her feel even more isolated in Vienna. And living with Julie, Marjane feels especially out of touch—Julie's sex partner on this night is Julie's 19th overall, something that Marjane can barely fathom. For that matter, Marjane is also shocked that Julie is willing to share this information at all. Such information isn't something that Iranian girls who do have premarital sex share—in Iran, sex is taboo, and those who do have premarital sex conceal it rather than flaunt it. But it's worth noting that even if Marjane says she understands the sexual revolution now, understanding it doesn't mean that Marjane is ready to participate in it herself. For now, it's enough to understand that birth control makes it possible for women to have sex without fearing pregnancy, and that some women are open about their sex lives. As Marjane notices how Julie conducts herself, Marjane starts developing her own ideas about the kind of woman she wants to be.

### The Vegetable Quotes

☛ “Whatever! Existence is not absurd. There are people who believe in it and who give their lives for values like liberty.”

“What rubbish! Even that, it's a distraction from boredom.”

“So my uncle died to distract himself?”

For Momo, death was the only domain where my knowledge exceeded his. On this subject, I always had the last word.

**Related Characters:** Momo, Marjane Satrapi (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 37

### Explanation and Analysis

When Momo argues that existence is meaningless and absurd, Marjane is the only person who is able to challenge him. Momo likes to think of himself as a hardened, wise intellectual who knows everything. However, Marjane recognizes that Momo is only able to hold these beliefs

because his life is easy and privileged. Growing up in Europe, Momo hasn't had his rights systematically taken away by the government, nor has he had to fight ruthlessly for what he believes in. His main issue is that he's bored—he and his other friends talk often about how bored they are on vacation.



The uncle that Marjane invokes her is her Uncle Anoosh. In *Persepolis*, Uncle Anoosh was an intellectual who escaped to Russia—and when he returned to Iran, he was imprisoned and executed. He made a major impression on young Marjane, as he showed her that there are things worth fighting and dying for. So for Marjane, to hear Momo suggest that living is absurd and worthless reads as privileged and tone-deaf. She implies that if he knew what it's like to deal with oppression and an overbearing, controlling government, he wouldn't think this way. Standing up to Momo allows Marjane to connect with her Iranian roots in a way that makes her feel proud—something she desperately needs in Europe, where few appreciate her heritage.


☝ The harder I tried to assimilate, the more I had the feeling that I was distancing myself from my culture, betraying my parents and my origins, that I was playing a game by somebody else's rules. Each telephone call from my parents reminded me of my cowardice and my betrayal. I was at once happy to hear their voices and ashamed to talk to them.

[...]

If only they knew...if they knew that their daughter was made up like a punk, that she smoked joints to make a good impression, that she had seen men in their underwear while they were being bombed every day, they wouldn't call me their dream child.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Julie, Momo, Marjane's Father/Dad, Marjane's Mother/Mom

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 39

### Explanation and Analysis

As teenage Marjane tries to fit in in Europe, she feels increasingly guilty about what her parents would think of her behavior. By this time, she's been in Europe for about a year and has spent most of that time hanging out with Julie, Momo, Olivier, and Thierry. This group is Marjane's only

hope for friendship, so she feels compelled to do whatever it takes to fit in with them. Unfortunately for Marjane, this means smoking joints that she doesn't really want to smoke and doing everything she can to look and act as European as possible.

Despite Marjane's desire to appear European for her friends, though, her shame suggests that she wants to find a way to honor her family and her Iranian culture. It's worth noting that Marjane isn't able to bridge the gap in part because her friends don't care about her history or her culture, aside from the fact that Marjane has seen war and death. In other words, there's no incentive for her to even try to express her pride in her identity—whenever she does, her friends ignore her.

As a people pleaser, Marjane desperately wants to make her parents proud. She knows exactly how to do that—take pride in her culture and do well in school—but in her experience, there's little overlap in actions that will make her parents happy and actions that will help her fit in with her friends. And because her parents aren't around to encourage Marjane to make better choices, Marjane does what she thinks she has to do to fit in and maintain some semblance of a community. The fact that she's so ashamed about what she's doing speaks to how difficult—if not nearly impossible—it is for her to merge her Iranian identity with her European home and friends.

## The Horse Quotes

☝ “It's amazing how you've grown.”

I didn't repeat that she, too, had changed. At her age, you don't grow up, you grow old.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi, Marjane's Mother/Mom (speaker), Marjane's Father/Dad

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 47

### Explanation and Analysis

When Mom visits Marjane in Vienna after a year and a half apart, both Mom and Marjane are shocked by how much the other has changed. In the last year, Marjane grew seven inches and underwent the physical changes of puberty, while Mom now has gray hair. In this instant, Mom and Marjane have to confront the proof that they're getting older—and in Mom's case, she's not just getting older but getting *old*. Marjane's aside that adults grow old rather than

grow up suggests that this is the first time Marjane really comes to terms with her parents' mortality. Prior to this, it was possible for her to ignore that they were aging and see them simply as her parents in their mid-30s. But Mom's gray hair and the new wrinkles under her eyes make ignoring the aging process impossible.

It's also telling that Marjane doesn't say anything. While it's normal and expected for parents to comment on their children's growth and development, it's often considered rude to remark on how old an adult looks. With this, the novel lays out a double standard in how aging works. Parents have the ability to freely comment on how much their children have changed. This allows them to better process any emotions they feel about watching their children grow up. But as a child—even one nearing adulthood—Marjane can't do the same when it comes to her parents. Instead, she has to watch them changing in silence, all while becoming increasingly aware that her parents will one day grow old and die.

☞ In the letter, he was overjoyed by the thought that I had a peaceful life in Vienna. I had the impression that he didn't realize what I was enduring.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Marjane's Father/Dad

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 48

### Explanation and Analysis

At one point during Mom's visit with Marjane, Mom offers Marjane a letter from Dad. Though Marjane is thrilled to receive the letter, its implications disturb her. Throughout Marjane's time in Europe, she hasn't shared with her parents how miserable she is. They also have no idea that she's experimenting with drugs or hanging out with people who scoff at the idea that someone would die for their ideals, as many of Marjane's family members did during the Islamic Revolution. And while it's understandable why Marjane wants to keep her sadness and growing depression silent, it's becoming increasingly difficult for her to keep it under wraps.

It seems that some of this comes down to Marjane's personality and her Iranian upbringing. She's a people pleaser and is particularly intent on making her parents happy—Iranian children don't disobey or disrespect their parents openly or often, as parents are considered "sacred."

But while Marjane knows that her parents would be upset to discover she's having such a hard time, there's little evidence they'd be angry with her for suffering xenophobia and sexism. In this sense, Marjane is taking on a huge responsibility to protect her parents from what she sees as a personal failing on her part. But besides the drug problem that Marjane admits at various points is out of control, she has little to be ashamed of. Europe hasn't lived up to Marjane's or her parents' expectations, and it's hard and unhealthy for her to try to protect her parents from that fact.

### Hide and Seek Quotes

☞ I'd already heard this threatening word yelled at me in the metro. It was an old man who said "dirty foreigner, get out!" I had heard it another time on the street. But I tried to make light of it. I thought that it was just the reaction of a nasty old man.

But this, this was different. It was neither an old man destroyed by the war, nor a young idiot. It was my boyfriend's mother who attacked me. She was saying that I was taking advantage of Markus and his situation to obtain an Austrian passport, that I was a witch.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Markus

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 66

### Explanation and Analysis

It's shocking for Marjane when Markus's mother kicks her out and accuses her of taking advantage of Markus. Part of this shock comes from the fact that Marjane loves Markus and implies that prior to this moment, she saw Markus's mother as a normal, reasonable person and a possible ally in Vienna. In other words, Marjane doesn't see Markus's mother as existing in the same group as an old, prejudiced war veteran or a "young idiot." In many ways, this makes Markus's mother's xenophobia even more disturbing and terrifying for Marjane. Acknowledging that even a seemingly normal woman like Markus's mother could hold such horrible views impresses on Marjane that many people in Vienna could feel the same way—even those she wouldn't expect.

It's worth examining Markus's mother's accusation that Marjane is using Markus to get an Austrian passport. This is a common accusation lobbed against immigrants worldwide—in saying this, Markus's mother reveals her belief that immigrants from developing countries want to



infiltrate and take over Western countries. Markus's mother also seems to imply that Marjane is doing this by hoodwinking Markus, probably through sex. With this, she also implies that Marjane is a promiscuous woman who wields sex like a weapon to get what she wants. This, of course, ignores the fact that Marjane is only 16 or 17 at this time—she's a teen in her first sexual relationship, not an adult. In refusing to see Marjane as the child she is, Markus's mother dehumanizes Marjane even further.

## The Croissant Quotes

☝☝ What do you want me to say, sir? That I'm the vegetable that I refused to become?

That I'm so disappointed in myself that I can no longer look at myself in the mirror? That I hate myself?

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 72

### Explanation and Analysis

Though Marjane stops selling drugs to her classmates, she begins using more and more herself—and her teachers begin to take notice. In this sequence of frames, one of Marjane's teachers notices that she fell asleep in class and asks if she's okay. While Marjane goes on to tell him that she's fine, her internal monologue reveals that she isn't. At this point, Marjane is depressed and suffering—she feels like she compromised who she really is in order to fit in. She knows that her parents would be disappointed in her for a variety of reasons: she's struggling in school, she's doing drugs, she ignores the Iranian parts of her identity.

Despite the fact that Marjane seems to blame herself for her mistakes, the book makes it clear that she's not entirely to blame. Few of Marjane's friends in Vienna care about who she actually is. So to fit in, Marjane felt like she had to change herself and compromise in various ways in order to earn their acceptance and find some semblance of a stable community. This, unfortunately, meant taking drugs she didn't want to take, which now makes school more difficult than ever. Marjane also felt like she needed to obscure anything obviously Iranian about herself in order to escape the xenophobia and sexism that has been following her everywhere in Vienna. But even though many of Marjane's decisions seem understandable given her circumstances, her depression and self-hatred make it clear that compromising on one's identity like this can have disastrous

consequences, regardless of one's reasons for doing so.

## The Veil Quotes

☝☝ I had known a revolution that had made me lose part of my family.

I had survived a war that had distanced me from my country and my parents...

...And it's a banal story of love that almost carried me away.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Markus

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 87

### Explanation and Analysis

While in the hospital being treated for bronchitis, Marjane starts to see how misguided she was to allow a “banal story of love”—her breakup with Markus following his cheating on her—to almost kill her. She acknowledges that after everything else she's been through, it's ridiculous to think that she almost died of heartbreak. This illuminates how Marjane thinks of her life in Iran versus her life in Europe. In her mind, her childhood in Iran was noble, and it's commendable that she survived it at all when so many of her family members didn't. It dishonors those family members, she implies, to put herself in so much danger because of a love story gone wrong.



Even as Marjane recognizes that it's not worth it to die over love, it's still important to acknowledge that in Iran, she was surrounded by family that loved her. The revolution and the war she mentions might not have seemed as difficult when she endured them with people who loved her and who experienced the exact same thing. In contrast, Marjane had no one in Vienna except for Markus at this point, which is why losing him was so deeply painful. But by acknowledging everything else Marjane survived in Iran, Marjane reorients herself and chooses to celebrate herself as an Iranian survivor—not as a heartbroken European.

☝☝ Despite the doctor's orders, I bought myself several cartons of cigarettes.

[...]

I think that I preferred to put myself in serious danger rather than confront my shame. My shame at not having become someone, the shame of not having made my parents proud after all the sacrifices they had made for me. The shame of having become a mediocre nihilist.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Marjane's Father/Dad, Marjane's Mother/Mom

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 90

### Explanation and Analysis

In the days before Marjane returns to Iran, she smokes cigarettes constantly—despite her doctor's orders to not smoke following her recovery from bronchitis. Smoking during this time is self-destructive behavior that distracts Marjane from her bigger issues: that she feels ashamed of what she did and didn't do while in Vienna, and that she thinks she let her parents down. Turning to cigarettes is a natural continuation of Marjane's drug use throughout her time in Vienna. For the last four years, drugs have been a way for Marjane to ignore pressing issues and escape the pressure she feels to be a certain way. They help her fit in in Vienna, but they also alter her mental state to the point that she can ignore how awful she feels about herself. This, the novel shows, is a vicious cycle—Marjane is at a serious disadvantage because she hasn't done anything to change her situation in the last four years. While Marjane turns to drugs in an attempt to alleviate her suffering, in reality, they don't actually help her feel any better—they just prolong her suffering and make her pain more difficult to deal with when she finally does face it.

of growing up. And the physical markers of aging are less pronounced than the physical changes that take place during puberty. Marjane's parents sent her to Vienna when she looked physically like a child. Now, she looks like a grown woman, and to her parents, Marjane is unrecognizable as their beloved daughter.

Marjane's tone as she describes finding her parents suggests that she's sad they don't recognize her. This makes the case that the processes of growing up and growing old—especially when families aren't together to witness this progress on a daily basis—can be emotionally difficult. And though Marjane does seem sad at many points that her parents and grandmother are getting old, what seems to hurt the most here is that they don't recognize her. In other words, it's more disturbing for Marjane to confront how much *she's* changed in the last four years. Even as she's sad to see how much everyone in her family has aged, it's sad in part because they haven't aged at the same rate. While Marjane is miles away from where she was four years ago, her parents haven't undergone that same rapid transformation save for gray hair and wrinkles.

☝☝ “Ah, there's nothing like Iranian tea!”

“Oh yes, especially with a cigarette. Do you want one?”

“Mom!!”

“What? You know the proverb: ‘prosperity consists of two things: tea after a meal, and a cigarette after tea.’”



It was the first time that my mother had spoken to me in this tone: in her eyes now, I had become an adult.

## The Return Quotes

☝☝ There were people everywhere. Each passenger was being met by a dozen people. Suddenly, amongst the crowd, I spotted my parents...

...But it wasn't reciprocal. Of course it made sense. One changes more between the ages of fourteen and eighteen than between thirty and forty.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Marjane's Father/Dad, Marjane's Mother/Mom

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

At the Tehran airport, Marjane immediately recognizes her parents. Her parents, however, don't recognize her until she approaches them. This builds on Marjane's earlier observation that adults of her parents' age grow old instead

**Related Characters:** Marjane's Mother/Mom, Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Marjane's Father/Dad

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 95

### Explanation and Analysis

Over breakfast on Marjane's first morning back in Tehran, Mom offers Marjane a cigarette. This is shocking for Marjane—aside from during Mom's visit in Vienna, Mom generally never smoked in front of Marjane during Marjane's childhood. The cigarettes that Mom and Marjane share thus represent their changing relationship with each other. Now, both Mom and Marjane are adults and Mom is willing to treat Marjane as such.

Marjane's surprise is understandable. While she feels like an



adult and knows that she looks like one now, it's nonetheless unusual and somewhat unsettling to have her parent treat her like an equal for the first time. This reflects the way that relationships between parents and children change as children grow into adults. Marjane's family has always encouraged Marjane to be independent and mature, but they've also always been there to offer guidance and parental support. Accepting that Marjane smokes cigarettes is a way for Mom to acknowledge that she's no longer in charge of Marjane's health or actions—as an adult, Marjane can make these choices for herself. And for that matter, Mom can as well.

☛ Many had changed names. They were now called Martyr what's-his-name Avenue or Martyr something-or-other Street.


It was very unsettling.

I felt as though I were walking through a cemetery.

...Surrounded by the victims of a war I had fled.

It was unbearable. I hurried home.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 97

### Explanation and Analysis



On her first afternoon back in Tehran, Marjane walks around the neighborhood to revisit the city. What she finds disturbs her: to flatter the parents of martyrs (young men conscripted to fight in the Iran-Iraq War), many streets now bear martyrs' names. This is so unsettling for Marjane exactly because she wasn't around to watch the war from Iran. She actively avoided any news of Iran or the war when she was in Vienna, which makes the aftermath of the war all the more shocking for her. She later reveals that she had no idea of the massive death toll, or how terrifying it was for Iranians who weathered the war from Iran. So part of her discomfort stems from the fact that she had no idea what was going on in her home country.

However, part of Marjane's discomfort also stems from her own guilt. She feels guilty that she fled the war when so many young men stayed and died. In this way, Marjane feels separated from one of the biggest events in Iran's history. It makes her feel less Iranian, in addition to making her relative privilege clearer to her. She didn't think of herself as being privileged in Vienna because life was so hard for her.

But now, she realizes how lucky she was to have evaded so much death and destruction. While acknowledging her privilege is important, it nevertheless increases Marjane's sense that she didn't suffer as badly in Vienna as others did in Iran.

☛ Next to my father's distressing report, my Viennese misadventures seemed like little anecdotes of no importance. So I decided that I would never tell them anything about my Austrian life. They had suffered enough as it was.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Marjane's Father/Dad, Marjane's Mother/Mom

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 103

### Explanation and Analysis

After Dad explains what happened in the weeks leading up to the cease-fire (essentially, the regime executed thousands of imprisoned intellectuals), Marjane decides that everything she experienced in Vienna pales in comparison. Marjane makes this decision in part because she loves her parents and wants to honor them—she wants them to believe that she had a great time in Vienna and made something of herself. In reality, neither of these things are true—she had happy moments, but she doesn't believe she did anything of worth. And for that matter, Marjane sometimes believes that she sabotaged herself and her future by leaning so heavily into drugs and the punk scene. It's thus possible to read Marjane's decision to stay silent as an act of love toward her parents.

This, however, ignores the consequences of Marjane's silence. As she refuses to talk about Vienna, Marjane feels more and more self-hatred and ultimately makes two unsuccessful suicide attempts. Silence, this suggests, isn't an effective way to protect loved ones—and it's also unhealthy to compare one's trauma to that of others. It's understandable why Marjane would compare her "Viennese misadventures" unfavorably to people's experience of the war in Iran, but this doesn't mean that what happened to her in Vienna wasn't traumatizing.

## Skiing Quotes

☞ Certainly, they'd had to endure the war, but they had each other and close by. They had never known the confusion of being a third-worlder, they had always had a home! At the same time, how could they have pitied me? I was so shut off. I kept repeating to myself that I mustn't crack up.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Marjane's Grandmother, Marjane's Father/Dad, Marjane's Mother/Mom

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 113

### Explanation and Analysis

Marjane reveals that though she wants to tell her family about what happened to her in Vienna in the weeks after she gets home, she makes a point to stay quiet. She also starts to tell herself that she had it worse in Vienna than they did in Iran. Marjane's thought process is understandable, and she makes several good points. One of the things that made her time in Vienna so unbearable was that she was entirely cut off from her family and from Iranian culture at large. None of her friends wanted to learn about her culture or traditions, and the only time she got to speak Persian was when her parents called. Thus, she had to honor her cultural traditions all by herself—a tall order for a teenager trying to fit in. Family and community, Marjane suggests, makes it easier to endure tragedy. And in that sense, she's probably right that her family in Iran had somewhat of an easier time of the war together than she did of being in Europe alone. Indeed, over the course of *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*, Marjane doesn't characterize her childhood in Iran as being nearly as traumatizing as her time in Vienna. She had a support network as a child and that made all the difference.

Marjane's silence, however, means that it's impossible for her to get help. Her family has no way of knowing how depressed she is because she refuses to talk about it. Silence is Marjane's true enemy in this sense—if she were to open up and trust her family to acknowledge her pain, she might find them far more willing to help her than she seems to expect.

☞ “What do you mean? You've done the deed with many people?”



“Well, I mean...I've had a few experiences.”

“So what's the difference between you and a whore???”

Underneath their outward appearance of being modern women, my friends were real traditionalists.

They were overrun by hormones and frustration, which explained their aggressiveness toward me. To them, I had become a decadent Western woman.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 116

### Explanation and Analysis

On a skiing trip with several of her Iranian friends from childhood, Marjane admits that she had several sexual experiences in Europe. Her friends' deeply negative reactions are surprising to Marjane mostly because these same friends wear heavy makeup and idealize Western culture. These friends want to know what it's like to live in the West—but whenever they encounter something that challenges their traditional worldviews, they betray just how traditional they still are. In addition to being offended and hurt, Marjane also knows that she tried to hold onto her more traditional cultural mores while in Europe. And in compared to her female friends in Vienna (like Julie, for instance), Marjane's conduct was very conservative—she had only a couple boyfriends and only “a few [sexual] experiences.” This drives home for Marjane how much her time in Vienna changed her. She doesn't feel as though she strayed that far, especially since she struggled so much to fit in in Europe. But now that she's back in Tehran and is spending time with friends who have grown up in Iran, the fact that she absorbed Western ideas surrounding sex and gender relations is unavoidable.

☞ But as soon as the effect of the pills wore off, I once again became conscious. My calamity could be summarized in one sentence: I was nothing. I was a Westerner in Iran, an Iranian in the West. I had no identity. I didn't even know anymore why I was living.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 118

### Explanation and Analysis

In an attempt to improve her spiraling mental health, Marjane finds a psychiatrist willing to prescribe antidepressants. While the medicine helps her feel more normal, it doesn't actually address her sense that she doesn't belong anywhere, which is underpinning her depression and feelings of hopelessness. This encapsulates Marjane's central conflict throughout the memoir. Her identity seems impossible to pin down. Marjane's experiences in Vienna make it increasingly difficult to fit in Iranian society, while her more conservative Iranian upbringing set her apart from her liberal friends in Vienna. It seems to Marjane that she'll never be able to find likeminded people who understand that she exists between cultures—especially since her parents and her friends seem unaware that she's struggling. This disconnect, Marjane's narration shows, is traumatic and dangerous. Not knowing where she belongs makes Marjane decide to attempt suicide not long after this—to Marjane, not fitting in seems like a reason to die and put an end to the struggle altogether.

that it's unhelpful and even actively harmful to view someone only in terms of their trauma. When Marjane was in Vienna, Momo thought her worthy of his friendship only because Marjane had seen war and death. That was difficult for Marjane to deal with, as she's more than just her experience of the war. However, when Marjane talks about Reza, she suggests that just like Momo saw her in terms of her connection to a war, she sees Reza only in terms of his service. This makes it possible for Marjane and Reza's relationship to take off, but it means that neither Marjane nor Reza can accept that they're not actually compatible. They look for what they want to see and ignore the mounting evidence over the course of their relationship that they don't belong together.

### The Exam Quotes

☝☝ He sought in me a lost lightheartedness. And I sought in him a war which I had escaped. In short, we complemented each other.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Reza

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 125

### Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Marjane describes all the ways that she and Reza, her future husband, aren't actually compatible and don't see the other for who they really are. She implies that when Reza looks at her, Reza sees an easier, more innocent life in Europe. Since Reza wants to leave Iran for Europe or the United States, this view makes sense. Marjane looks like the perfect combination of Europe and Iran to him. Marjane, on the other hand, sees Reza only in terms of his military service. Reza is an Iran-Iraq War veteran, a conflict that Marjane feels guilty for escaping. Thus, dating Reza is a way for Marjane to connect herself to that cultural touchstone of war and feel like a real member of Iranian society.

However, throughout the novel, Marjane makes the case


### The Convocation Quotes

☝☝ I applied myself. Designing the “model” that would please both the administration and the interested parties wasn't easy. I made dozens of sketches.

This was the result of my research. Though subtle, these differences meant a lot to us.

This little rebellion reconciled my grandmother and me. [...] And this is how I recovered my self-esteem and my dignity. For the first time in a long time, I was happy with myself.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Marjane's Grandmother

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 144

### Explanation and Analysis

After Marjane pushes back on her university administration's insistence that women must honor the martyrs by dressing conservatively, one of the religious officials who works with the school tasks Marjane with designing new uniforms for female art students. This is one of the first opportunities that Marjane has to marry her Western sensibilities with the more conservative culture of Iran. And because she's successful in pleasing both the administration and the more liberal art students, Marjane feels, at this point, like she'll be able to create a balanced and satisfying life for herself in Iran. This makes it feel as though it's possible for her to bridge the gap between her Western teenage years and her Iranian heritage, something that's very comforting for Marjane.

Marjane also makes up with her grandmother (who was disappointed in Marjane for getting a man arrested by the Guardians of the Revolution to avoid getting arrested herself). Marjane's "rebellion" impresses upon her grandmother that Marjane realizes she has to stand up for herself and do things that are right, even if they're difficult. And Marjane sees the value in this as well. Pushing back on the sexist administration on behalf of all her classmates makes Marjane feel like she's doing a good thing for Iran and for her more immediate community. It also allows Marjane to think that sexism and oppression based on gender is getting better in Iran, though she later insists that this is false.

political prisons), female students also won't have the wherewithal to even apply themselves to their studies. In this sense, the Iranian government makes it difficult for women to do or think about anything other than how they come off to others.



“ I didn't say everything I could have: that she was frustrated because she was still a virgin at twenty-seven! That she was forbidding me what was forbidden to her! That to marry someone that you don't know, for his money, is prostitution. That despite her locks of hair and her lipstick, she was acting like the state.


## The Socks Quotes

“ The regime had understood that one person leaving herself while asking herself: Are my trousers long enough? Is my veil in place? Can my makeup be seen? Are they going to whip me?

No longer asks herself: Where is my freedom of thought? Where is my freedom of speech? My life, is it livable? What's going on in the political prisons?

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 


**Page Number:** 148


### Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Marjane describes how Iran requires women to dress and how soldiers continually harass women for dress code infractions. Marjane insists that this kind of strict policing has a purpose: it forces women to live in fear and distracts them from larger, more pressing concerns, like politics and gender dynamics. In other words, Marjane recognizes that enforcing the dress code isn't really about the dress code. Rather, it's about controlling women's bodies and minds in any way possible.

Marjane makes the case that it's traumatizing and distracting to live in fear that one isn't dressed appropriately. If a person is constantly concerned that their pants don't fit right or if their head covering doesn't follow every rule to the letter, it's impossible to concentrate on anything else. This means that in addition to not being able to push back on government policies (like the state of the

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 149

### Explanation and Analysis

When Marjane reveals in class one day that she and Reza are sexually active, one of her classmates scold Marjane for being "indecent." In this moment, Marjane recognizes that the Guardians of the Revolution have successfully created a culture of fear in which civilians will police each other and further the Iranian state's aims. With this, the book speaks to how deep and institutionalized women's oppression is in Iran at this time.

Though Marjane takes issue with the entirety of this situation, the book nevertheless highlights how Iran's methods of oppressing women are exactly what make women feel like they have to marry unknown men for money, or not have sex when they want to. To many, there's no other option—if they want to have sex, they must get married. And getting married sometimes means taking the first available bachelor, even if they don't know who he is. This student is being unkind and unhelpful, but she's also a product of her environment. In contrast, Marjane is able to have sex with Reza and obtain birth control to do so safely because her time in Europe introduced her to the idea that sex is nothing to be ashamed of.

## The Wedding Quotes

☝☝ When the apartment door closed, I had a bizarre feeling. I was already sorry! I had suddenly become “a married woman.” I had conformed to society, while I had always wanted to remain in the margins. In my mind, “a married woman” wasn’t like me. It required too many compromises. I couldn’t accept it, but it was too late.

**Related Characters:** Marjane Satrapi (speaker), Marjane’s Father/Dad, Reza

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 163

### Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after Marjane and Reza get married, she regrets it. Being married complicates Marjane’s identity. At this point, Marjane feels more secure in who she is. For the

most part, she’s able to bridge the gap between the Western ideals she picked up in Europe and the far more conservative Iranian culture in which she currently resides. In other words, her identity seemed fixed and acceptable prior to her marriage—but now, she has to contend with being “a married women.”

Marjane clearly has definitive ideas about what it means to be married and female. She sees it as selling out to a culture she doesn’t always appreciate, especially when it comes to the way it treats women. Marriage on the whole thus feels oppressive to her, regardless of the actual nature of Marjane and Reza’s relationship (which is far more permissive and open than Marjane acknowledges, even if it makes her feel trapped). In addition, some of Marjane’s angst comes from her young age. She’s only 21 at this point and whether she realizes it or not, she’s still in the middle of the process of figuring out who she is.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## THE SOUP

It's November of 1984. Marjane, who is 14 years old, arrived in Austria believing that she'd escape Iran's religious fundamentalism for an "open and secular Europe"—and that her mother's best friend, Zozo, would take her in. This, however, isn't what happened: Zozo recently dropped Marjane off at a Catholic boarding house. As Marjane lies on her bed, she wonders what her roommate, Lucia, will look like. She figures that Lucia will look like Heidi.

Marjane arrived in Vienna 11 days ago. Zozo and her daughter Shirin, who was Marjane's childhood friend, picked Marjane up at the airport. From the beginning, Zozo seemed oddly unkind. In the car on the way home, Shirin seemed shocked when Marjane expressed relief that she wouldn't have to beat herself for the martyrs. Shirin then changed the subject and showed Marjane her fashionable earmuffs, scented pens, and pink lipstick. To Marjane, Shirin looked like a traitor for talking about "trivial things" while people in Iran are dying.

Marjane spent 10 days with Zozo's family. It was awful, since Zozo and her husband, Houshang, fought daily. When the family lived in Iran, Houshang was a CEO and Zozo was his secretary. But here, Zozo is a hairdresser and Houshang is "nothing." Marjane was ashamed to overhear fights about money, but she also thought there's a reason why she never heard her parents fight over money: her own father isn't incompetent. Finally, after 10 days, Zozo announced that her apartment was too small and took Marjane to the boarding house. Marjane was worried about living with nuns—the nuns she knew in Tehran were "ferocious"—and she was sad to leave Houshang, whom she considered an ally.

*The way that Marjane introduces herself betrays how young and immature she is. She arrived with big dreams that reflect a youthful, naïve outlook. Describing Europe as "open and secular" also suggests that Marjane idealizes Europe and thinks poorly of Iran. For now, she thinks the Western world is better than her home country. Lucia is a common Scandinavian name—Lucia's Day is a holiday in Sweden that celebrates St. Lucia, a young girl who was martyred for her Christian faith in 304 C.E. Marjane thus assumes her roommate will look stereotypically Swedish, like the titular character from Johanna Spyri's children's novel Heidi, which is about a little orphan girl who goes to live with her grandfather in the Swiss Alps.*



*Readers familiar with [Persepolis](#) will remember that Marjane left Iran in the middle of the Iran-Iraq War. Back home, Marjane had to honor the martyrs (young soldiers, mostly) in various ways, including by hitting herself. Given all Marjane has seen and experienced, Shirin's quick pivot to talking about silly things like lipstick and earmuffs makes her seem less patriotic and less Iranian to Marjane.*



*In addition to idealizing Iran, Marjane also idealizes her father when she proudly (and perhaps naively) declares that he's not incompetent like Houshang. On another note, being kicked out like this is likely traumatic for Marjane. She has to adjust her expectations yet again and become independent very quickly.*



Once at the boarding house, the Mother Superior told Marjane the rules and showed her around the facilities. The Mother Superior was shocked to learn that Marjane wasn't a Christian. Marjane felt independent and mature, so she went straight to the supermarket "to buy groceries like a woman." Pleasantly surprised by the well-stocked store, Marjane stocked up on scented laundry products and had just enough money to cover her detergent and a few boxes of pasta.

Now, Marjane lies on her bed, admires her laundry products, and waits for Lucia. When Lucia arrives, the girls greet each other and quickly discover that there's a language barrier between them: Lucia only speaks German, and Marjane only speaks French. After a few awkward minutes, Marjane shares special Iranian pistachios and Lucia makes them both cream of mushroom soup. At the table, they try to communicate. By drawing, Lucia is able to teach Marjane the German word for "television" and invite her to watch TV with her. Marjane is thrilled she's learning German, but in the TV room, she realizes how far she has to go. The movie is in German and Marjane understands none of it. She excuses herself.

## TYROL

Every morning, Lucia wakes Marjane up at 6:30 a.m. with her noisy hair dryer. Following her rude awakening, Marjane goes to school. Everyone ignores her there, but Marjane expected this since she arrived in the middle of the semester. Eventually, kids begin to pay Marjane more attention as she aces math tests and draws caricatures of the teachers. And since she hasn't spoken French in three years (since the Islamic government closed bilingual schools in Iran), kids take advantage of her knowledge gaps. Two boys tell her that the French word for a triangle is "dick" and laugh when Marjane asks another student to "borrow his dick." Though the experience is embarrassing, Marjane tells herself that at least kids know she exists.

After a while, an 18-year-old French girl named Julie notices Marjane. Later, Marjane realizes that Julie is only interested in her because unlike the other students, Marjane has "known war." Julie introduces Marjane to her friend Momo, a boy who greets everyone by kissing them on the lips. This marks the first time that *anyone* has kissed Marjane on the mouth. Momo introduces Marjane to Thierry and Olivier, a pair of Swiss orphans who live with their uncle. Marjane's new friends are intrigued that Marjane is a "third-worlder," that she's living alone, and that she's seen war. Momo is "obsessed with death," so he finds Marjane particularly interesting.

*Even if Zozo's abandonment hurt, Marjane is able to look on the bright side: now, she can be independent. At this early point in Marjane's European adventure, Vienna looks like paradise with its stocked supermarkets. As wonderful as Vienna looks, though, Marjane reveals through her tight finances in this passage that she might not be able to take advantage of everything it to offer.*



*Not understanding German drives home for Marjane that Europe might not be as great as she expected. Though the girls seem happy enough to share pistachios and soup, sharing food is only the first step to making friends and finding a sense of home. Notably, Marjane wouldn't struggle so much with the language had she stayed at Zozo's, where they speak Persian at home. In this sense, Zozo contributes to Marjane's trauma in yet another way.*



*Marjane is unsurprised that her classmates alternately ignore and torment her—she recognizes that, as an outsider, she's naturally going to be a bullying target. However, the crude joke that the boys play on Marjane reveals to her that sexism isn't unique to Iran—it exists in Europe, too. Even though Marjane is humiliated, she seems to think that the only way to fit in in Europe is to put up with this kind of behavior.*



*Marjane doesn't seem to condemn Momo or Julie for their curiosity about her situation, but she does make it clear that they only see her as a tragic survivor. In other words, they don't care about Marjane as a full person—they only care about the trauma she experienced in Iran. Momo's kiss drives home for Marjane that Europe's social and sexual norms are very different from those of Iran. If she wants to fit in, she'll have to accept that fact.*



As Christmas vacation approaches, everyone at school talks about their plans. Many of Marjane's classmates are going on vacation to exotic places. Her friends will be scattered across Europe, skiing and visiting family. Thierry complains about how boring it'll be to ski, as Momo insists that Christmas is just a way for American businesses to make money. None of Marjane's friends listen to her when she tries to explain that Iranians don't celebrate Christmas. Instead, they have to wait for the Iranian New Year on March 21. By the Friday before Christmas, Marjane feels awful. Most streets are filled with shoppers, but her residential street is empty. She wonders what she'll do all alone for two weeks.

When Marjane gets back to her room, Lucia asks what's wrong. She assumes Marjane is upset at the prospect of celebrating Christmas alone, so she invites Marjane to accompany her to the Tyrol in the Alps. They strike a deal: Marjane won't mention Lucia's boyfriend to Lucia's family if Lucia stops drying her hair at 6:30 a.m. Lucia's parents are like no one Marjane has ever met. Lucia's mother has a moustache, while her father wears leather pants. Marjane accompanies them to midnight mass and joins the extended family for meals. A French-speaking cousin translates for Marjane—and to Marjane's relief, she never has to talk about war or death. On the day that Marjane and Lucia leave, Lucia's parents give Marjane a framed photo of Lucia, Marjane, and Lucia's little sister. Marjane feels like she has a new family and never again complains about Lucia's hair dryer.

## PASTA

One day, not long after school starts again, Marjane's friends discuss someone named Bakunin. When Marjane asks who that is, Momo says imperiously that Bakunin was "the anarchist." He then goes on to talk about how great vacation is. Marjane asks if there's another vacation coming up. Secretly, Marjane dislikes vacation, because it means having to spend time alone. She assures Julie that she doesn't have a problem with vacation, she's just not used to having so much of it. Momo takes her by the shoulders and says condescendingly that she'll get used to it—in Europe, no one is forced to work all the time. He goes on to say that *nobody* would work at all if the anarchists had triumphed and encourages her to relax and "cultivate" herself. Marjane thinks Momo is a jerk, but he has a point: Marjane needs to educate herself enough to fit in.

*Marjane's classmates' vacation plans reveals their privilege. And Thierry's comments about being bored on his trip suggest that he's not aware of his privilege, either. Ignoring Marjane confirms that Momo and his friends only care about Marjane when it comes to her tragic experiences. They don't care about her culture, nor do they consider how difficult it must be for her to see them jetting off to exotic locales.*



*Unlike Marjane's school friends, Lucia and her family seem to genuinely care about Marjane as a person. Marjane's comment about not having to talk about war or death reveals just how exhausting it is for her at school, where death is all Momo cares to talk about. In contrast, Lucia and her family show Marjane what it's like to respect others' cultures and traditions. And best of all, they show Marjane that it is possible to find a place for herself in Austria.*



*An anarchist is someone who believes that the government is not only unnecessary but also actively armful. "The anarchist" whom Momo is referring to is Mikhail Bakunin, a 19th-century political writer and Russian revolutionary anarchist. Momo sees Marjane's worry about another vacation as proof that Marjane is just a poor, uncivilized person from a developing country. This certainly makes Momo feel more superior—it allows him to cast himself as an expert in European culture. Despite Momo's condescension and rudeness, Marjane decides to take his advice and "cultivate" herself in the sense of learning enough to be able to fit in.*





Thus, Marjane decides to spend the next vacation reading. This allows her to distinguish herself among her classmates as a hard worker, all while avoiding having to admit she's not going anywhere for vacation. She first reads Bakunin, the Russian anarchist who rejects all authority. This is all Marjane understands of his philosophy—and she suspects that's all Momo understands, too. Then, Marjane studies the history of the commune and reads Jean-Paul Sartre. Her friends love Sartre, but Marjane finds him annoying. When Marjane isn't reading, she bundles up in her snowsuit and makes multiple trips to the supermarket to pass the time.

Marjane decides that to educate herself, she has to understand everything. She decides to start by learning about herself, so she reads her mother's favorite book, *The Mandarins* by Simone de Beauvoir. She then reads *The Second Sex*. Since de Beauvoir insists that women's outlook would change if they urinated standing up, Marjane tries it. Her urine runs down her leg and she thinks it's disgusting. It seems far simpler to sit on the toilet. After this, Marjane decides that she has to become "a liberated and emancipated woman" before she learns to urinate like a man.

One day in February, Marjane makes herself spaghetti. She's starving, so she carries her entire pot of pasta to the TV room to watch TV with the nuns. Suddenly, the Mother Superior steps in front of Marjane and reminds her to use her manners. The Mother Superior says it's true—Iranians have no education. Marjane spits back that all nuns were once prostitutes, attracting the attention of everyone in the room. The Mother Superior's assistant scolds Marjane and insists that Marjane must leave. Marjane thinks to herself that it's possible to find extremists in every religion.

Though the nuns allow Marjane to stay through the end of the month, Marjane immediately calls Julie and asks to stay with her. Julie agrees, so Marjane says goodbye to Lucia. The nuns send a letter to Marjane's mother and father, claiming that Marjane stole a fruit yogurt and chose to leave the boarding house. Marjane's parents are confused, since they know Marjane hates fruit yogurt. As Marjane boards the bus, she realizes she has a long way to go before she'll fit in in Vienna.

*In dabbling in politics, philosophy, and history, Marjane is also experimenting with how to present herself to her classmates. Reading so much makes her look cultured and smart, which seem to balance out the fact that she's not going anywhere for vacation. Her reading, however, teaches her more about her friends than it does about Bakunin, Sartre, or communes. She senses that her friends are probably just trying to look smart and sophisticated by idolizing Bakunin.*



*Turning to her mother's favorite book is a way for Marjane to connect with her family even though they're far away. And ranching out from Momo's reading list shows that, even as Marjane tries to fit in in Vienna, she's still more interested in figuring out who she is as a liberal Iranian woman. However, de Beauvoir's work shows Marjane that even though she thinks she's fairly liberal, she still has a way to go before she becomes "a liberal emancipated woman."*



*Even though the Mother Superior is deeply religious, she fails to demonstrate the kind, accepting attitude that Christianity preaches. The Mother Superior's highly offensive comment about Iranians having no education emphasizes to Marjane that Iran isn't the only country where religion can get distorted and twist its adherents into dangerous, mean people. In Vienna, the religion just isn't state-sanctioned like it is in Iran.*



*It seems that Marjane's rush to move out is a way for her to preserve her dignity. Staying the rest of the month may read to her as giving in to the nuns' ridiculous demands. That Marjane's parents don't automatically believe the nuns' side of the story speaks to the respect and trust that they have for their daughter.*



## THE PILL

Julie and Marjane share a room at Julie's family's house. Marjane throws herself into her schoolwork, but Julie is often out on dates with "mature" men. Julie is also extremely rude to her mother, Armelle. For instance, Julie often refuses to tell Armelle where she's going when she leaves the house. To Marjane, this is unacceptable—in her culture, parents are sacred. Marjane adores Armelle, so she spends a lot of time with her to make up for Julie's insolence. Armelle is very cultured (though she only reads the French psychoanalyst Lacan and hasn't read Bakunin) and understands Iran's culture, which is comforting to Marjane. Armelle calls Marjane's parents to assure them that Marjane is okay, which also makes Marjane feel secure.

Julie and Marjane always chat before bed. One evening, Julie moans that her mother is "unbearable." She says it's great to have Marjane around, though, since Armelle thinks Marjane is a good influence. This confuses Marjane, so Julie explains: Marjane does her schoolwork and is a timid virgin, while Julie has already had sex with 18 guys. Marjane is shocked; at home, people hide it if they have premarital sex. Julie lists all the guys she's had sex with and says that she doesn't like using condoms, since the guy "feels less." Noticing how shocked and confused Marjane looks, Julie explains that guys can't feel her vagina if they're wearing condoms. Now, though, Julie is on the birth control pill. That's what makes her butt so big. Marjane thinks that her own butt is big, but she's not taking birth control.

Since Armelle works for the United Nations, she often travels for days at a time. As she leaves for a trip, she warns Julie to not cut class and tells the girls to call their neighbor, Martin, if they need anything. (Julie has already explained to Marjane that she knows Armelle and Martin aren't sexually involved since her mother is still annoying. This logic escapes Marjane.) Once Armelle drives away, Julie immediately calls her friends to organize a party. On the night of the party, Julie does Marjane's **makeup** by drawing on thick black eyeliner. From this point on, Marjane begins wearing eyeliner like this regularly. Marjane, however, is shocked when she catches Julie spraying perfume on her vagina, which she's named Minou. When Marjane remembers that *minou* means paradise in Persian, she laughs.

The party isn't anything like Marjane expected. Julie plays Pink Floyd, which Marjane doesn't think is party music. Instead of dancing and eating like partygoers do in Iran, everyone lies around and smokes. People also make out publicly, which disturbs Marjane. Guests finally leave around 4:00 a.m. As Marjane struggles to remove her **makeup**, she hears noises coming from the bedroom—Julie and her latest partner are having sex. Horrified, Marjane tries to read in the living room.

*Living with Julie and Armelle gives Marjane a window into European family dynamics. What Marjane sees from this small sample size makes her feel like her culture is superior—while Julie is rude and unruly towards her mother, Iranian children treat their parents with reverence and respect. But Armelle's caring, generous behavior highlights that European parents can be just as good as Iranian ones.*



*Julie is shameless in talking about and having sex, which throws Marjane's relatively conservative upbringing into sharp relief. Marjane seems to think that people who have premarital sex should hide that fact no matter where in the world they are. Her confusion about what sex entails also emphasizes her youth and innocence.*



*Since Marjane is so young and comes from a culture that's more private when it comes to sex, Marjane doesn't understand how Armelle's obnoxiousness has anything to do with her sex life. But Julie, whom Marjane would likely describe as a "liberated woman," seems to propose that sex is necessary to maintain a healthy, relaxed outlook and not annoy one's family members. (In other words, Julie implies that Armelle wouldn't be annoying if she were having sex.) Marjane starts to take steps toward becoming liberated as she wears makeup for the first time and is able to giggle about something as taboo as Julie's vagina.*



*Talking about sex is one thing, but it's entirely different for Marjane to come to terms with the fact that sex is going on in her own home. Even if Marjane feels more like an adult by wearing makeup, eyeliner alone isn't enough to turn her into a liberated woman with Western sensibilities about sex. Marjane's horror suggests this situation isn't just uncomfortable but genuinely traumatizing.*



A few minutes later, Julie and her partner walk out of the bedroom, naked. Julie wraps herself in a blanket and her partner puts on underwear, and then they join Marjane on the couch. Marjane has never seen a man in his underwear before. She remembers how her father once explained to her what testicles were. He'd described them as ping-pong balls. Remembering this, Marjane howls with laughter. Julie accuses her of being stoned. This evening marks Marjane's first step toward assimilating into Western culture and understanding the sexual revolution.

*Even though Marjane tries to act nonchalant in front of Julie and her nearly naked partner, the experience is wildly unsettling for her. Remembering her father's humorous sex-ed lesson helps Marjane connect this unsettling experience with a more comforting memory of the past, but the conflation between testicles and ping-pong balls nevertheless reveals Marjane's innocence and her more conservative upbringing where sex was involved. But that Marjane is able to laugh at this memory suggests that she's slowly becoming more comfortable with Western culture's openness about sex.*



## THE VEGETABLE

Marjane's body begins to change. Between the age of 15 and 16, Marjane grows seven inches and develops a beauty mark on her nose. She thinks her new body is hideous. To make things worse, she experiments with cutting her own hair. Eventually, Marjane cuts it short, spikes it up with gel, and starts wearing eyeliner and a scarf. Julie thinks Marjane looks beautiful; Momo, Olivier, and Thierry say nothing. Even the young hall monitors at school love Marjane's new look. They pay Marjane to cut their hair, which provides her with spending money. Momo, however, takes issue with this. He accuses Marjane of sucking up to the power-hungry "peons."

*If Momo wants to keep Marjane around, he has to make it clear that no one else at school is worth her time. Momo is obsessed with death, and Marjane represents his clearest connection to death and trauma—and he seems to think that if he lets her go, he won't be as cool and edgy. So by accusing Marjane of sucking up to worthless people, Momo puts Marjane on the defense and forces her to explain why he should let her stick around. This kind of manipulation keeps Marjane off balance and makes her feel less at home in Vienna.*



Momo insists the hall monitors just want to control everyone. One afternoon, he expounds on his theory that life is nothingness. He declares that when people realize this, they can't "live like an earthworm" anymore. Marjane snaps that this is stupid; existence isn't absurd and people die for their values. When Momo says that even that is a "distraction from boredom," Marjane asks if her uncle "died to distract himself." Momo can't argue with this, since Marjane knows more about death than he does.

*Momo's insistence that life is nothingness reflects his privilege. Marjane's narration implies that Momo leads a cushy, privileged life—he's never had to fight or work for anything. For Marjane, who's come from a war-torn country and whose parents fought for their rights, Momo looks like a spoiled child. Even if Momo doesn't argue with Marjane, it's still implied that he doesn't necessarily believe her.*



Thierry rolls joints while everyone else keeps watch. Marjane doesn't like smoking, but she participates to feel like part of the group. To her mind, marijuana is no different from heroin. She remembers her parents talking about her cousin, who became addicted to heroin and started to "look like a vegetable." Not wanting to become a vegetable, Marjane only pretends to smoke and sneakily rubs her eyes to make them look bloodshot. As Marjane does this, she feels more and more like she's moving away from her culture and betraying her parents. She feels like a coward every time they call, since they still think she's a such a perfect child. If they knew she was dressed like a punk and smoked joints to fit in, she suspects they wouldn't think so highly of her anymore.

*At this point, Marjane has resolved to assimilate into her friend group and into Western culture more broadly. But she has to compromise who she is inside (an independent, proud Iranian woman) in order to externally fit in. Given that Marjane only pretends to smoke and feels like she's betraying her parents, it seems that she finds her efforts to fit in emotionally taxing. She feels trapped between two cultures, two identities, and two realities.*



Marjane feels so guilty that she changes the channel whenever news of Iran comes on TV. Whenever friends or classmates ask if Marjane has seen the latest from Iran, she lies and says her parents are fine. Despite her efforts to distance herself from her past, Marjane still dreams about her family at night. Once at a party, Marjane tells a boy she's French—at this point, Europeans see Iran as evil and she doesn't want that burden. However, Marjane remembers how her grandmother always told her to keep her dignity and stay true to herself.

Unfortunately, though, the truth comes out a few days later. From a cafe booth, Marjane listens to classmates giggle that she's ugly and that she lies about having seen war to make herself seem interesting. They also say they'd commit suicide if their brother dated Marjane. Finally, Marjane loses her temper and shouts that she's proud to be Iranian. At first, she wants to die of shame. Then, she realizes she redeemed herself. She understands what her grandmother meant: that if Marjane isn't comfortable with herself, she'll never be comfortable.

## THE HORSE

When Julie and Armelle leave Vienna, Marjane moves into an apartment that she shares with eight young gay men. By now, Marjane is done with her punk phase and doesn't want to be "marginal" anymore. One day, Mom calls—she's visiting in two weeks. Marjane's housemates are overjoyed for her. In preparation for her mother's arrival, Marjane bathes, irons her clothes, and dresses up to go to the airport. At the airport, it takes Marjane a minute to recognize Mom, since her mother now has gray hair. Mom doesn't recognize Marjane at first, either. It's odd for Marjane to be the taller one when they embrace.

Marjane brings Mom to stay with her at the communal house. Mom is shocked to discover that Marjane's roommates are all men, though learning that they're gay seems to placate her. She comments that Marjane has grown up a lot. Marjane doesn't say that Mom has changed a lot, too—she's getting old. Conversations between them are difficult, since it's hard to catch up on a year and a half's worth of events. Mom talks about Dad's new job working on the gas in Tehran's buildings. She also lies to Marjane that she left a special anniversary necklace in Iran, though Marjane doesn't learn Mom lied until much later. After the first night when Marjane cooks pasta, Mom takes over the cooking.

*It's understandable why Marjane would avoid news of Iran, as she wants to avoid any extra trauma. In addition to enlightening her as to what her parents are suffering on a daily basis, news of Iran also reminds Marjane more generally that she has ties in Iran. Since she's concerned with assimilating and has to deal with others' xenophobia and bigotry, it's easier to pretend she's not Iranian and knows nothing about Iran.*



*Marjane's classmates' xenophobia is on full display in this passage as they condemn romantic relationships between Marjane and any Viennese boys. In this moment, Marjane comes to an important conclusion: that she is genuinely proud to be Iranian. If she ignores her identity, she'll never find peace or happiness. In essence, it's more important that Marjane figure out who she is and take pride in her authentic identity than it is to try to assimilate.*



*Coming face to face after a year and a half of separation is a shock for both Marjane and her mother. It throws into sharp relief how much Marjane is growing up—and how old Mom is getting. Mom's gray hair in particular drives home that she's getting older and is doing so rapidly. Though Marjane doesn't talk much about her housemates, their excitement for her suggests that she's in a more supportive place where she can more comfortably be herself.*



*For Mom, it's a big shock to realize that her daughter is living with eight gay men. With this, Marjane has to confront how Westernized she's become in the last 18 months. The revelation that Mom lies about the whereabouts of her necklace suggests that Mom is trying to protect Marjane from traumatizing information. Marjane seems to imply that Mom sold or lost the necklace, which would suggest that Mom and Dad aren't doing well financially in Tehran.*



Mom gives Marjane a letter from Dad. In it, Dad writes that he's happy about Marjane's idyllic life in Vienna. Marjane realizes Dad has no idea what she's going through. Mom and Marjane spend much of their time walking and talking about the situation in Iran. Marjane is relieved that Mom never asks about life in Vienna—she figures that Mom is afraid of what Marjane might say. Often, they simply hug each other. Mom tells Marjane that she has to become the best at *something*—even if she only becomes the best cabaret dancer. She also talks about how much things have changed. When she used to come to Europe, people would treat her kindly and generously. Now, everyone treats her like a terrorist when they see her Iranian passport.

A few days later, as Mom and Marjane sit at a cafe, Mom asks for a cigarette. She knows Marjane smokes—Marjane smells, and Mom found a packet of Camels in Marjane's bag. Though Marjane is enraged that Mom violated her privacy, she decides to let it go and hands over a cigarette. As they smoke together, Marjane shares what really happened with the nuns. Mom praises Marjane for standing up for herself but makes her promise to not insult people in the future.

Since Marjane's lodgings are temporary, Mom finds Marjane a new apartment. When they go see it, the landlord, Frau Doctor Heller, greets them and offers them tea. They agree to the terms of the lease. At the tram stop, though, Marjane and Mom can't stop laughing—Frau Dr. Heller looks like a horse, and her tea was "like horse piss." They laugh at this joke for years to come. Mom stays for 27 days. She cooks Iranian food, strokes Marjane's hair, and speaks in Persian. The night before Mom leaves, she begs Marjane to buy more vegetables and to not insult Frau Doctor Heller. She also shows Marjane sketches for new clothes. Marjane is sure that Mom knows how lonely she is but keeps a straight face anyway.

## HIDE AND SEEK

Frau Doctor Heller lives in an old villa built by her father. The only downside to these living arrangements is that Frau Doctor Heller's dog poops on Marjane's bed weekly. When Marjane gets angry about it, Frau Doctor Heller accuses her of being uptight. By this point, all of Marjane's friends have left. Olivier and Thierry are back in Switzerland, Julie is in Spain, and Momo was expelled. Marjane now has a boyfriend: 20-year-old Enrique is half-Austrian, half-Spanish, and knows real anarchists. When he invites Marjane to an anarchist party, she spends the days leading up to it dreaming about how her new friends will be willing to burn everything to the ground. She also thinks the party will help her understand Bakunin better.

*It's disconcerting for Marjane to realize that Dad thinks she's living a happy, conflict-free life in Vienna. In reality, Marjane's life is far from idyllic—her living situation is unstable, and she feels alone and unmoored. For Mom, this visit doesn't just introduce her to a more adult version of her daughter, it also shows her a new, unfamiliar version of Europe that isn't nearly as open and welcoming as it once was. The Islamic Revolution has shifted European's perspectives on Iranians, and Mom recognizes that things will probably never be like they used to.*



*Again, it's telling that Mom praises Marjane for not taking the Mother Superior's abuse. This makes it clear that Mom and Dad have raised Marjane to be independent and stand up for herself. However, Mom still believes her daughter needs to be polite, which suggests she still has firm ideas about who Marjane should be, even as Marjane begins to step outside of those ideas.*



*Even though the graphic novel is peppered with horrific instances in which Europeans insult Marjane's appearance, joking about Frau Doctor Heller indicates that Marjane can be just as rude. However, it's important to note the power dynamic here—Europeans are the dominant culture and denigrate Iranians to make Iranians assimilate or feel inferior. Marjane and Mom, on the other hand, are just looking for a laugh.*



*Marjane has every right to be upset about dog poop in her bed. Frau Doctor Heller's reaction thus reads as rude and prejudiced—she seems to imply that Marjane only takes issue because she's too conservative and strict. Now that Marjane's other friends are gone, she has the opportunity to discover all over again who she wants to be. But even if she has more freedom to be herself without Momo's oppressive presence, Marjane still holds Momo up as an ideal. Because of Momo's introduction to anarchy and Bakunin, Marjane still thinks it's important to pursue anarchy and like what Momo liked.*



When Marjane and Enrique complete their hour and a half journey to a commune in a forest, however, Marjane is shocked: the party is just a bunch of adults playing hide-and-seek. She initially refuses to play and feels like she's fallen out of love with Enrique, but he convinces her to join the group. By the end of the night, Marjane is in love again. Everyone else sleeps together in the living room, but Marjane is too embarrassed. In Iran, even kissing in public is considered sexual, so this is too much for her. Fortunately, Enrique's friend Ingrid offers them a bedroom upstairs. Marjane and Enrique's relationship has been nonsexual up to this point, but Marjane decides she's ready to lose her virginity.

The next morning, though, Marjane is still a virgin—and Enrique isn't in bed next to her. She cries, worried she must be too ugly for him. When Marjane goes downstairs and finds Enrique talking with Ingrid, she decides he must want Ingrid instead. Enrique pulls Marjane to a private part of the house and tells her he has a secret to share with her: he thinks he's gay. He assures Marjane that she's beautiful and Marjane feels a bit better. It's a relief that Enrique is gay and doesn't think she's ugly. Eventually, Marjane loses touch with Enrique, but she hangs out often with his anarchist friends. She feels caught between Frau Doctor Heller's house, school, and her anarchist friends.

Marjane begins doing drugs regularly with her anarchist friends and people begin to notice. Her physics teacher, Yonnel Arrouas, pulls her aside after class one day. He doesn't seem to believe that Marjane actually experienced bombings in Iran, but he invites her over for lunch on Saturday anyway. Marjane enjoys a wonderful afternoon with him, his twin daughters, and his mother. But since Yonnel's wife doesn't like Marjane, Marjane is never invited back.

Following the Enrique debacle, Marjane finally understands what Julie was talking about in terms of Armelle and Martin's sexless relationship. Sex, Marjane realizes, is necessary, but she has no idea how to go about finding someone to have sex with. One day, a new student, Jean-Paul, invites Marjane to get a drink. Marjane is so excited that she gets there an hour early, but Jean-Paul is a half-hour late. As Marjane tells him she's "experiencing a great lack of affection," she leaves her hand on the table for him to take. Instead, Jean-Paul tells her that good things come to those who wait and asks for help with his math homework. Marjane feels stupid for thinking he liked her.

*Marjane expects something very adult and serious from an anarchist party, not something as childish as a game of hide-and-seek. The fact that she enjoys the game once Enrique convinces her to play shows her that she doesn't have to be so serious all the time—even adults can have fun and let loose once in a while. Despite how much she's changed, Marjane still clings tightly to some of the more conservative aspects of her Iranian culture. Fortunately, these friends seem to respect that by giving Marjane and Enrique a private room.*



*Especially after spending so much time with her gay roommates at the communal hose, learning that Enrique is gay may make Marjane feel hopeless about her prospects of connecting with straight, available men. However, even though things don't work out with Enrique, Marjane is still able to spend time with people who care about her at the commune and develop her identity as a budding anarchist.*



*Though Marjane never learns or never shares the reason for Mrs. Arrouas's scorn, it's possible Mrs. Arrouas objects to Marjane's ethnicity, or perhaps she's uncomfortable with the fact that her husband has invited a young woman over to the house.*



*Even if Marjane feels ready to have sex and become an adult in this way, her behavior with Jean-Paul nevertheless reads as somewhat immature, because she doesn't yet know how to read romantic situations and behave accordingly. Her desire to become sexually active also speaks to how far away she's moving from her more conservative Iranian culture. Julie is a role model to Marjane now, rather than an example of how not to behave.*



Marjane becomes good friends with Ingrid and spends most weekends at the commune, meditating or doing drugs. She doesn't always like using drugs, but when she's inebriated, Marjane doesn't have to think about how disappointed and lonely she is. Eventually, Marjane meets "the first great love of [her] life": Markus. He invites her to a club one weekend. Marjane makes no effort—she wears ratty clothes, shows up late, and doesn't hide her dislike of dancing. When the club closes, Markus offers to drive Marjane home and asks if she'd split the cost of gas with him. He says he loves Marjane's rebelliousness and nonchalance before kissing her. Marjane is thrilled to have a real boyfriend.

Things go downhill. One afternoon at Markus's house, Markus's mother bursts in and shouts in German for Marjane to go "raus"—essentially, to get out of the country. Old men on public transit have said this to Marjane before, but this feels different. Markus's mother doesn't realize Marjane understands German and spits that Marjane is just trying to get an Austrian passport. She throws Marjane out. Marjane says nothing and figures that Markus is suffering more than she is, since he'll have to give up his relationship with his mother to see her. When they hang out at Marjane's house, though, things are no better. Marjane doesn't have marijuana anymore since she's not seeing Ingrid much. Frau Doctor Heller kicks Markus out, insisting her home isn't a brothel. She accuses Marjane of prostitution. Enraged, Marjane insults Frau Doctor Heller in Persian.

After this, Marjane and Markus hang out most often in his car, smoking joints. One day, he suggests they go to a cafe to buy drugs. Since Markus can't find a parking spot, he asks Marjane to go in and purchase the drugs. Though Marjane is terrified, she tells herself she's doing this for love. She successfully purchases the drugs. Markus is so proud that he tells the school that Marjane has drug contacts. With this, Marjane becomes her school's official drug dealer. She figures that she's following Mom's advice to be the best at something, and she gives dealing her best effort.

## THE CROISSANT

Fortunately, Marjane is too concerned about doing well in school to get in big trouble. But as she prepares for her final exams, she realizes she has major knowledge gaps. One night, God appears to her in a dream and tells her the subject of the upcoming test. Marjane calls Mom, who calls God, who tells the examiner what to ask Marjane. Marjane gets the best grade in the school. Over the summer, Marjane takes odd jobs and eventually gets a job at a cafe. The job pays well, but male customers often try to pinch Marjane's bottom. Svetlana, the Yugoslavian chef, spits in these customers' food.

*Even though Marjane has previously voiced her concerns about becoming a "vegetable" through drug use, she continues to take drugs anyways in an attempt to mask her deep sadness and loneliness. Her sadness and apathy rob her of any hope she might otherwise feel about life improving—which is why the events of her date with Markus surprise her so much.*



*Incidents of racism and sexism happen more often now that Marjane is sexually active with an Austrian man. Marjane is no longer an innocent child in the eyes of European adults—to them, she's a foreign seducer, intent on stealing the hearts of gullible Austrian men. However, Marjane feels worse for Markus than for herself because she still clings to Iranian family norms. Since Iran positions parents as "sacred," she assumes that Markus must be distraught—but there's little evidence that he's upset.*



*When Marjane works herself up to purchasing drugs "for love," she makes it clear that romance is the driving force in her life right now. Even if Marjane's romantic relationships turn her into a person her parents wouldn't like, Markus's pride in her likely outweighs any shame. Becoming a drug dealer opens a new chapter in Marjane's search for her identity.*



*It's telling that Marjane attributes her success to God and her mother—God appeared as a character in [Persepolis](#) and guided young Marjane. The confluence of events here suggests that Marjane will find success when she acknowledges her Iranian roots and combines them with her current European life. On another note, Svetlana may sympathize more with Marjane than others, being a foreigner in Vienna herself.*



When school starts again, the principal calls Marjane to his office. He warns her that selling marijuana at school could bring severe consequences, successfully ending Marjane's career as a drug dealer. But even though Marjane isn't *selling* drugs anymore, she takes more and more. Markus is impressed at first, but when his lecturing doesn't curb her use, he distances himself from Marjane. To the reader, Marjane admits she's smoking too many joints and often falls asleep during class. She knows she's a vegetable and is disappointed in what she's become. Thanks to Mom's prayers, though, Marjane manages to graduate.

In 1988, Markus begins to study theater. Marjane registers to study technology but never goes to class. During this time, Marjane begins to learn about Austria's new president, Kurt Waldheim. She often accompanies Markus to a cafe to discuss politics with his friends. Markus's friends insist that Waldheim has instituted Nazism in Austria, but Marjane insists that nothing much has changed since Waldheim's election 18 months ago. Marjane also hasn't noticed the skinhead population increasing, and she insists that the skinheads aren't nearly as scary as the Guardians of the Revolution in Iran. All of Markus's friends, like most young Viennese, protest often against the government. They insist that old Nazis are teaching extremism to new Nazis in the Tyrol. Marjane notes that people were nice to *her* in the Tyrol, but one woman says that's only because Marjane is female.

Markus, however, never joins his friends at protests. Instead, he holes up in his room and writes his play. He tells Marjane that protesting is a waste, since Waldheim was elected democratically. Marjane calls Markus a coward when he insists that writing is his form of protest—they have to educate people so people won't vote for Nazis. This marks the beginning of the end for their two-year relationship, though they both try to hold things together. On the night before Marjane's 18th birthday, Marjane shares that she's going to Graz with a friend and asks to stay the night. Markus reminds Marjane that her apartment is closer to the train station. In the morning, Marjane misses her train anyway.

Deciding this is a sign that she should spend her 18th birthday with Markus, Marjane picks up croissants and decides to surprise him. When she arrives, though, she finds Markus in bed with another woman. Markus tries to explain, but Marjane hurls insults at him. At this, Markus tells Marjane to leave. They never see each other again.

*Marjane's heavy drug use and her recognition that she's a "vegetable" points again to her deteriorating mental health. Losing her identity as a drug dealer means that Marjane has little to hold onto, especially as Markus starts to distance himself. But the fact that Marjane so readily stops selling after her chat with the principal also suggests that she doesn't actually want to be known as a drug dealer and longs to redefine herself.*



*Likely because Marjane is so caught up in her own misery and her relationship with Markus, she's doesn't pay as much attention to what's going on around her. This introduces readers to one of the graphic novel's most important ideas: that fear robs people of their ability to think critically about what's going on around them. Even if the skinheads in Vienna do pose a legitimate threat, Marjane thinks that they'll never be as formidable as the Guardians of the Revolution. In this sense, she still idealizes European culture and doesn't think it can be as dangerous as Iran's regime.*



*Since Marjane comes from a politically active family (her parents demonstrated several times in [Persepolis](#)), Markus's outlook is unacceptable to her. Markus's outlook stems from his own privilege—he seems to believe that even if things are getting worse in Austria, it's not going to affect him much or at all. Since Marjane is a foreigner, though, she'll become a target of any nationalist or racist policies. In short, Markus and Marjane grow apart because Markus won't acknowledge how Marjane might suffer in Austria.*



*Marjane put a lot of time and effort into her relationship with Markus, so breaking up like this cuts deeper than a more amicable breakup might.*





## THE VEIL

Marjane is distraught. In her mind, Markus is the only person who's cared about her in the last four years. As Marjane cries in her room, Frau Doctor Heller steps in and accuses her of stealing a brooch. Marjane cries more, wondering where her mother, father, and grandmother are—they're not here to comfort her. Since everything in the room reminds her of Markus, Marjane gets dressed; puts her passport, plane ticket home, and some money in a bag; and leaves. She ignores Frau Doctor Heller's threats on the way out. Marjane spends her 18th birthday on a bench. When it gets dark, she remembers her grandmother saying, "night brings good counsel."

Suddenly, Marjane understands that Markus is a jerk. He made her buy drugs, knowing she might get arrested. He didn't take Marjane's side when his mother insulted Marjane. Marjane also suspects that his mother didn't actually cut off his allowance—he just wanted to use Marjane's money. In retrospect, Marjane bears no ill will toward Markus. She realizes she wanted him to be *everything* to her, a big task for a boy of 19. Marjane spends that night lying on a bench. In the morning, Marjane boards a tram and sleeps above a heating vent. She spends the next month this way. It doesn't take long for her to run out of money and lose her dignity. She digs for food in the trash and smokes others' cigarette butts. Eventually, tram operators refuse to let her board. Sleeping on the streets is frightening.

Marjane knows she can't go back to Zozo or Ingrid, and she has no interest in returning to evil Frau Doctor Heller. She sleeps on the streets for more than two months and slowly develops a cough. Her cough becomes constant and bloody until finally, she faints. When Marjane wakes up, she's in the hospital. She knows that if she'd fainted during the night, she would've died. As Marjane slowly regains her strength, she thinks of all she's lived through. Marjane muses that she survived a revolution and a war—and yet, love almost killed her.

*There's no evidence that Marjane has ever even seen Frau Doctor Heller's missing brooch—this scene implies that Frau Doctor Heller thinks that immigrants and foreigners are dishonest and want to take advantage. Dealing with this abuse is too much for Marjane to bear on top of her breakup.*



*Though it's unclear whether Marjane is right about Markus's intentions and possible lies, it's important for her to feel angry with him, as it spurs her to reclaim her independence. Being on the streets, though, is far more difficult and dehumanizing than even dealing with Frau Doctor Heller. Marjane's life quickly comes to revolve around mere survival.*



*Ending up in the hospital helps Marjane put her recent traumas in perspective. She seems to question whether a cheating boyfriend is really worse than living through a revolution and a war. This helps Marjane reorient herself and take pride in surviving everything she's faced thus far in her life.*



When the doctor declares Marjane healthy, Marjane remembers Mom saying that Zozo owes her money. Marjane decides to pursue that money—it's her only chance. Fortunately, Zozo hands over an envelope without a fuss. Zozo also says that Marjane's parents are frantic. Just then, the phone rings. It's Marjane's parents. Marjane asks to come home and asks her parents not to ask about her absence. They promise. Then, Marjane stops at Frau Doctor Heller's for her belongings. Frau Doctor Heller insists on keeping some things as payment for the stolen brooch. Knowing she can't take everything back with her anyway, Marjane doesn't argue. Even though the doctor forbade her to smoke, Marjane buys cartons of cigarettes and smokes most of them. She figures that putting her health in danger is easier than confronting her shame. Finally, Marjane dons her **veil**. She's ready to go home.

*It's possible that Zozo might not be as evil as Marjane initially thought, given that she hands over the money so readily. This offers hope that Marjane's Iranian community is still there for her, if she only asks for help and guidance. Indeed, Mom and Dad's willingness to let Marjane come home is more proof of this. Having this small comfort, though, isn't enough to soothe Marjane's fear and shame. Marjane knows she became a "vegetable" in Vienna and she feels like she failed—but she also doesn't give herself enough credit. She suffered during her time in Vienna and while she did make some poor choices of her own, she also faced horrible sexism and bigotry beyond her control.*



## THE RETURN

As soon as Marjane catches sight of the customs agent at the Tehran airport, she remembers how oppressive Iran is. The agent asks if she has any pork, alcohol, or fashion magazines. He then asks her to fix her **veil**. Once she's past customs Marjane spots her parents immediately. They, however, don't recognize her until she taps Dad on the shoulder. Marjane only realizes how much she's grown when she notices that she and Dad are now the same size. Dad now drives a Renault S instead of a Cadillac. Marjane used to be ashamed of the Cadillac and the privilege it denoted, but now she wishes Dad still had it. It would remind her of better days. When they get home, Marjane heads straight to her room. She's overjoyed to be home and sits in the dark to enjoy it.

*After four years in which no one seemed to care much about Marjane's clothing, it's a shock to have the customs agent balk at how Marjane wears her veil. When Marjane's parents don't recognize her right away, it drives home just how much she's grown and changed in the last four years. Their daughter is an adult now, and the family will have to adapt to accommodate her new maturity.*



In the morning, Marjane wakes up to snow. She hated snow in Vienna, but she's excited to see it now. Looking around her room, Marjane thinks her furniture is too small, and she's embarrassed by the punk drawings she drew on the wall. When Marjane digs for a Kim Wilde tape to listen to, she can't find one. In the kitchen, Mom offers Marjane breakfast. They giggle about Frau Doctor Heller's disgusting tea and Mom says she'd like a cigarette. Marjane is shocked, but she realizes that Mom sees her as an adult now. Mom eventually explains that she gave Marjane's tapes away. Rather than get upset, Marjane takes this as a sign that it's time to look forward. She asks for a sponge and scrubs her punk drawings off the walls.

*Marjane's room represents who she was as a child. Now that she's an adult, she sees how young and naïve she was at age 14, when she last saw this room. But even as Marjane looks around with disgust, there are still parts of her childhood that are comforting to her, like the Kim Wilde tapes. Listening to those tapes again would let Marjane escape to a more comfortable time—or, at least, a time that seems easier and less fraught in retrospect. But that Mom has since given the tapes away emphasize that Marjane can't run back to her childhood and must continue to move forward.*



Several hours later, Marjane hears Mom on the phone with one of Marjane's childhood friends. Marjane shushes Mom; she doesn't want her friends to know she's back yet. In the afternoon, Marjane puts her **veil** on and walks around the city. It's very different. Now, huge murals of martyrs decorate buildings. After seeing billboards advertising sausages for four years, Marjane realizes it'll take a while to adjust. She also notices that many street names have been changed to honor martyrs. This is very unsettling; it makes the city feel like a graveyard of war victims. Marjane can't bear it—especially since she wasn't home to experience the war.

Dad gets home late that night. Over dinner, he explains that they have to rebuild everything in the city. Mom adds that they rebuild just to prepare for the next war, which she says will inevitably destroy everything. Marjane is shocked to hear Mom sound so disillusioned. Fortunately, Dad changes the subject and asks about Marjane's day. Marjane mentions how disquieting the streets are now that they've been renamed. Dad says it's not even that bad in their neighborhood—in poor neighborhoods, nearly *all* the streets are named after martyrs. He insists that no one knows now why their children died. The war, in his estimation, was a setup to destroy Iran and Iraq's armies. Now, after eight years of war, the state names streets after dead martyrs to try to flatter the martyrs' families and make their deaths mean something.

Marjane notes that on TV, she also saw mothers who were "overjoyed" that their children died. Dad explains that the state has convinced people that martyrs live in luxury in the afterlife. He mentions that the war itself was like hell, and the months before the ceasefire were the worst. Dad explains that a month before the ceasefire, Iraq bombed Tehran daily. The state hadn't announced the ceasefire yet when armed Iranians opposed to the Islamic regime (the *Mujahideen*) entered Iran from Iraq, supported by Saddam Hussein. Dad is shocked that Marjane hasn't heard about this already, but Mom reminds Dad that Marjane has been in Europe.

*As she walks through Tehran, Marjane realizes that it is fundamentally different from the Tehran she left behind years ago. In particular, the war seems to be everywhere. The new street names and the murals honoring the martyrs ensure that no one is going to forget the war and everyone who died because of it. Since Marjane didn't experience much of the war firsthand, though, it's unsettling for her in a different way than it might be for others. She may feel guilty for not having been here to experience it.*



*When Dad brings up the fact that poorer neighborhoods have even more streets named after martyrs, Marjane has to confront her privilege yet again. She had the opportunity to leave the country and escape the war, but even if she'd stayed, she still wouldn't have had it as bad as poorer Iranians. The effects of the war, though, are far-reaching, and Marjane's parents are less hopeful about Iran's future.*



*Marjane's parents don't know that Marjane actively avoided any news of Iran during her time in Vienna. Though she avoided the news to protect herself from even more trauma, she now has to confront the truth of what happened to her home country, in addition to her own shame for not knowing about this sooner. This makes Marjane feel even worse about rejecting Iranian culture in favor of Western culture.*



Continuing his story, Dad says that the *Mujahideen* knew most Iranians opposed the regime. They expected popular support. However, since they entered from Iraq, no one welcomed or supported them. The Guardians of the Revolution killed them. Dad says that the regime was worried. They knew that if the *Mujahideen* had reached Tehran, they would've freed imprisoned intellectuals who opposed the regime. To eliminate the problem, the state gave prisoners a choice: renounce their ideals and be freed, or be executed. The state executed tens of thousands of prisoners. The war, meanwhile, took up to a million lives. Dad says that this doesn't account for the many people who were disabled, orphaned, or widowed. After Dad's story, Marjane feels like everything that happened to her in Vienna is unimportant. She vows to never speak of her time in Austria.

*Dad's story drives home that Iran's regime is willing to do anything to amass and keep its power. Killing intellectuals means killing any potential for opposition. It also frightens people like Marjane's family, who are educated and oppose the regime—but now may be less willing to protest or fight for their rights. Even if Marjane didn't have to experience these events firsthand, hearing about them is still traumatizing. This makes her feel guilty for leaving Iran and for ignoring what was going on—and since she didn't see anything this bad in Europe, she believes she has no right to feel traumatized by her experiences in Vienna.*



## THE JOKE

After 10 days, Marjane's entire extended family shows up to visit her. Marjane is terrified that everyone knows how badly she failed in Vienna. Everyone is kind, but Marjane soon grows tired of being the center of attention. When the visits taper off, Marjane's grandmother finally visits. She's the one person Marjane really wants to talk to. Then, Marjane's friends arrive. Marjane isn't as worried about seeing her them, since she figures they're the same age and they'll be able to connect. But her friends are all very made-up and want to get married as soon as possible. They also want to hear about Vienna's nightclubs, which Marjane didn't enjoy. Marjane realizes later that getting made up and wanting to go to nightclubs was her friends' way of resisting. She still feels very alone.

*Seeing all her family members is unsettling for Marjane and makes her anxious. In part, this is because she is so self-conscious about what happened to her in Vienna, and she seems to believe that her failures must be obvious to everyone who looks at her. And seeing how much her friends have changed impresses upon Marjane that she might not even have a home in Iran anymore.*



About a week later, Marjane moans to Mom that all her friends are unbearable. Mom points out that no one is asking young Iranian women to be intelligent these days. She suggests Marjane cut her friends some slack. When Marjane's grandmother says that there must be *someone* Marjane wants to see, Marjane realizes there is. She wants to see Kia, whom she played with in the streets. Mom has never liked Kia and starts to protest. After Marjane assures Mom that they won't get into trouble now that they're adults, Mom shares what happened to Kia. He was arrested for trying to evade his military service and sent to the front. Now, he's "almost dead"—he's disabled. Marjane is nervous but not dissuaded. She tracks down his phone number and schedules a visit.

*Since she spent the last four years in Iran, Mom attempts to contextualize Marjane's friends' behavior. Because the regime curtailed women's rights, Mom implies that there's nothing for young women to do but make themselves attractive to men, dream of marriage, and idealize Europe. Learning that Kia is now disabled also forces Marjane to acknowledge that everything has changed.*



On the way to Kia's apartment, Marjane worries about what she'll find. One of Kia's neighbors seems thrilled that someone is visiting Kia, and his reaction calms Marjane down enough to ring the doorbell. Kia answers the door from his wheelchair and lets Marjane in. It's awkward at first and Marjane tries to only look at her friend's eyes. She only notices that Kia only has the use of one arm when he goes to fetch sodas from the kitchen. After Marjane helps Kia get his soda open, Kia explains that he hopes to go to the U.S. to be fitted for prostheses.

When another awkward silence falls, Kia tells Marjane a joke: A grenade lands on the head of a young soldier at the front, blasting him into pieces. The medics gather up the young man's body parts and rush him to Tehran, where the doctors stitch him together. Then, when he's healed, the young man's family finds him a wife. On their wedding night, the bride is aghast: the doctors reattached the man's penis to his hip. Despite the man's insistence that his penis still works, the bride demands a divorce. The man is so fed up that he points to his armpit and tells his wife to kiss his butt.

Kia laughs so hard that he falls out of his wheelchair. He and Marjane spend the rest of the afternoon laughing. Marjane visits Kia several more times before Kia leaves for the U.S. After this day, Marjane learns that people can only wallow in their miseries for so long before they have to laugh.

## SKIING

Marjane is in a depressive funk and can't shake it. Over the next few weeks, her friends and family make lots of suggestions for how to feel better. They suggest joining a gym, getting married, and starting school, but all Marjane wants to do is tell them what happened in Vienna. She wants them to feel sorry for her, show her compassion, and say they understand. Marjane reasons that they always had a home and family nearby, even if they did endure the war. She, meanwhile, felt like a "third-worlder" the entire time she was in Vienna. But since Marjane refuses to talk, no one gives her what she wants. Marjane tries to keep it together but soon becomes depressed. She thought that coming to Iran would fix everything, but she can't escape her past.

*Seeing Kia in a wheelchair makes the consequences of the war real for Marjane in a way they weren't before. Before seeing Kia, she could pretend that the war didn't affect any of the people she loves in such a devastating way. This makes Marjane feel even more like people had it worse in Iran than she did in Vienna. But that also doesn't give Marjane room to acknowledge that she nonetheless had painful, dehumanizing, and traumatizing experiences in Vienna.*



*Kia's joke makes the point that in the face of pain and suffering, sometimes the only thing people can do to feel better is laugh. It's especially meaningful that Kia—a disabled veteran—is the one telling this joke. This shows Marjane that even people who are suffering deeply can try to make the best of their situation—a lesson Marjane might find useful in dealing with her own trauma.*



*Reconnecting with Kia and having so much fun shows Marjane that things at home might not have changed as much as she thinks. That Kia is still around and is just as funny as he used to be suggests that Marjane might still have a home in Tehran after all.*



*Marjane recognizes that the only way to deal with her trauma is to talk about it. However, because she feels like her trauma isn't as valid as what Iranians experienced, she can't bring herself to speak up. Given that Marjane becomes depressed because of this, the novel implies that comparing one's trauma to others' is unhelpful and unhealthy. And, for that matter, trying so hard to be okay is also damaging.*

Marjane spends her time smoking, refusing invitations from friends or family, and watching TV. Finally, Marjane's friends insist on taking her skiing. Mom forces Marjane to go against her will. Instead of skiing, Marjane sits outside and smokes. To her surprise, the fresh air and time away does help her feel better. But that first night, as Marjane and her friends talk about boys, one friend asks if Marjane has had sex and what it feels like. When Marjane notes that it depends on one's partner, one friend asks if Marjane is any different from a whore. Marjane is shocked, but she realizes that her friends are traditionalists under their Western-style **makeup**. In their eyes, Marjane is a "decadent Western woman."

When Marjane gets back home, she's even more depressed than before. Mom finally suggests that Marjane find a counselor. Marjane sees several and tells them about her shame, her secrecy, and her poor self-esteem. Many don't know what to do with her, but one finally prescribes medication. The pills make Marjane feel well, but they also put her in a sort of trance. And as soon as they wear off, Marjane's feelings of worthlessness return. She feels like a Westerner in Iran and an Iranian in the West. This dysphoria makes Marjane wonder why she's even living. She decides to kill herself.

When Marjane's parents take a 10-day trip to the Caspian Sea, Marjane stays home. She recently saw a film in which a woman slit her wrists after drinking a lot. Marjane downs half of a bottle of vodka in preparation, but she's squeamish and only nicks her wrist. After this, she takes all her antidepressants. Marjane goes to sleep, expecting to die—but she wakes up three days later. Following this failure, Marjane seeks out her therapist. He's surprised she survived swallowing so many pills and suggests she's alive thanks to a divine intervention. After this, Marjane decides she isn't supposed to die and vows to get herself under control.

Marjane throws herself into self-improvement. She removes a lot of her body hair, buys a new wardrobe, and cuts her hair. After some more shopping and some new **makeup**, Marjane looks like a sophisticated woman. She begins exercising frequently and becomes an aerobics instructor. Marjane feels strong, invincible, and ready to meet her destiny.

*Even if Marjane's friends are intrigued by glittery images of Vienna's nightclubs and Western beauty standards, they're struggling just like Marjane to reconcile their traditional upbringings with more liberal Western standards. This doesn't make the comment about Marjane any less rude, but by contextualizing the comment, Marjane is able to sympathize a bit more with her friends. Nevertheless, having her sexual history defined in such crude and offensive terms makes Marjane feel like she doesn't fit in.*



*The fact that simply talking about her trauma with counselors doesn't seem to help much suggests that Marjane needs more than talking. She needs to feel at home and understood, but this feels impossible. Marjane decides that since she doesn't fit in anywhere, it's no use even trying—hence her choice to commit suicide.*



*In reframing her situation, Marjane finds that she can begin to find meaning and purpose in her life. It's comforting, in this instance, for her to feel like she's not in control of her life—some outside force or higher power wants her to survive. This allows her to feel less responsible for her negative experiences in Vienna and instead, "get herself under control."*



*In some ways, Marjane's new persona is yet another mask. Just like her heavy eyeliner in Vienna or her veil in Iran, her new makeup, clothes, and hobbies give her something to hide behind. It's worth noting, though, that this persona seems healthier than her previous ones. Marjane may finally be moving past her trauma.*



## THE EXAM

It's 1989. Marjane's parents have no idea what caused Marjane's abrupt about-face, but they're thrilled anyway. They buy her a car to encourage her to keep trying. Marjane spends her time going to parties and attends one party at her friend Roxana's house. She doesn't know anyone at the party but soon makes the acquaintance of a young man named Reza. They connect over the fact that Reza's friends attended school in Tehran with Marjane. They also discover that they're both painters. Though Roxana tries to draw Marjane away and even warns Marjane that Reza is a "merciless seducer," Marjane spends the entire evening with Reza.

Marjane is especially taken with Reza when he reveals that he fought in the war. He attempts to tell her the same joke Kia did before describing what it was like to be a tank gunner. All of this makes Marjane think that Reza is a hero—and two years later, she goes on to marry him. Roxana refuses to speak to Marjane after the party; she wanted to set Reza up with a different friend. As Marjane and Reza embark on their relationship, Marjane realizes they're complete opposites. Reza is neat, quiet, and dreams of having a family. Marjane is messy, social, and prefers smoking to meditation. But Reza idealizes Marjane's time in Vienna, while Marjane sees Reza as a way to connect with the war she never experienced. In this sense, they complement each other.

It doesn't take long before Marjane and Reza start talking about a future together. Reza wants to move to Europe or the U.S. and invites Marjane to come with him. Marjane doesn't refuse, but she's not ready to leave Iran. Reza insists that Marjane is just nostalgic for Iran—soon, she'll be ready to leave. Getting visas is hard, so instead of planning their departure Marjane and Reza study for the National Exam. This will allow them to attend college. In June 1989, they take their exams. For the drawing portion of the exam, Marjane prepares a version of Michelangelo's Pietà (the Virgin Mary holding Jesus's body), but puts Mary in a **veil** and Jesus in an army uniform. It honors the martyrs.

Several weeks later, Marjane and Reza wait anxiously for the newspaper that publishes the names of accepted students. They both get in. Ecstatic, they get in Marjane's car and Reza puts his hand on Marjane's. This is all they can do; they can't kiss or hug in public since they're not married. When Marjane gets home, she tells her parents the good news. She notes that she still has to take the ideological test, but she thinks it'll be easy. Mom and Dad, however, set Marjane straight: she has to learn to pray in Arabic and learn Islamic philosophy. Though Marjane tries hard to study, she eventually just prays for help.

*Marjane begins to distinguish herself as a social butterfly. Going to so many parties does great things for Marjane's outlook—she meets more people who can help her feel like a part of a community. And connecting with Reza over their shared love of painting suggests that Marjane's defining characteristic in Tehran is no longer her stint in Vienna. She's an Iranian painter and can connect with other Iranian painters.*



*It's important to Marjane to reintegrate into Iranian culture. For her, this means finding a way to connect with the war she escaped. Though Reza allows Marjane to do this, it's also worth considering the implications of their differences. Aside from their shared love of painting, their interests and desires are wildly different, which raises serious questions about their compatibility. And moreover, neither Reza nor Marjane sees the other as a whole person—Marjane is an alluring Westerner to Reza, while Reza is a heroic soldier to Marjane.*



*Even though Marjane crafts a very pro-Iran drawing for her test, she draws on Western imagery to do so. This reflects how Marjane is figuring out how to combine her Western sensibilities with those of her home country. At this point, this works for her and makes her feel as though she can build a life in Iran. But Reza might also be correct—it's impossible to ignore the Iranian rules (like the veil) that Marjane consider repressive.*



*It may not seem that different from Vienna when Marjane and Reza can't be affectionate in public. However, it's worth remembering that in Iran, any public displays of affection could be dangerous for them—they're dealing with state-sanctioned Guardians of the Revolution, not just parents and landlords. The nature of the ideological test drives home how much Iran wants its young people to conform. When Marjane can't learn enough, it suggests she may struggle to conform.*



At Marjane's exam, the examiner asks her whether she wore a **veil** in Vienna and if she knows how to pray. Marjane answers truthfully: she didn't wear a veil because she thinks God would've made women bald if their hair was such an issue. She also prays in Persian instead of Arabic, since God is supposed to be within everyone and she wants to understand what she's saying. Several weeks later, she gets her acceptance letter. Later, she learns that her interviewer was impressed by her honesty. In Marjane's opinion, he's a "true religious man."

*Fortunately for Marjane, her budding belief that she needs to be true to herself doesn't disqualify her from attending college. As she experiences success here, Marjane begins to suspect that she won't have a hard time integrating into Iranian society. It may make her think that she can still flout tradition, as long as she finds people who are respectful of honesty and difference.*



## THE MAKEUP

Once Marjane and Reza pass the entrance exam, they become a "real couple." Now, they know they'll both stay in Iran until they're done with their studies. As they make this transition, though, Reza and Marjane start to pick on each other. Marjane accuses Reza of not being active enough, while Reza insists Marjane isn't elegant enough and doesn't wear enough **makeup**. To fix things, Marjane decides to make an effort and shows up to a date wearing heavy makeup. As she waits for Reza, though, she sees a car of Guardians of the Revolution and a bus—this means there will be a raid. Knowing the Guardians will arrest her for her lipstick, Marjane calls over a Guardian. She tells him that a man on the steps catcalled her. The Guardians take the man away. Marjane ignores the man's pleas for her to tell the truth.

*Having college figured out makes Marjane and Reza feel as though their future is assured. But with this comes a shift in their relationship as they stop trying so hard to impress each other. This is why they start to pick on each other. Marjane still wants to be loved and to avoid heartache, so she believes it's worth it to turn herself into someone she isn't in order to keep Reza around. This, though, has consequences: getting this man arrested to protect herself is cruel and self-serving.*



Reza arrives not long after and quips that Marjane's lipstick is too flashy. Marjane tells him about getting the man arrested to protect herself, which makes Reza laugh. He praises Marjane's "instinct for survival" and suggests they find another spot to hang out. For the reader, Marjane explains that it's very dangerous for unmarried couples to be together in public at this time. Guardians of the Revolution stop couples all the time, so married couples carry copies of their marriage licenses. If unmarried couples can't convince Guardians they're cousins, the Guardians arrest them. Then, Guardians call the woman's parents and demand the equivalent of a month's salary in exchange for her release—or they whip the woman.

*While Reza isn't wrong to note that Marjane acted to ensure her own survival, the fact still remains that Marjane's actions don't reflect well on her. And for that matter, Reza laughing at what Marjane did suggests he's not a particularly honorable person either. But within the context of the Guardians of the Revolution's power over the population, it's also important to recognize that Marjane is just trying to escape even more trauma and pain.*





Back in the story, Reza insists they're lucky. Their parents allow them to see each other in private; they don't *have* to risk being seen in public. He also notes that if they do ever get arrested, they just have to say they're engaged—their parents will willingly pay the fine. Suddenly, Marjane asks what will happen to the man the Guardians of the Revolution arrested. Reza says he'll probably just get a small punishment. However, the Guardians sometimes mess with people, so they might hang him. Reza tells Marjane about two of his male friends who, during a stop, told a Guardian that they “go out together.” The soldier beat them for being gay. Marjane and Reza spend more time inside after this, but Marjane feels suffocated. She and Reza begin to “close in on each other.”

When Marjane gets home, her grandmother is there. Marjane tells her grandmother about her trick to get the man arrested and laughs uproariously. Marjane's grandmother, however, is enraged. She calls Marjane a “selfish bitch” and reminds her of all their family members who spent time in prison or were executed for their ideals. Marjane, she insists, has no concept of integrity. After her grandmother storms out, Marjane looks at herself in the mirror. This is the first time her grandmother has ever yelled at her—and she wants it to be the last time.

## THE CONVOCATION

Marjane starts school in September of 1989. She's very excited. On the way to school, she and Reza discuss whether they can tell anyone they're dating. Reza insists they can't; they'll both be kicked out. Marjane tells the reader that Reza is exaggerating, but only a little—the university *does* separate men from women, though people still try to flirt from across the room. As Marjane sits in on her first art history class, she realizes that many of her classmates took the prep courses together. In his lecture, the male professor insists that Arab art and architecture is actually “art of the Islamic empire.” Marjane finds it funny that the new regime is just as senselessly patriotic as the old one.

Over lunch, Marjane gets to know her female classmates. She thinks they're very funny until they say that Reza is cute. Two classmates though, Shouka and Niyooosha, introduce themselves. Niyooosha teases Marjane about having lived abroad—she can tell Marjane hasn't been in Iran long by the way she wears her **veil**. To the reader, Marjane explains that arranging one's veil is a science. She also shares that two years after this moment, Niyooosha's future husband forbade her from spending time with Marjane—in his eyes, Marjane is amoral.

*Reza's offhand, unconcerned tone when he talks about the man's arrest suggests that Reza has become numb to the atrocities the Guardians of the Revolution commit. Even though he acknowledges that the Guardians sometimes dole out punishments that are too harsh for the supposed crime, he doesn't think he and Marjane need to worry. Their affluent, liberal-minded parents will save them—and so they should just consider themselves lucky. Reza's inability to see how awful this is may contribute to Marjane's increasing unhappiness in their relationship.*



*It's likely Marjane is trying to do what Kia did with his joke and find humor in a humorless situation. But while Kia's joke is a way for powerless soldiers to bond, Marjane's “joke” just exposes her own lack of integrity. Marjane's grandmother, meanwhile, insists that Marjane can't fight oppression by oppressing others. She has to hold onto her ideals and her kindness.*



*Possibly because Marjane has spent more time in Europe (where she wasn't hearing and internalizing Iranian propaganda), it's easier for her to recognize the current regime's hypocrisy. Marjane's perspective situates her as an outsider, even as she seems to integrate into the student body. Meanwhile, Marjane also makes it clear that the regime's controls aren't as effective as the regime thinks they are. For instance, men and women still flirt with each other, even if they're not supposed to.*



*Making friends with Shouka and Niyooosha helps Marjane feel more at home while she's at school. Even if she can't admit that she and Reza are together, she can still find a sense of belonging among other classmates. The fact that Marjane struggles to wear her veil suggests that she's still an outsider and that she still chafes under the regime's rules.*



At this time, women gain a bit more freedom every year. **Veils** slowly shorten and women show increasingly more hair. Marjane learns to tell what a woman looks like under her veil, and she can tell how progressive women are by how much skin they show. When she gets home after her first day, Marjane is thrilled that her grandmother is there. Her grandmother gives Marjane a gift: a cotton headscarf so she doesn't get too hot. Marjane thinks at first that her grandmother forgave her, but her grandmother hasn't.

A week later, Marjane's new friends trick her into admitting she's dating Reza. The director interrupts their conversation, however, to announce a required meeting at the main campus for all students. The main campus is far more repressive than the art college; for instance, there are separate staircases for men and women at the auditorium. One of Marjane's friends explains that this is so male students can't ogle female students' bottoms as they climb stairs. When all the students are seated, a man lectures them on their "moral and religious conduct." He says that they must honor the martyrs. Women must do this by wearing longer headscarves, narrower pants, and by not wearing **makeup**.

When the speaker takes questions, Marjane stands up and notes that art students need to be able to move around. It's much harder to move freely in a long headscarf. Further, she points out that wide trousers obscure a woman's shape better than narrower ones—but wide trousers are in style right now. Marjane asks if their religion is just against fashion. Then, she says that the male students can wear tight clothes that excite women, and yet those male students supposedly lose control over a bit less headscarf. After the lecture, the Islamic Commission of the university summons Marjane.

Marjane speaks with the man who administered her entrance exam. He tells her that the **veil** is a necessary part of their religion but asks her to design uniforms for the art college. Marjane's design has a shorter headscarf and wide trousers. After this, Marjane and her grandmother make up. Marjane's grandmother reminds Marjane that fear turns people into cowards without consciences. With this, Marjane regains her dignity and is happy with herself for the first time in a long time.

*Marjane and her classmates resist in some of the only ways they can. They technically follow the rules, but only enough to avoid negative attention. Even if Marjane's grandmother is disgusted with Marjane's actions, she still cares about her granddaughter. She understands that being disappointed is enough—she doesn't have to neglect Marjane to make her point.*



*As Marjane describes the art campus versus the main campus, it becomes clear that the art school is a bubble of progressivism in Tehran. Though the art department technically follows the rules by separating male and female students, Marjane also probably feels more at home there than she does elsewhere on campus. It's telling that the speaker supposedly addresses all students—but he narrows in on how women dress. His goal seems to control women, not just honor the martyrs.*



*Again, possibly because Marjane has more practice thinking critically than her peers, she feels more comfortable pointing out the hypocrisy in the speaker's message. However, while she may be able to get away with speaking out in the privacy of her home or in Vienna, Tehran isn't as forgiving. Marjane could suffer violence or death for speaking out too boldly—and other women presumably choose to stay silent to stay safe.*



*Even though Marjane believes that this man's views on women are still oppressive, he's still willing to treat Marjane like a human being as they talk. Tasking her with designing new uniforms helps Marjane feel useful and as though she's able to rebel safely. Making up with her grandmother thanks to this also helps Marjane feel like she can fit in in Iran.*



## THE SOCKS

In the art college, male and female students have separate studios. Students used to draw nudes for figure drawing, but now, their female models wear **veils**. Marjane's class thus learns how to draw drapery. Male models are easier. Though they're clothed, it's at least possible to tell that they *have* limbs. One night, Marjane stays late to draw a male model. A supervisor interrupts Marjane's drawing and notes that she's not allowed to look at men—it's against the moral code. If she wants to draw a man, she has to draw him while looking away. Marjane encounters absurd situations like this often. One afternoon, as she rushes to catch the bus, Guardians of the Revolution yell at her to stop. They tell her that when she runs, her bottom makes "obscene" movements. Marjane shouts at them to not look.

Early in the 1980s, the government imprisoned and executed a number of high school and college students. Out of fear, Marjane and her classmates avoid talking about politics. These days, anything is enough of a pretense to arrest a woman—some are arrested for showing their wrists or laughing loudly. Marjane even gets arrested for wearing red socks. The regime understands that if women are preoccupied with what they're wearing, they don't have time to think deeply about their freedoms or the current political situation. Marjane notes that this is understandable—fear robs people of their ability to analyze a situation, and dictators use this to their advantage.

Though Marjane's classmates rebel by showing a bit of hair or wearing makeup, she discovers that her classmates aren't as rebellious as they seem. One day, she drops her pencil case and her birth control pills fall out. A classmate helps her clean up her things and shares that she also takes the pill. It helps with her irregular periods. Marjane says she takes it because she and her boyfriend have sex, which attracts the attention of everyone in the room. One woman tells Marjane she's being indecent, but Marjane argues that what she does with her body is her business. To the reader, Marjane explains that the woman is probably just frustrated because she's forbidden to have sex. And despite the woman's "rebellious" **makeup** and visible hair, she's "acting like the state" because she's repressed. After this, many students shun Marjane.

*Nude figure drawing is an important part of an arts education. Requiring that models be clothed (or veiled) shows that the Iranian government is more interested in promoting their religious ideas than they are in educating their students. This may start to make Marjane think that she needs to leave Iran if she really wants to receive an education in art. Even aside from this, though, Marjane makes it clear that female students often face oppression for silly reasons, which makes them more anxious about how they look and feel less safe in their day-to-day lives.*



*Persepolis 2 makes it clear that controlling a population isn't hard if everything a person does can be punishable by arrest. Women, Marjane shows, live in constant fear that they'll be arrested for existing—which means they spend their time worrying about how they look to others instead of worrying about their schoolwork. Simply because of this fact, it's likely that Marjane and her female classmates aren't getting the most out of their education—these arrests seem designed to distract them from schoolwork.*



*This fight with her classmates throws Marjane's Western values into sharp relief. Though Marjane declares that her body is hers, her classmates show that they think their repressive society should have more of a say in how women conduct their lives and bodies. In this way, Marjane's classmates actively support the repressive regime they purport to hate. The Guardians of the Revolution would have no way of knowing that Marjane is having sex—but they don't have to if civilians can step in and shame Marjane. This speaks to a widespread culture of fear and shame.*



Fortunately, Marjane slowly makes friends with those who don't shun her. They begin gathering to model for and draw each other. Their professor is thrilled with their drawings. Over time, Marjane becomes increasingly aware of the divide between public life and private life. In private, people drink, dance, have sex, and have homosexual relationships. Leading two disparate lives is hard to deal with emotionally. To compensate, Marjane and her friends party nearly every night. But the Guardians of the Revolution still arrest them out of their own homes. Everyone is terrified the first time, but they soon get used to it, and their parents always bail them out. Because of these arrests, partying gets expensive fast.

One night, the Guardians of the Revolution arrive to break up a party. The female partygoers pour alcohol down the toilet and pull on their **veils** as fast as they can. Male guests run to the roof and sprint away across the city. When the Guardians of the Revolution enter the apartment, they chase after the men. The Guardians shoot one man and arrest the women. When Dad comes to get Marjane, he starts to suggest she stop partying. But because he knows it's important to let Marjane make her own choices, he doesn't finish. The next day, all Marjane's friends gather at her house. They're angry and terrified, but they decide to throw another party in defiance.

## THE WEDDING

By 1991, things settle down. Marjane is in her second year of college, is madly in love with Reza, and has tempered her Western ideals. Her friends have relaxed their traditional views too, so many of them are now coupled. It's very difficult to be a couple and to be unmarried. Marjane and Reza can't get hotel rooms or rent an apartment together without a marriage certificate. After a real estate agent suggests they get married, Reza asks Marjane to marry him, though neither of them feel ready. Marjane asks for time to think and goes home to talk to Dad, since Mom is away. Dad points out that the only way for Marjane to get to know Reza is to live with him, and that's only possible if they're married. He and Marjane acknowledge that she can always get a divorce.

*These friends help Marjane discover where she fits into Iranian society. She may not be able to connect with all of her classmates, but there are some who feel just as repressed as she does. Partying and gathering together gives these students a way to connect and express themselves—though Marjane makes it clear that only being able to express oneself in private is emotionally taxing. In this sense, the divide between one's private and public life becomes another source of trauma.*



*Though Dad cares deeply for Marjane's safety, he also understands that she's an adult. It's important to him that she be allowed to make her own decisions, which is why he doesn't forbid her from partying. This speaks to the changing nature of Marjane's relationships with her parents. She's no longer a child that they need to control and protect—her opinions and desires matter just as much as theirs do.*



*Two years into school, Marjane is beginning to feel more comfortable. She notes that all her classmates have relaxed and moved toward the middle in terms of liberal versus conservative views. This could be because their education helps them see how repressive Iran is—and that Marjane might have some good points. Regardless, Iran's strict rules about what couples can and can't do have major consequences. Even though Marjane knows she's not ready to get married, it seems like her only option if she wants to live like a normal, independent adult.*



Ultimately, Marjane decides to get married. Dad takes Marjane and Reza out for dinner so they can all talk about it. After dinner, Dad gives Reza three conditions if he wants to marry Marjane. First, Reza must give Marjane the right to divorce (women only have this right if their husbands agree when they sign the marriage certificate). Then, Reza has to promise to take Marjane to Europe after they graduate; Dad promises to support them financially. Dad's last condition is that they should only stay together as long as they're happy. Years later, Dad shares with Marjane that he always knew she and Reza would get divorced. But he thought it was important for Marjane to figure that out on her own.

After this, Marjane calls Mom, who's visiting a sibling in Vancouver. Unlike Dad, Mom is aghast and insists they'll revisit the conversation when she gets home. Dad assures Marjane that he'll talk to Mom. By the time Mom gets home, she's fully supportive of the wedding and throws herself into planning. She drags Marjane all over Tehran to shop for dresses, pick out flowers, and try hairstyles. At one point, Marjane asks Dad for a small party, but Dad points out that Marjane is his only child. This is their chance to throw a party and celebrate. Eventually, Marjane gives in. Her parents invite 400 guests and hire two bands.

Marjane and Reza have a ceremony with a mullah first. Then, they follow Iranian traditions by having a married woman rub sugar loaves over their head and by sucking honey off of each other's fingers. Next, they open gifts. Marjane notices that Mom is absent from the festivities and finally finds her crying in the bathroom. Mom sobs that she wants Marjane to be independent and educated, not get married at 21. Marjane begs Mom to trust her. The party goes on for hours. At 2:00 a.m, Marjane and Reza finally go home to their new apartment. As soon as the door closes, Marjane regrets getting married. She's always wanted to subvert expectations and doesn't think she can do that as a married woman. It's too late to go back, though. Marjane feels trapped.

In addition to Marjane's identity crisis, Reza becomes a problem. They begin arguing immediately and lead separate social lives. Marjane says that in retrospect, she knew it wasn't going to work, but she needed to feel loved after her debacle in Vienna. To keep their marriage going, Marjane agrees with everything Reza says. She even gets blue contacts when he says he likes light eyes. Within a month of their wedding, they set up separate bedrooms and stop going out together. Since so many consider them a model couple, it's hard to admit that they're failing. So they pretend to be in love in public, but they fight and insult each other daily in private.

*It's significant that Dad is the one to lay down the law with Reza. Even if Dad accepts Marjane as an adult, he still knows that Iranian law doesn't see Marjane as a fully capable person all on her own. Instead, it falls on him as her father—the man currently responsible for her—to make sure that Reza will treat her well and respect her autonomy. Though this may make it seem like Dad doesn't truly respect Marjane as an adult, it's something Dad has to do to make sure that Marjane doesn't sign away any power she has.*



*Dad makes the case that the wedding isn't just about Marjane and Reza. Rather, it's about their families and gives Mom and Dad an opportunity to express their pride in their only daughter. When Marjane backs down and accepts the big wedding, she essentially accepts her parents' autonomy and agrees to the fact that their opinions are valid. This is a mark of Marjane's maturity and her changing relationship with her parents.*



*Mom has this meltdown because she sees getting married as something that will trap Marjane. It doesn't matter to her that Reza presumably agreed to Dad's conditions—the fact remains that Marjane will now have to defer to another person when she makes decisions about her life. Once she gets home, Marjane realizes that Mom is right: getting married feels oppressive and wrong. This is mostly because Marjane felt she had no choice but to get married if she wanted to lead an independent life with Reza.*



*As Marjane and Reza's marriage crumbles, society's customs and expectations keep them from pursuing a divorce, which might make them happy. Iranian culture, Marjane shows, forces people to make choices they wouldn't normally make to fit in and seem normal—but behind closed doors, those people suffer as a result of their choices. With this, Marjane illustrates that suffering can take many forms and often isn't visible to those on the outside.*



## THE SATELLITE

The same year that Marjane and Reza get married, Iraq attacks Kuwait. Iranians aren't surprised or concerned; they think it serves Kuwait right for supporting Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War. As expected, though, many Kuwaitis immigrate to Iran. Identifying them is easy, as many drive fancy, modern cars. One day, while Marjane is walking on the sidewalk and drinking a soda, a Kuwaiti man offers her money for sex. She throws her soda at him. Later, one of Marjane's uncles explains to her that Kuwaiti women are oppressed to the point that Kuwaiti men can't conceive that a woman walking with a soda is anything but a prostitute. One afternoon, Marjane and Dad watch the news. Europeans are panicking about the conflict and worry the Iraqis will come for them. Marjane and Dad laugh.

Mom walks in as Dad and Marjane laugh. Marjane explains what they saw on the news, but Mom reminds Marjane that Iranian media isn't trustworthy—it makes anti-Western propaganda whenever possible. In response, Marjane points out that Western media isn't reliable either; it paints Iranians as terrorists and fundamentalists. Mom says it's still hard to know which side to choose. She hates Saddam Hussein and sympathizes with the Kuwaitis, but she also detests the allies who only get involved for oil. Dad adds that allies fought in Afghanistan for a decade, but no one cares because Afghanistan is poor. Worst of all, other countries are intervening in the current conflict because of human rights issues, but it's unclear what people they care about.

For the reader, Marjane explains that thinking about the war in this way wasn't common at this time. Most Iranians were just happy the conflict wasn't happening in Iran—and were thrilled that other countries were fighting Iraq. Now that Iran isn't in the middle of a war, people sleep peacefully. Rationing is a thing of the past, and since all the political protesters were executed, there's no opposition. The regime has total control over the country. And many people just want to be happy, so they forget "their political conscience." When Marjane isn't with her parents, she's like this, too. One day, though, one of her friends installs a satellite antenna. This allows Marjane and her friends access to Western viewpoints. Soon, most people with means, including Marjane's parents, have a satellite. They cover them during the day to hide them from the government.

*Learning about how Kuwait oppresses its women likely makes Marjane feel as though she has it pretty good in Iran—after all, she can walk down the street without incident most of the time. Seeing the Europeans panic over Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (in what becomes known as the Gulf War) shows Marjane and Dad that the Europeans have no idea of what's actually going on in the region. They erroneously believe that all Middle Eastern countries brimming with terrorists. To Marjane and Dad, this is ridiculous and makes them feel superior.*



*The allies that Marjane and her parents mention are likely the United States, which intervened in Iraq during the Gulf War. As far as Marjane's parents are concerned, allies like the United States don't actually care much about the people in the Middle East and instead care about oil and money. In other words, Dad seems to propose that Westerners cherry pick what suffering to care about when it comes to the Middle East.*



*The way that Marjane describes Iranians' views on the conflict mirrors her own thinking when she got the man arrested at the bazaar in order to divert attention off herself. She figured that anything was worth it if she didn't get arrested and hurt—and now that Iranians aren't suffering, they feel the same way about other countries. By drawing these parallels, Marjane encourages readers to see that this line of thinking is common. But by condemning people who think this way, Marjane also makes the case that people should interrogate this kind of thinking.*



Once Marjane's parents get a satellite, Marjane spends most of her days on their sofa watching TV. Dad takes issue with this and asks if Marjane's marriage is making her depressed. He says that she's not engaged or curious anymore. Marjane spits that she's a young married woman, but Dad snaps that it doesn't take "exceptional intellectual effort" to be married. He encourages her to focus on her degree. Enraged, Marjane storms out. Deep down, she knows her father is right. All of her friends are getting married. Some marry American Iranians, others marry wealthy old men, and the lucky ones marry rich young men. A few actually love their new husbands. After listening to several classmates discuss marriage prospects, Marjane apologizes to Dad. He promptly checks out several books from the library for Marjane.

Marjane likes the books Dad gets for her and starts spending more time with older intellectuals. Once a month, she attends meetings at a Dr. M's home. There, people discuss that if Mossadegh had been able to finish reforming Iran in the 1950s, the country wouldn't be in such a sorry state today. Everyone agrees that to move forward, Iran has to admit its mistakes. Marjane mostly listens during these meetings and uses her learnings to change her life. She realizes once again that it's essential that people educate themselves.

## THE END

At the end of Marjane and Reza's fourth year of college, in 1993, the head of the department calls them to his office. The department head says that Marjane and Reza are his best students, so he has a special final project for them. He wants them to design a theme park based on Iran's mythological heroes. Reza and Marjane are so excited by the project that they agree to work together. They don't fight at all during the seven months they spend working. Over the summer, Marjane and Reza spend all their time in libraries, museums, and speaking with researchers. They design attractions, restaurants, and hotels. Finally, graduation arrives. Dr. M and Marjane's parents admire the designs.

Marjane defends their **thesis** alone. She and Reza get full marks and afterwards, one man on the committee suggests that Marjane propose the project to the mayor's office. Marjane gets turned away from her appointment with the mayor's deputy twice for wearing an inappropriate headscarf and for wearing **makeup**. When Marjane finally gets to present their project, the deputy points out that half of the figures Marjane portrays are women without veils. It's impossible, he suggests, to tweak the project to adhere to the moral code. Moreover, he explains that the government only cares about religious symbols, not Iranian mythology.

*As Marjane sees all her friends and classmates getting married for the sake of getting married, she sees that Dad is right: one doesn't have to be intelligent or engaged to be married. When Marjane notices that she's little different from her friends in this sense, it's easier for her to admit that she's wrong. And with this, Marjane refocuses on her education and figuring out who she is. It's no longer enough for her to try to escape her unhappy marriage by watching TV—the only way through is to dedicate her time to bettering herself.*



*Mossadegh was the Iranian prime minister who nationalized Iran's oil industry in the 1950s. By looking back at Iran's history, Marjane comes to a better understanding of where she fits into Iranian society. Now, she understands the importance of taking an interest in her country's past and culture—looking at it critically helps her combine her Western sensibilities with her Iranian pride.*



*When Marjane and Reza have a project to focus on, they don't have as much time to spend picking on each other. This offers some hope for their marriage and a possible path forward. If Marjane and Reza can come up with more projects like this one and put their combined talents to work, they may come to enjoy their marriage. The project itself also helps Marjane combine her Western and Iranian identities and feel proud of her culture.*



*Marjane's meeting with the mayor's deputy makes it clear that she can't make a life for herself in Iran—the kind of art she wants to make isn't the kind of art that Iran appreciates. This begins to suggest that if Marjane wants to pursue her art, she'll need to do so outside of Iran. And since Marjane's art is what makes her happy, the novel also suggests that Marjane will need to do whatever it takes to find fulfillment through her art.*



Later that afternoon, Marjane meets up with Farnaz, a childhood friend. Marjane shares that she thinks she and Reza will separate now that their project won't go any further. Farnaz asks if Marjane still loves Reza and then says that her sister got divorced last year. As soon as she was divorced, every man she saw, from the butcher to beggars on the street, wanted to sleep with her. To them, divorced women aren't virgins and so have no reason to refuse sex. Farnaz also says that men think their penises are irresistible. She tells Marjane to stay with Reza as long as her life isn't unbearable.

This conversation disturbs Marjane. She realizes she doesn't love Reza anymore and rushes home to tell him, but she visits her grandmother instead. Through tears, Marjane says she has something horrible to say and tells her grandmother she wants a divorce. Her grandmother is relieved; she thought someone died. Marjane's grandmother says that she got divorced 51 years ago, when *no one* got divorced. Even then, she knew she'd be happier by herself than "with a shitmaker." Marjane begins to smile through her tears as her grandmother gives her more advice. Her grandmother says that first marriages are practice rounds for second marriages. She also points out that Marjane doesn't have to get divorced right away—she can get divorced whenever she's ready.

Marjane takes her grandmother's advice. She gets a job as an illustrator for a magazine and adores her colleagues. The first few months are happy, but then, in March 1994, an illustrator draws a cartoon that labels a mullah as an assassin. The government arrests the illustrator and begins examining cartoons and the press more closely. Days later, Marjane learns that one of her coworkers was arrested for a cartoon portraying a bearded man. Her coworker is released two weeks later. When Marjane and a colleague, Gila, go to visit their coworker, they listen to his story of being beaten for exercising his freedom of expression. The man's wife gets home with their son. Though Marjane and Gila try to engage his wife in conversation, their coworker speaks over his wife and clearly controls every aspect of her life.

In the car on the way home, Marjane snaps that she can't believe she idolized their coworker for being arrested when he's so horrible to his wife. Gila insists that it's *all* men, not just Iranian men. She used to date a Spanish diplomat who was just as terrible. Marjane, however, points out that in Iran, every law takes the man's side. A man who murders someone in front of women won't be convicted, since women can't testify. Even if men do allow women to divorce them, the man gets custody of any children. Marjane realizes she wants to leave Iran.

*As far as Farnaz is concerned, it's fairly normal for women to find themselves in unhappy marriages. But she holds these views because the alternative seems so much worse. In recounting this conversation, Marjane implies that Iran offers women choices that seem to give them no chance at real happiness. By creating situations like this, Iran keeps women oppressed and in pain.*



*Readers might expect Marjane's grandmother to be more conservative, given her age. But instead, Marjane's grandmother is able to give Marjane the gift of familial support, and she's also living proof that divorce isn't the end of the world. Marjane's impending divorce then marks another shift in her relationships with her family. Now, all of Marjane's family members view her as a competent, trustworthy adult capable of making her own decisions. This recognition brings them all closer together.*



*In the professional world, Marjane becomes even more aware of her government's oppressive policies and censorship attempts. Though at first this makes Marjane feel like her job is even more important than ever—she has to stand up for her rights and those of other illustrators—it's impossible to ignore how frightening this situation is for Marjane and her coworkers. Then, it's disturbing for Marjane to see her imprisoned coworker treat his wife so poorly.*



*While Gila may have experience to back up her claim that other men, not just Iranian ones, are awful, Marjane emphasizes that it's impossible to ignore the laws that place men above women in Iran. The country is set up to favor men while silencing and oppressing women—even when those women are victims or even innocent bystanders. This is the final straw for Marjane. She realizes she'll never feel at home in Iran when she'll never have the same rights as men.*





When Marjane gets home, Reza's sister is there. His sister is pregnant with her first child and quips that her son will need a cousin. Once his sister is gone, Reza laments that he and Marjane aren't a real couple. Marjane agrees. She says they're still together out of habit and because they won't admit their failures. Reza says he's still in love with Marjane, but Marjane isn't in love with him anymore. When Reza suggests they go to France, Marjane says it's a waste of time to keep working on their marriage. A few days later, Marjane tells her parents she's going to France—alone. Dad says he knew all along that Marjane and Reza would divorce. This annoys Mom, but Dad says Marjane had to make the mistakes herself.

Dad tells Marjane that he and Mom are very happy for her. He insists Marjane can't live in Iran. The country has suffered too many setbacks as a result of the revolution, and Marjane doesn't need constant supervision anymore. Marjane prepares to leave the country. She first goes to Strasbourg to take entrance exams for the school of decorative arts. Then she returns to Iran to sort out her visa. In her last few months in Iran, Marjane wanders the mountains every morning. She visits her grandfather's grave, her Uncle Anoosh's grave, and visits the Caspian Sea with her grandmother. Early in September, Marjane leaves Iran again. Dad cries and Mom makes Marjane promise not to come back. Marjane's grandmother is also there. After this departure, Marjane only sees her grandmother once more. Her grandmother dies in January of 1996. Freedom, Marjane says, has a price.

*Because Dad respects Marjane so much and believes it's important to treat her like an adult, he wanted to allow her to make this mistake on her own. And especially since he made Reza promise to treat Marjane well, Dad probably felt assured that Marjane wouldn't suffer too badly as a result of her failed marriage. Marjane's choice to divorce marks her final coming-of-age moment. Now, she's a truly independent woman—and will be even more independent once she leaves Iran.*



*Though Marjane's story ends with her relationships with her family stronger than ever, the note about Marjane's grandmother's death makes it clear that these strong, adult relationships can't last forever. Inevitably, parents and grandparents get old and pass away. Even though Marjane's parents and grandmother are certainly aware of this, it's still important to them to encourage Marjane to seek a better life for herself in Europe. In this sense, they remain guardians long after Marjane is an adult. Marjane's final lesson is that her personal happiness may come at the expense of seeing her family regularly—but her happiness is more important to her family than having her nearby and miserable.*





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