

## CHARACTERS

**MICHAEL (MYNAH)**, an eleven year old boy en route to England aboard the ocean liner *Oronsay*  
**CASSIUS** and **RAMADHIN**, his two boy companions  
**MISS LASQUETI**, tablemate and likely spinster  
**MAX MAZAPPA**, tablemate and jazz pianist  
**MR. NEVIL**, tablemate and retire ship dismantler  
**LARRY DANIELS**, tablemate and botanist

**MR. GUNESEKERA**, tablemate and tailor  
**EMILY de SARAM**, passenger; Michael's distant cousin  
**ANSUTHA**, passenger; she is deaf and a former acrobat  
**SUNIL, THE HYDERABAD MIND**, of the Jankla Troupe  
**FLAVIA PRINS**, passenger; friend of Michael's uncle  
**MR. HASTIE**, the ship's kennel master  
**MASSI**, Ramadhin's sister and (later) Michael's wife

## PLOT

In the first chapter, the only portion narrated in the third person, the boy is driven by anonymous relatives to the port, where he climbs aboard the ship without saying goodbye. The narrator then assumes the first-person voice and introduces Flavia Prins, an acquaintance of his uncle, the only adult supervising him on the *Oronsay*, though she is traveling in First Class. Michael is assigned to eat in "the least privileged place" in the dining room, the Cat's Table, farthest from the Captain's Table. There he meets Cassius and Ramadhin, two other boys near his age, also traveling unattended. The adults at the table are some of the novel's central characters. Mr. Mazappa, a troubled pianist, teaches the boys bawdy songs and facts. Mr. Nevil, a ship dismantler who carries blueprints of the *Oronsay* with him, shows the boys around the ship as he does safety research.

Michael (nicknamed Mynah) learns that a seventeen-year-old cousin, Emily, is on the boat. He forms a quick friendship with "quiet Ramadhin and the exuberant Cassius." At nights they spy on an anonymous prisoner who is brought out on the deck for exercise after most passengers have retired. Flavia Prins tells Michael the prisoner is rumored to have killed a judge. Ramadhin regularly wakes Michael before dawn and the three boys sneak up to the First Class deck to swim and steal food. They agree to do at least one thing that was forbidden each day.

Mr. Daniels, a botanist who eats at the Cat's Table and has a crush on Michael's cousin, Emily, wrestles and plays with the boys; Michael lies to him that Emily likes theatre. Daniels talks with the Jankla Troupe, acrobats and illusionists who include The Hyderabad Mind (Sunil). Daniels takes the boys down to the hold to show them his garden full of exotic plants growing under lights and misters. Daniels shares an "unusual beedi" (a type of cigarette) with them, after which they cause havoc in the swimming pool. The boys find an empty turbine room to sleep in during afternoons so they can continue prowling at night, and Michael sees Sunil alone on deck with his cousin Emily.

The ship's most prominent passenger is Sir Hector de Silva, a philanthropist cursed by a priest he insulted and traveling to England (with two doctors and an ayurvedic) in hopes of being cured of rabies. Mr. Nevil tells Michael more about ship dismantling, saying that after being salvaged, the materials are "reborn" as new products. Miss Lasqueti, another member of the Cat's Table, sleeps a great deal, avoids the sun, and carries some of her twenty-plus pigeons in a coat with padded pockets. Asuntha is a deaf girl whom Sunil takes care of and Emily befriends.

A man known as Baron C. recruits Michael to slip through stateroom transoms, body slicked with oil, to let him in to burglarize. When they enter Sir Hector de Silva's room Michael notes the contrast between a metal bust of the knight and the comatose man himself lying on the bed. The Baron steals a portrait of the man's daughter.

After a film screening on deck is cut short by a storm, Cassius and Michael persuade Ramadhin to tie them to the deck with ropes. After some hours surviving the lashing waves, they are discovered and rescued by the crew. When reprimanded by the captain, Cassius claims someone in masks had tied them there.

The ship lands for a day at Aden, and only men and the children in their care are permitted six hours ashore. The boys convince Mr. Daniels to escort them but quickly ditch him, returning just in time with Mr. Daniels and Emily, who has come ashore wearing a fake mustache. Ramadhin has smuggled aboard a small dog. The next morning the little dog escapes into first class and bites Sir Hector de Silva's throat, killing him, then disappears. The captain blames Mr. Hastie for the dog bite that killed de Silva, demoting the kennel master to maintenance. The boys resume watching the prisoner's nighttime walks, and Emily tells Michael the man's name is Niemeyer.

De Silva is buried at sea just before the *Oronsay* approaches the Suez Canal. It enters the channel at midnight; Michael and Cassius stay up all night watching the passage from the railing, fascinated by the flurry of activity under electric lights: paperwork scribbled and flung aboard, cargo loaded on and off. Though Michael never sees Cassius again after the voyage, years later in London he visits an exhibit of Cassius' paintings and realizes that they were all depictions of what the boys saw that night in the Canal, painted from their perspective on the railing.

Years later, Michael returns to London for Ramadhin's funeral, finding that his friend died in a questionable situation, apparently smitten with a fourteen-year-old girl he was tutoring. Michael reflects on his own "cold heart," saying he remains aloof even from those he loves. After the funeral Michael spends time with Ramadhin's sister Massi, and they eventually marry. The marriage does not last.

Mr. Daniels organizes a dinner party in his garden in the hold for the Cat's Table members and Emily, Asuntha, and the ayurvedic. We now learn Asuntha's background: her father, the prisoner Niemeyer, was an active criminal, rarely home, and her mother went insane. After visiting her father in prison, the girl walked until she found her Aunt Pacipia camped out with a circus troupe, which the girl joined. Some years later, Sunil was present when Asuntha, now seventeen, struck her head during an acrobatic fall and lost her hearing. Sunil later found her at Niemeyer's trial, and she committed her life to his cause. One night, as the boys hide in a lifeboat, they hear bits of conversation between Emily and Sunil-- enough to realize they are plotting something. We learn that two officials, an Englishman named Giggs and an incognito Sri Lankan named Perera, are aboard to guard against the prisoner's escape. Cassius and Michael think they see Miss Lasqueti with a small pistol. Cassius and Michael again hide in a lifeboat and overhear Emily talking with a man who says he is Perera. Emily sounds drowsy; a scuffle ensues, and when they climb out of the boat later they find a man's body. The next day not even a bloodstain is left on the deck. Michael visits Emily, who seems drugged and unaware of who Perera was.

That night when the prisoner comes out for his walk, he grabs one of the guards and threatens to break his neck; this forces both guards to unchain the man's neck and legs, leaving only his hands shackled. As the moon comes out, Asuntha steps from the shadows, and then the night watchman discovers the scene. Niemeyer grabs his daughter and runs to the stern railing. Giggs, the English official, fires a pistol into the air and lights come on. Giggs aims at the prisoner and demands that he put the girl down; all eyes are on him and Niemeyer when another shot is fired, hitting Giggs, who drops his gun. Michael follows Emily's eyes and catches a glimpse of Miss Lasqueti tossing something overboard. Then the prisoner, still holding his daughter, jumps into the Mediterranean.

Michael reunites with Emily after fifteen years. Divorced, she has retired to a solitary cabin in British Columbia. Michael asks about her role in the prisoner's escape, but she seems reluctant to discuss it. She does reveal that Perera was posing as the tailor, Mr. Gunsekera. Emily had always assumed she had killed Perera but now is uncertain. She is not sure if Asuntha died, but she had in her mouth the key to Niemeyer's manacles.

Upon docking in the Thames, the boys leave the ship and each other without a farewell. Michael finds his mother and Emily says a brief goodbye.

### **MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS**

#### **Maturity**

- That which has come before shapes that which follows.
- Personal identity is formed by the appropriation of the knowledge and formative experiences.
- Who we are is largely contingent on where we come from and who we encounter. In this way we remain connected to the past, even to events from long ago.

#### **Truth**

- Truth is not that which is obvious and apparent.
- Understanding requires exploration of hidden or submerged places.
- Even then, truth is contingent upon understanding and interpretation.
- Thus, meaning reveals and re-invents itself through this process of exploration and interpretation.

#### **Memory**

- The dividing line between past and present is not as sharp as it might appear.
- The boundary between memory and imagination is similarly fluid, though its unreliability does not make it less valuable.
- We are the sum of the narratives we tell about ourselves, and these stories continue to change and accrue additional meanings.

#### **Power**

- Power is exercised both overtly (often through rank and privilege) and covertly (often by those who seem weakest).
- Transgression subverts power in subtle ways, highlighting the often hollow nature of authority.
- The exercise of overt authority and force is ultimately less powerful and durable than the authentic connections one forms with others.