

made of carved sandalwood beside my bed, in which, long ago in India, my father's mother used to store the ground areca nuts¹² she ate after her morning bath. It was my only memento of a grandmother I had never known, and until Mr. Pirzada came to our lives I could find nothing to put inside it. Every so often before brushing my teeth and laying out my clothes for school the next day, I opened the lid of the box and ate one of his treats. **G**

That night, like every night, we did not eat at the dining table, because it did not provide an unobstructed view of the television set. Instead we huddled around the coffee table, without conversing, our plates perched on the edges of
180 our knees. From the kitchen my mother brought forth the succession of dishes: lentils¹³ with fried onions, green beans with coconut, fish cooked with raisins in a yogurt sauce. I followed with the water glasses, and the plate of lemon wedges, and the chili peppers, purchased on monthly trips to Chinatown and stored by the pound in the freezer, which they liked to snap open and crush into their food.

Before eating Mr. Pirzada always did a curious thing. He took out a plain silver watch without a band, which he kept in his breast pocket, held it briefly to one of his tufted ears, and wound it with three swift flicks of his thumb and

G **THEME AND CHARACTER**

Consider the way Lilia cares for the gifts she receives from Mr. Pirzada. Why are they special to her?

12. **areca** (ə-rē'kə) **nuts**: seeds of the betel palm, chewed as a stimulant.

13. **lentils**: cooked seeds of a beanlike plant native to southwest Asia, a staple in Indian and Pakistani cuisine.

