*Read through the short story and annotate it as you go. Think about the following: structure, organization, syntax, themes, antagonist, connections to The Kite Runner, etc.*

“There’s no getting away from it,” said old Mr. Karas. “If a man were to rummage through his past, he’d find material in it for a whole different set of lives. One day, either by mistake or because he felt like it, he chose just one of them and went on with it to the end; but the worst of it is that those other lives, the ones he might have lived, are not entirely dead. And sometimes it happens that you feel a pain in them, like a leg that’s been cut off.

“When I was a boy of about ten, I began to collect stamps. My father didn’t altogether approve of it; he thought it'd make me neglect my lessons, but I had a pal, Lojzik Cepelka, and we used to share our passion for foreign stamps. Lojzik’s father used to play a barrel-organ, Lojzik was a messy kid with freckles, as unkempt as a sparrow, a regular ragamuffin, but I was fond of him, in the way that schoolboys are fond of a friend. You know, I’m an old man; I’ve had a wife and children; yet I have to say that none of our feelings are finer than friendship. But you’re only capable of it when you’re young; later on, you get sort of crusty and selfish. A friendship of the sort I’m telling about springs simply and solely from enthusiasm and admiration, from excess of vitality, from abundance and overflow of emotion; you’ve got so much of it that you simply have to give it away to somebody. My father was a lawyer, the chief man among the local bigwigs, a most dignified and severe person, and I palled around with Lojzik, whose father was a drunken organ-grinder and whose mother was a downtrodden laundress, and yet I venerated and idolized Lojzik, because he was smarter than me, because he could shift for himself and was as plucky as they make them, because he had freckles on his nose and could throw stones left-handed——in fact, I can’t remember all the things that made me so attached to him; but it was certainly the closest attachment I’ve ever had.

“And so Lojzik was my trusty comrade when I began to collect stamps. Somebody once said that only men have the collecting instinct, and it is true. I suppose that the craze for collecting things must be the survival of an instinct dating back to the times when every male collected the heads of his enemies, the spoils of war, bearskins, stags antlers and~, in fact, anything he could capture as booty. But a stamp collection possesses one quality that makes it a perpetual adventure; it somehow excites you to touch a bit of some distant country, such as Bhutan, Bolivia or the Cape of Good Hope; it brings you into a sort of personal and intimate touch with these foreign countries. So there is something about stamp-collecting that suggests travel by land and sea, and deeds of derring-do in general. It is very much the same as the Crusades.

“As I was saying, my father didn’t exactly approve of it; as a rule, fathers don’t approve if their sons do something different from what they themselves have done; as a matter of fact, I’m just the same with my own sons. This business of being a father is a sort of mixed feeling: there’s a great deal of affection in it, but there’s also a certain prejudice, mistrust, hostility or whatever you may choose to call it. The more affection you have for your children, the more there is of this other feeling. Anyway, I had to hide my stamp collection in the attic, so that my father couldn’t catch me with it. In the attic there was an old chest, a sort of flour bin, and we used to crawl into it like a couple of mice to have a look at each other’s stamps. Look here, this is a Netherlands, this is an Egyptian, this is Sverige, or Sweden. And because we had to hide our treasures like that, there was something deliciously sinful about it. The way I got hold of those stamps was also an adventurous business; I used to go round to families I knew, and those I didn’t, and beg and pray to let me soak the stamps off their old letters. Now and then I came across people who had drawers crammed full of old papers stored away, in an attic or desk; those were my most delightful hours when, sitting on the floor, I sorted out those dusty piles of litter to try and find stamps I hadn’t already got–you see, I was silly enough not to collect duplicates, and when I happened to come across an old Lombardy or one of those tiny German states or free cities, why, the thrill I had was perfectly agonizing–every vast happiness has a sweet pang about it. And in the meantime, Lojzik was waiting for me outside, and when at last I crept out, I whispered right in the doorway, ‘Lojzik, Lojzik, I found a Hanover in there!–Have you got it?–Yes. And away we ran with our booty, home to our treasure chest.

“In our town there were factories that turned out all sorts of trash: jute, calico, cotton, and shoddy wool–the rubbish that we produce specially for the colored races all over the world. They used to let me ransack their wastepaper baskets, and that was my happiest hunting ground; there I came across stamps from Siam and South Africa, China, Liberia, Afghanistan, Borneo, Brazil, New Zealand, India, the Congo–I wonder whether the mere sound of the names gives you the same sense of mystery and glamor as it does me. Good heavens, what joy, what frantic joy I felt when I found a stamp from, say, the Straits Settlements, or Korea or Nepal or New Guinea or Sierra Leone or Madagascar! I tell you, that particular rapture can be realized only by a hunter or a treasure-seeker or an archaeologist who’s doing excavations. To seek and to find–that’s the greatest thrill and satisfaction a man can get out of life. Everybody ought to seek something; if not stamps, then truth or golden ferns or at least stone arrowheads and ashtrays.

Well, those were the happiest years of my life, my friendship with Lojzik and stamp-collecting. Then I had scarlet fever and they wouldn’t let Lojzik come to see me, but he used to stand in the hall and whistle so that I could hear him. One day they must have taken their eyes off me or something; anyway, I got out of bed and slipped upstairs to the attic to have a look at my stamps. I was so feeble that I could hardly lift the lid of the trunk. But the trunk was empty; the box containing the stamps was gone.

“I can’t describe to you how distressed and horror-stricken I was. I think I must have stood there as if I’d been turned to stone, and I couldn’t even cry, there was such a lump in my throat. First of all, it was appalling to me that my stamps, my greatest joy, were gone–but what was more appalling was that Lojzik, the only friend I had, must have stolen them while I was ill. I felt overwhelmed, dismayed, dumbfounded, despondent–you know, it is amazing how much a child can suffer. How I got out of that attic, I don’t know; but after that I had a high fever again and during my clearer moments I pondered in despair. I never said a word about this to my father or my aunt–I had no mother–I knew that they simply wouldn’t understand me and thus I became rather estranged from them. From that time onwards my feelings for them ceased to be close and childlike. Lojzik’s treachery affected me terribly; it was the first time anyone had played me false. ‘A beggar, I said to myself, ‘Lojzik’s a beggar and that’s why he steals; it serves me right for fooling around with a beggar. And this hardened my heart; it was then I began to draw a distinction between one person and another–I forfeited my state of social innocence; but at the time I didn’t realize what a shock it had been to me and how much damage it had caused.

“When I had got over my fever, I had also got over my distress at the loss of my stamp collection, though my heart still ached when I saw that Lojzik had now found new friends; but when he came running up to me, rather sheepishly because it was so long since wed seen each other, I said to him in a curt, grownup tone:

‘Shove off, I’m finished with you. Lojzik turned red and replied:

‘All right, then. And from that time onward he hated me with a stubborn, proletarian hatred.”

“Well, that was the incident which affected my whole life. The world I lived in was, so to speak, desecrated; I lost my faith in people; I learned how to hate and despise. After that I never had a friend; and when I grew up, I began to assume that because I was by myself, I needed nobody and would show no favor to anyone. Then I discovered that nobody liked me; I used to put this down to the fact that I despised affection and was proof against all sentimentality. And so I became an aloof and purposeful man, very fussy about myself, very punctilious, the kind of person who always wants to do the right thing. I was cantankerous and harsh towards my subordinates; I did not love the woman I married; I brought up my children to fear and obey me, and by my industry and sense of duty I gained quite a reputation. Such was my life, my whole life; I attended to nothing except my duty. When my time comes, the newspapers will say what valuable work I did and what an exemplary character I had. But if people only knew how much solitude, mistrust and self-will there is about it all.

“Three years ago my wife died. I never admitted it to myself or to anybody else, but I was terribly upset; and in my distress I rummaged about among all sorts of family keepsakes which had been left by my father and mother: photographs, letters, my old school exercise books. I felt like choking when I saw how carefully my stern father had arranged and kept them: I think that, after all, he must have been fond of me. The cupboard in the attic was filled with these things, and at the bottom of a drawer was a box sealed with my father’s seals; when I opened it, I discovered the stamp collection I had put together fifty years earlier.

I’m not going to keep anything back from you: I burst into tears and I took the box into my room like a man who has found a treasure. So *that’s*what happened, suddenly flashed across my mind; while I was ill, somebody must have found my stamp collection and my father confiscated it, so that I would not neglect my homework. He shouldn’t have done it, but it was all because of his concern and affection for me; I don’t know exactly why, but I began to feel sorry for him and for myself.

“And then I remembered: so Lojzik never stole my stamps. Good heavens, how I had wronged him! Again I saw before me the freckled and messy urchin, and I wondered what had become of him and whether he was still alive. I tell you, I felt so wretched and ashamed when I looked back on it all. Because of a single false suspicion I had lost my only friend; because of that I had wasted my childhood. Because of that I had begun to despise the lower orders; because of that I had become so opinionated; because of that I never became attached to anyone. Because of that the very sight of a postage-stamp always made me feel annoyed and disgusted. Because of that I never wrote to my wife, either before or after our marriage, and I explained this away by pretending to be above what I chose to call ‘gush; and my wife felt this keenly. Because of that I was harsh and aloof. Because of that, only because of that, I had so fine a career and performed my duties in such an exemplary manner.”

“I saw my whole life afresh; suddenly it seemed a different life, was the thought that struck me. If that hadn’t happened, I should have been so full of enthusiasm and dash, affection, chivalry, wit and resourcefulness, strange and unruly things of that sort– why, good heavens, I might have been almost anything else, an explorer or an actor or a soldier! Why, I might have felt some affection for my fellow men, I might have drunk with them, under-stood them, oh, there’s no knowing what I might have done. I felt as if ice were thawing inside me. I went through the collection, stamp by stamp; they were all there: Lombardy, Cuba, Siam, Hanover, Nicaragua, the Philippines, all the places I had wanted to go to and which now I shall never see. On each of these stamps was a scrap of something that might have been and never was. I sat brooding over them all night, taking stock of my life. I realized that it had been an artificial and impersonal life, which did not belong to me, and that my proper life had never come into being.” Mr. Karas shook his head sadly. “When I consider all I might have been, and how I wronged Lojzik–”

Father Voves, on hearing these words, looked very downcast and forlorn; most likely he had remembered something in his own life. “Mr. Karas,” he said pityingly, “don’t think about it; it is no use, you can’t put it right now, you can’t make a fresh start–”

“No,” sighed Mr. Karas with a slight flush. “But you know, anyhow– anyhow, I’ve started collecting stamps again

Terms to define: You should look up these important vocabulary words and write the definition down below; also consider how these writing techniques are being used in this story…

* Catharsis:
* En medias res:
* Frame narrative:
* Asyndeton:
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