

# FAB 2021



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ANDLYN.



Narjas Zatat and Shirley Hottier are this year's first place winners of the Faber and Andlyn (FAB) Prize for new writers and illustrators from underrepresented backgrounds.

Narjas Zatat won the text prize with her epic YA fantasy submission, *Djinn-touched*, whilst illustration prize winner Shirley Hottier submitted a selection of illustrations.

Second place for the text prize was awarded to Ben Williams for his middle-grade submission, *Grace Weaver and the Other Kingdom*. Samareh Azadi was awarded second place for the illustration prize for her portfolio.

**Leah Thaxton, Publisher said:** 'The wealth of talent and number of book signings coming out of this prize is immensely exciting. The impact of these winners' artistic and literary output will resonate across classrooms, libraries, and in homes – not to mention all the runners-up and alumni who have deals yet to be announced, and books in the pipeline. We are delighted to celebrate more untapped talent and see the landscape changing.'

**Jasmine Richards, FAB Prize judge said:** 'What an absolute treat to be a part of this prize. I was delighted by the range and ambition of the stories submitted. And with the illustrations, it was fabulous to see so much magic rubbing shoulders with the gorgeous observations of children and their everyday lives. The FAB Prize does a great job of platforming talent and I'm excited to see what happens next with this year's winners.'

Since its launch last year, the FAB Prize website ([fabprize.org](http://fabprize.org)), a hub for aspiring writers, illustrators and publishing professionals, now features interviews with an incredible roster of talented creatives such as Costa Debut Novel winner Ingrid Persaud, Nikita Gill, Annabelle Sami, Jeffrey Boakye, Kereen Getten, Dapo Adeola and many more.

## FAB PRIZE ALUMNI

This year marks five years since the inauguration of the FAB Prize and we could not be prouder of the amazing achievements of our esteemed alumni! Here are just a few of the things they have accomplished in the last year.

Faber is the proud publisher of two books illustrated by last year's illustration winners. Ngadi Smart has illustrated *Musical Truth* by Jeffrey Boakye and Akhran Girmay is the artist behind a new edition of Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely's novel, *All American Boys*. In addition, Hannah Lee and Allen Fatimaharan have released *The Rapping Princess*, their second picture book with Faber. Mariesa Dulak and Janelle McCurdy also have publishing deals with Faber, each for three books.

Michael Mann released *Ghostcloud* with Hachette, who are also publishing *Sadé and Her Shadow Beast* by Rachel Faturoti. Tolá Okogwu has a deal with Simon & Schuster for her middle-grade duology *Onyeka and the Academy of the Sun* and two picture books. Knights Of are publishing the Mayhem Mission series by Burhana Islam, Arathi Menon has a deal with Yali Books and Sai Pathmanathan published *Utterly Jarvellous* with Bloomsbury. Aisha Busby's third book, *Moonchild: City of the Sun*, was published. Casey Elisha is working with the Arts Council to donate her latest book, *I Can Be That Too!*, to schools, libraries and families.

More than fifty of our alumni now have agents:

Sojung Kim-McCarthy, Su Jang Jang, Farah Shah, Clara Kiyoko Kumagai, Christine Lalla, Nilesa Chauvet, Beatrice Anobah, Ngadi Smart, Tomi Oyemakinde, Ravena Guron and Pam Aculey all signed up with agents over the last year.

Several of our previous winners have also been bestowed with awards and other accolades. Varsha Shah was the winner of the Times Chicken House Award with *Adjay and the Mumbai Rail Times*. Mónica Ibarra Parle was shortlisted for the Wasafiri Writing Prize as well as the Bridport Prize and the Peggy Chapman Writing Prize. Nilesa Chauvet is the winner of a 2021 London Writers Award and Habon Jama won the Golden Egg Award. Seema McArdle has been shortlisted for the WriteNow programme. As well as publishing four books Rashmi Sirdeshpande has gone on to win the Society of Authors Queen's Knickers Award and be shortlisted for the Lollies and the Sainsbury's Children's Book Award. In 2022, she is an official author for World Book Day and the WriteMentor Picture Book Writer-in-Residence.

We could go on to list even more achievements from our alumni from this year alone, as there are so many we haven't touched on, but time would fail us. There are not enough words to describe how proud we are of all those who have passed through our doors. We feel privileged to be included in their journey and we are truly excited to see what else lies in store for them.

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# TEXT ENTRIES

## 1ST PRIZE WINNER



## NARJAS ZATAT

*Djinn-touched*

Narjas was born in Hungary to an Algerian dad and a Greek mum, and when she moved to London at the age of eight, the question ‘Where are you from?’ became a bit of an existential crisis. As a child, she tried to understand her identity by writing stories. As an adult (and a proper serious journalist!) she continues to write with a passion for diverse stories. She still hasn’t figured out how to answer that question, though.

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The judges said:

‘This decision was unanimous. Narjas’ work has all the perfect ingredients for a fresh and epic YA fantasy. Her writing is engaging, sumptuous and magical. Narjas is an incredibly talented storyteller with the potential to be a true writing star.’

## DJINN-TOUCHED

**‘Weaver, Wreaker, Walker, Wynd,  
Three for virtue and one for sin,  
Dealing in secrets is Weaver spoils,  
Sounding the war cry is Wreaker’s toil,  
Wynd draws the calm to an unyielding storm,  
Beware the Walker who steals your soul.’**

### I

#### *Kahina*

The soldier’s spit slid down Kahina Hajjaj’s cheek in a slow, wet trail that mingled with the thin film of sticky sweat on her face. It came to a gooey stop at the bottom of her chin as Achamana prayers echoed across the Bridge City of Qir.

“Watch where you walk, *mutazeh*,” the soldier growled at her. The pungent smell of his unwashed skin crawled inside Kahina’s nose, and she breathed through her mouth instead, trying not to vomit.

Kahina kept her face downcast and her expression blank as the spittle dripped off her chin and joined the grime on the stone-trodden ground.

“A hundred apologies,” she said quietly and slumped her shoulders to appear even smaller than she was as the midday sun roasted her back underneath her once white djellaba. *Ignore me*, she thought. *I’m no one. No one. No one.*

The guard’s hand clenched the pommel of his sword, trying to decide if she was worth cutting down. Kahina steeled her body for the blow. If the God *Ammon* were on her side, she would get a bruised chin, perhaps a fractured bone and nothing more. She held her breath. A tense moment slid uneasily into the next and then another peel of the prayer bells echoed, and he dropped his hand. Kahina wasn’t worth it after all. “Out of my way,” he said, and he marched towards the temple.

When he was completely out of sight, Kahina exhaled noisily and wiped her face with the back of her sleeve. She let herself grin. *Easy work*, she thought and headed towards the gates as she palmed the hefty coin purse she had lifted from the soldier’s waist moments before.

He carried a sword and several small knives, as well as a water canteen and darts to disperse crowds. There was so much clutter on his belt, taking his coin hadn’t changed the weight distribution when she’d swiped his pouch.

His armour was made of interlocking aluq metal, painted gold, and bejewelled at the sleeves. Kahina would have freed those too if she could.

She had a certain talent for liberating soldiers of their belongings: Kahina was small and bony; She was not striking and did not have a womanly shape, so soldiers saw right through her. All it took was a nudge here, a sleight of hand there, a mumbled *excuse me*, and Kahina could steal anything.

Kahina was sweating hard, her long braid was heavy on her neck, and she couldn't wait to get home. Baba would berate her for the risk she was taking, stealing in the upper districts, but the extra coin would feed everyone - even that lard Mohammed - for weeks. She could even pay the Hyacinths' monthly tithe on time.

And more importantly, she could replace the djinn talisman that hung on their door. It was wearing thin, and she could hear the ghuls breathing heavily outside their door at night, as though they too knew that the talisman was going to fail her family and they were waiting to feast.

Kahina shivered. The last thing her mind should be on was ghuls. She needed to focus on her exit strategy.

Kahina weaved her way through the throng of worshippers pouring out of Urei Temple, its tall, glinting minarets disappearing into clouds like knives striking up into the sky. The Umaris had changed the names of the Mazigh temples, but Kahina thought it strange that they had bothered to leave them at all.

The temples were a waystation for the Mazigh Whispers Market, where rebels and chiefs met and traded information in the breath of prayer. Baba hated when Kahina went to the market, but it was the only way to move the rare, pilfered gem she couldn't sell on the streets.

Qir was famous for its bridges. There were hundreds: long ones made of sandstone that connected a high district to a low district; short bridges that acted like ladders, rope bridges that were in tatters, mostly in the lower districts, wide bridges with homes built on them, bridges that connected shops and balconies and bridges that were hollow, leading to secret tunnels that only the Mazigh gangs knew the routes of.

It had been the idea of an old Mazigh chieftain to build the city upwards, to protect from the ghuls. When the Umari invaded, they moved up whilst the Mazigh people were forced down, close to the ghuls that prowled the dunes and mountains around the city, and the Ifrits that skulked in the spindly shadows of the Yeshua trees.

Today the crowds were heavy, and guards stood around the sandy temple plinths like a wake of eager vultures waiting to descend on moving flesh. *What's with all the soldiers.*

There was a coiled sort of tension in the air, and Kahina swallowed the bitter taste of unease that coated her tongue.

The final toll of a bell marked the end of prayers, and the crowd surged towards the bright red Urei Bridge. She hurried along with them, eager to get out of the district and away from whatever was brewing.

The soldiers Kahina passed were edgy: She could see it in the way their eyes darted from place to place and the way their hands clenched and unclenched as though they were preparing for a fight. She pushed her way past the metalsmiths and jewellers that Urei was famous for and headed towards the growing line out of the higher district. Kahina looked around, trying to find the source of her disquiet.

"Hurry up," a soldier said, as he herded the people leaving the temple into groups. She swore quietly as the stolen bag of coins clinked against each other, and she thanked all the Gods and Goddesses in Kabylia that the guard had already moved on to a new group of people.

Kahina turned to an elderly Mazigh man leaning heavily on a wooden cane, the black clan tattoos on his face a stark contrast to his brown skin. "What's up with the lighties?" she said.

The man, whose eyes were the white of blindness, shook his head. "All's I hear, they caught him wif a pocket full-a Emeralds," he said.

*That'll do it*, Kahina thought grimly. Emerald was a royal stone, only to be worn by royalty. They said the doors of the palace were made of the stuff. *What sort of fool carries emerald around in his pocket? Rookie mistake.*

The old man leaned in, and Kahina could smell the pungent ka'k root on his breath. "That she-devil is with them. Only blood will follow."

"Well, there goes my day," Kahina said. The 'she-devil' could only be the lieutenant, and where she went, violence followed. Kahina craned her neck and saw a growing crowd gathering at the base of the temple.

They surrounded a heavily beaten man kept down on his knees by the end of a woman's sword.

The woman, unlike the other soldiers, was dressed only lightly in armour. She stepped back and kicked the man viciously in the head, and Kahina's heartbeat sped up as the cruel face of Lieutenant Salazar came into view.

The lieutenant turned to face the crowd, a small, absent smile flirting on the edge of her cruel mouth. Silence descended onto the gathering. People averted their gaze, and others rushed away from the clamour. They didn't want to be in her firing line, and Kahina didn't blame them. Others were still, gripped by fear. *She's going to make an example out of him.*

The lieutenant was beautiful in a delicate sort of way, with a fine-boned face and pillow-white skin. But her eyes were inky black chips of stone, and there was an empty, soul-less quality behind her gaze that terrified Kahina. She had never seen a Marid, but she imagined the dark djinn would look just like Lieutenant Salazar: Otherworldly and vicious.

She clasped white silk-gloved hands in front of her and surveyed the crowd in a calm and detached manner. It didn't fool Kahina, who knew what this woman was capable of. These spectacles of brutality happened often. Kahina turned to go. There was no reason to watch what was about to happen. She hoped the savagery was short-lived.

The man on the floor groaned. It was a small sound, little more than a breath of expelled pain, but Kahina's eyes snapped up to him.

She knew that voice.

And when he looked up, she recognised the face almost obscured by blood, because it was a face she saw every day: Dark curls, brown eyes so like her own. A groan made its way unbidden out of her mouth. *Ammon have mercy, it's baba.* Kahina's body started shaking, and she almost dropped her stolen coins as another guard roughly herded her towards the gates. *Baba, you know better than to touch emeralds!*

He coughed, and blood splattered onto the ground; Kahina's eyes ran over his body and she almost sobbed at the slashes that crossed his chest and legs, weeping blood. *They've whipped him.*

"Do we not provide?" Kahina's eyes moved back to the lieutenant, whose voice curled around the fearful hush of the crowd like a snake. Kahina's heartbeat was like a hammer in her chest as she felt something dark awaken in her chest, unfurling as her slow, hot rage made its way through her body, burning her blood.

"Did we not build a wall to protect you from the creatures outside?" she continued softly and ran her hands along baba's face in a light caress. "Did we not bring knowledge to your ignorant, dirt-trodden people?" She dug her nails into his cheeks and Kahina bit her bottom lip to stop the scream at the edge of her throat. A simmering rage beat a hard staccato in her chest. She took a step forward. *How dare she hurt her father?*

“Yet you repay our benevolence with thievery?”

It felt like electricity was running along her skin, and the current raised the hairs on her arms. She forced herself to breathe, and to focus on how she was going to save him.

The Lieutenant squeezed her father’s face so hard she left half-moon nail imprints, and then she stepped lazily to the side.

“Would you like to see what we do to thieves?” She said, and slowly plucked off one of her gloves. She unsheathed her sword. A soldier grabbed her father’s neck and forced it down.

All rational thought left Kahina’s mind and the crackling electricity running along Kahina’s skin became painful. Too late, she realised what her anger was about to unleash. A wild, blind panic tore through her. *No, no, no.*

Salazar’s eyes glittered. “We cut them down,” she said and lifted her sword.

Kahina’s vision went black, and a sharp pain erupted in her head.

A moment later the screaming began, and even before she opened her eyes and saw all the blood, even before she saw the death she had caused, she knew she’d done it again.

She’d soulwalked.

**‘And so the swan flew into the fire,’ - A Mazigh proverb.**

## II

### *Sufian*

Sufian unstrapped his swords and placed them on the wooden scabbards hanging by the wall. He took off his thin pencillas and unhooked the knife at his boot, but he kept his throwing knives strapped to his bare chest. He was a royal tracker and a member of the imperial guard, but that wasn’t the reason he kept his knives.

Umari soldiers liked to fight with bastard sons.

Sufian shrugged out of his golden yelek waistcoat, folded it, and placed it by his standard regulation cot, before taking out a fresh one from the wooden cupboard in the corner of his chambers. A cot. A cupboard. A weapons chest. These were all that he needed. Like all his waistcoats, it bore his father’s crest - the goldfinches on the left breast, and the mark of the Umari Dynasty, a fist inside a triangle, on the right.

He put it on, feeling bare without all his weapons. It was an official court session, and he would have to stand to tradition, so he reached for the silver ceremonial cuffs he had to wear on his wrists to show that he was an illegitimate son.

A *halfbreed*, the Umari aristocrats liked to hiss as he walked by.

A knock sounded on the door and before he could open it, the white-blond hair of Prince Lief barrelled through the door.

“There’s a Knut game in the Hookah district tonight,” he whispered excitedly. “Salazar is out on patrol. If we go now we’ll miss her.”

Sufian carefully hooked the silver cuffs onto his wrists and tied a white silk sash on his waist. "There is a ceremony," he said pointedly. "Did you forget?"

Prince Leif pushed the door open and stood behind Sufian, giving his mirror reflection a wink. Though Sufian had dark hair and darker eyes, and Lief was light, there was something similar in the shape of their eyes. But where Lief's face was open and smiling, Sufian was sombre and serious. He noticed the prince was dressed in his official court uniform, and a circlet of emeralds to mark his royal status. To Sufian, it had always looked heavy on his head.

"Your father insists on your attendance," Sufian said.

"*Our* father," Lief said, putting his arm around Sufian's shoulders.

"Don't," Sufian said. The only reason the king hadn't tossed him to the djinns outside the city walls when he was born was that the king believed that royal blood was paramount. Even *tainted* royal blood. The king had made it a habit to have affairs with women from the Dhahab class and sometimes, from the Fiddtans, but Sufian was the first Mazigh-born bastard and he had never been allowed to forget it: He lived in the soldiers quarters, not the royal courts, and the king liked to parade him around like a street dog he'd taken in whenever he needed to quell Mazigh protests over soldier brutality or famine. *'In my eternal benevolence, I have taken a Mazigh - born into my great family,'* he would say.

The last time the prince had snuck out, Sufian had been put on guard duty for two whole weeks, and he hadn't been able to travel to the lower district. He couldn't visit amma.

Lief dropped onto his just-made bed. "We won't get caught this time. Promise."

"I am a member of the royal guard," Sufian said, swallowing his irritation. "Not a nursemaid."

"You're also my brother, and currently being a bore," Sufian said. "Can we get mkhabez on the way?"

"They're *your* favourite sweets," he said dryly. "And no." It was no use to talk to the prince when he was like this, so Sufian ignored him and left his chambers. He walked across the palace courtyard and took in the sounds of birds, their chirping tones harmonising into a strange and familiar song.

It was the only place in the palace that Sufian could tolerate. Lief bred desert birds, and they perched on vines that grew around the emerald columns. The courtyard was an open space filled with plants and flowers Lief had planted for the birds. Sufian had always found the vibrant life in the courtyard comforting in the barren desert. He rarely got to leave the confines of the palace and it felt like a pocket of freedom.

The prince came into step beside him and grinned, calling a bright blue falcon to his arm and Sufian reached out and stroked the bird, feeling its soft feathers under his calloused hand.

"Just let me give you one," Lief begged. "Maybe a red tip? A swallow?"

Sufian yanked his arm back and shook his head. Such a beautiful bird in his possession would be killed by Umari soldiers just to spite him. "We will be late. Let's go."

The palace was built to be a fortress first, but Sufian thought it was more like a prison. There were sentries stationed at the four spires and soldiers standing at every doorway, and every arch, and outside every one of the hundred rooms. A pair of Umari soldiers patrolled the only way in and out of the palatial grounds at the foot of the Imperial Bridge. It was not a station Sufian enjoyed.

Even dressed in his imperial uniform, the soldiers deliberately confused him with a Mazigh worker.

"Why does the Great Sufian look like he's bitten into a ginger root?" the prince interrupted Sufian's brooding and looped his arm through his.

"Stop being a nuisance," Sufian said, and carefully wrenched his arm out of the prince's grip as

they arrived at the giant emerald doors of the Royal Atrium.

Sufian steeled himself, pushed the doors open and let Prince Lief walk ahead of him. Though Sufian was older, he was, in the eyes of the court, nothing.

Sufian kept his eyes ahead as whispers followed him. He'd had a talent for tracking that the king exploited when he was young, but to these people, it didn't matter that Sufian could find anyone and anything; It didn't matter that he could find dirt on even the most cloistered Imam and track the footsteps of the Mukhabarat, the elite legions of the Umari dynasty. It didn't matter, because his mother was Mazigh, therefore he was Mazigh.

He inhaled and tried to calm his frustration. Now was not the time for a show of weakness.

The sun shone through muted amber glass ceilings and the columns threw giant shadows across the marble walls.

At the end of the Atrium, King Farouq lounged on a heavy golden throne. The prince and his father shared similar colouring, but that was where the resemblance; The king's hair was whiter and there were no smile lines on his face. His blue eyes were shrewd and suspicious in a face carved by war.

Dressed in his purple armoured yelek waistcoat, along with his djinn - warded double sword at his waist, he watched them coldly. Although he was nearly sixty, years of battle had kept his giant body primed for combat. As he walked down from the throne, his gait heavy and calculated, he reminded Sufian of a god his mother had told him about - Gurzil, the Ox God of war.

Sufian bowed low, but the king ignored him and turned to Lief.

"You are late," the king said.

Prince Lief scrambled with a clumsy bow. "I apologise for my tardiness father."

The king leaned in close so that only Lief and Sufian could hear him. "Do you enjoy the sting of my whip, boy?"

Lief swallowed. "No, your Greatness."

The king ground his teeth and fixed his eyes on Sufian. "Did I not command you to bring the Imperial prince here at midday?"

"You did, your highness," Sufian responded quietly. He knew the hit was coming but dodging it would only make it worse for him, so he stilled himself and let the back of the king's hand strike him across the face. His eyes filled with water and his cheeks stung, but he pushed the pain and humiliation down.

The king returned his gaze to Lief. "You begged me to let him be in your imperial guard, Prince Lief. I would hate to make you regret your decision."

"Yes father," Lief said in a small voice.

Sufian kept his gaze on the back of the throne room. He ignored the throbbing in his cheek, he ignored the cruel laughter from Umari advisors seated around the throne. If he showed any weakness, it would be bad for him and for Lief, so he stood there with his hands resting behind his back and his face staring ahead. Only Lief, who had glanced at him quickly when his father wasn't looking, saw the storm brewing in Sufian's eyes.

The Atrium doors flew open and Sufian turned around to see Lieutenant Salazar walking briskly into the hall. His lip curled in a momentary sign of disgust.

The king scowled. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

Salazar's boots echoed around the atrium and Sufian flinched at the sound. She made strode up to the emperor and whispered something in his ear. Sufian was able to make out two words, and they

broke through the dark storm of his thoughts and set his heart racing in excitement: “Djinn-touched”.

“Summon the Guild,” the king said quietly. His advisors, who had been lounging in seats at the base of the throne, immediately scrambled up and ran out of the Atrium. “Everyone but the Imperial Prince,” he paused, turning to Sufian, “and *him*, get out.”

Sufian saw something he had never seen before in the king’s face; it was there and gone in an instant.

Sufian saw fear.

## 2ND PRIZE WINNER



## BEN WILLIAMS

### *Grace Weaver and the Other Kingdoms*

An amateur geek and professional daydreamer, Ben discovered that writing middle-grade fiction came easily to someone who never quite grew up. He studied English Literature at Queen Mary University and has since gone on to work in publishing and the arts sector. His work has been shortlisted for the 2021 WriteMentor Novel-in-Development Award and the PRH WriteNow 2021 editorial programme, and he hopes one day that young readers will be able to enjoy his daft adventures.

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The judges said:

‘We loved Ben’s story. It was exciting and enchanting. He left us wanting to know what would happen next. Ben’s use of prophecy, magic and other fantastical elements makes him a writer to watch!’

# GRACE WEAVER AND THE OTHER KINGDOM

## 1

“Grace Weaver, what *are* you drawing?”

Grace looked up from her workbook as Mrs Hughes loomed over her desk, looking down at her over a pair of thin wireframe glasses. “Uh, a dragon, miss.”

The other girls sniggered. Mrs Hughes sighed in exasperation.

“This is *Geography*, Grace. Why are you drawing dragons in Geography?”

“Well... I was finished doing my volcano so—”

“Grace,” Mrs Hughes interrupted, “school is for studying, *not* doodling. If you’re finished with your volcano then start on your exercises, page one-hundred and twelve.”

“Yes, miss.” Grace muttered, ears burning beneath her Afro hair as she turned back to the Year Eight curriculum. Snaking green dragons disappearing beneath a case study on tectonic plates.

But at least Mrs Hughes didn’t know about the ogre she’d drawn in Maths, Grace thought, or the griffin she’d sketched in History. Otherwise she’d have been in for a proper lecture. Told to focus on her studies, or worse, “*think about your future*”, a favourite phrase among her teachers that to Grace, didn’t mean anything at all.

“Grace Weaver?”

It wasn’t Mrs Hughes that spoke this time. But someone at the classroom door, the receptionist. “Sorry, Mrs Hughes. But I need to borrow her. The headteacher wants to see her in his office.”

\*\*\*

Grace didn’t understand what was happening, wracked her brains as they walked for what she could have possibly done to draw the head’s attention. Maybe they’d found out about the extent of her extra-curricular doodling after all. Or maybe it was because she’d called Abigail a brat at first break. But that had been a week ago. And besides, it *was* true.

Her speculation dissolved into nothing then as the head’s office came into view, along with the person standing outside, who rendered her all theories quite wrong.

A police officer. Dressed in a high-vis jacket and wearing a paper-thin smile, so that she resembled a particularly ominous traffic cone. The words METROPOLITAN POLICE stencilled across her chest.

They weren’t a new addition to Grisdon. Had been multiplying in Grace’s borough for some time now. But they were new to her school. It had started with Miss Everleigh, the deputy headteacher, and the latest to vanish into thin air after taking an ‘early retirement.’ Since then it had been all sergeants and inspectors, disappearing behind closed doors with one member of staff after another. Before cameras started going up in the hallways, and the classrooms, and the playground. While they had assembly after assembly about how there wasn’t anything to be worried about.

But it hadn’t had anything to do with Grace. That was until now.

She didn't return the police officer's smile, but instead stepped through the open door and into the room, rigid and tight-lipped, as her heart pounded in her chest.

Inside Mr Fitzgerald sat tan and grey-haired behind the head's desk, and with an altogether different expression. Ashen. Gripping hold of a document bearing the Metropolitan Police insignia. Looking up at Grace he pressed it to the table, tried to copy the policewoman's paper-thin smile, as if to reassure her. It may as well have been see-through for all the good it did.

"Grace." The head said as the door closed behind her, gesturing at the chair. "Please, take a seat."

Grace did as she was told, perching on the edge of a large leather chair with deceptively soft-looking padding. It wasn't comfortable at all. And too close to an air freshener that left the room smelling sickly-sweet of strawberry.

"Am I in trouble?" Grace said, bracing herself for the answer.

"No, not in trouble." Mr Fitzgerald said, but there was no conviction in it. "The constable here just needs to ask you a few questions. She's already picked up your mum, she's going to take both of you to the police station to have a little talk, alright?"

The words 'police station' might well have been a witch's curse for the way it rooted Grace to her seat. Stunned her still with a sharp, awful lurch. "My mum's here?" She said. "But why?" Restless fingers kneaded at her skirt; the cloying smell of the air freshener was beginning to feel suffocating. "What for? What's this about?"

But Mr Fitzgerald only shook his head. "I'm sorry, Grace, I'm not at liberty to say. Your mother's waiting at the school gates. The constable here will escort you, so let's not keep her." He tried for that smile again, but Grace could see the agitation behind it. That what he really wanted was for this conversation to be over, and for them both to be out of his school.

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They hadn't been lying about Mum. She was waiting there on the other side of the playground, hands clasped in front, clutching hold of her handbag.

And Grace felt her eyes start to well.

The playground wasn't very large, Grisdon School for Girls couldn't exactly be described as having a campus. A stocky Victorian thing wedged between stacks of concrete. And yet as the constable escorted her across, one hand resting just a little too heavily on her shoulder, it might as well have been Hyde Park. Lunch was over, nobody was around, but Grace could feel them watching from the windows, crowding for a look. After all it wasn't every day somebody from school got taken away by police. At least not until recently. She wondered if her friends were watching too, the thought made her feel sick.

"Mum." Grace said when they reached the gates, her voice on the verge of breaking.

Mum smiled. Not weak and strained like the headteacher, nor the false beam of the constable, but warm and gentle. Grace felt herself melt into it, slipping free from the police officer's grip to bury herself in Mum's itchy fleece.

"It's alright, Grace. You're alright." Mum said, kneading her way through Grace's frizzy curls as she shot the constable a reproachful look.

"Mum, what's going on? The head, he wouldn't say."

"Ma'am." The constable interrupted, gesturing towards the police car. "If you could step into the

car.”

Mum nodded, pulling Grace away to crouch in front of her. “I’ll explain on the way.” She said, almost in a whisper. And then a little louder. “Come on, let’s go.”

Grace took her hand then, squeezing it like she would a magic ward. As if it would be enough to make all the bad things disappear.

Mum broke it to her once she was in the back of the police car, a metal grate between them and the officers.

“It’s your Dad, Grace.” She said quietly. “He’s been arrested.”

The car pulled away from the school as she spoke, almost burying Mum’s words beneath the noise of the engine.

“What?” Grace said. But already a knot was forming in her stomach, a rush of vertigo leaving her woozy, like she’d been pitched off of a cliff. When Mum said it again Grace just felt numb. Stared at the police car’s mud-stained carpet.

Dad was a journalist, used to work for one of the big London newspapers. Until he and Mum separated. Now he was barely around at all, driving up and down the country freelancing for online magazines. He’d been out of contact for almost a month now, no visits, calls, not even a text. *Chasing an important scoop*. Mum had said. *I’m sure that’s all it is*.

Grace spent those weeks of silence working on a drawing. Instead of worrying. Instead of dwelling on the nightmares that didn’t agree with Mum’s explanation at all. It was going to be a gift for when he got back. Filled with dragons, and ogres, and griffins, with Dad at the centre, playing the hero as he fought them off with a shiny spear. It was going to be her best yet, even if that meant doing practice sketches in school time.

Only now it didn’t sound like he’d get to see it at all.

“Why?” Grace asked. “What for?” Desperate for an explanation, that she had meant something else, that they had got it all wrong, that the arrest had been a mistake. But instead Mum took her hand again and squeezed, Grace took no comfort in it, it only confirmed the worst.

“Because of something he wrote.” Mum said, one eye on the police officers behind the grate. “Something he shouldn’t have, that’s he not allowed to say.”

But Grace didn’t understand. Dad might not write nice things about the government, but he’d never done anything *wrong*, he wasn’t a criminal. She wanted to say as much to the officers in the front, shout at them, tell them to let him go. But Mum’s eyes pleaded with her, not now, not yet, I’ll explain everything soon.

## 2

“That’s the house?”

“My tea readings indicated as much, yes.”

“And I suppose that actually works, reading soggy tea leaves.”

“It has not failed me *so far*.”

“There’s a first for everything.”

“Do you intend to knock? Or are we to spend the day here standing?”

“But what am I supposed to say? ‘Hello, I’m here to recruit your daughter for the fulfilment of a

magical prophecy'? It doesn't exactly scream sanity, Gingernacks."

Leo stuffed his hands into the pockets of his duffle coat then, increasingly aware of how odd he must already look. Arguing with what would appear to any outside observer to be a somewhat feral looking cat. Only the cat had a point. Standing across the street from the house he'd done nothing up until now but stare. Three more terror attacks in the space of as many months had left people on edge. This wasn't the time to be looking suspicious.

He crossed the street, Gingernacks padding on after him.

"Alright. I'm a friend from school and I've got something to drop off." Leo said as he walked.

"Perhaps. But you don't exactly resemble a teenage girl, Leo." Gingernacks replied.

"Okay... I'm the *older brother* of a friend from school. And she borrowed her PE kit, and I'm returning it. There's definitely not a bomb in this bag, or a sword, or anything weird."

"Perfect, I knew you'd come up with something."

"I can't tell if you're being serious or not, and I don't much care." Leo said as they reached the gate of Grace's house. He had to admit, it wasn't exactly what he'd expected. A little Victorian terrace built from faded brick. Unassuming and ordinary. And though he'd always been told never to judge a book by its binding, he couldn't help but wonder.

"Maybe I'll just leave it on the doorstep." He said.

"Leo, just *knock*." Gingernacks interrupted, assuming a position on the garden wall. "Let's get this done."

Leo frowned. "Fine, but just because I'm helping doesn't mean things are okay between us, I still haven't forgotten—"

His voice trailed off, as from the other end of the street a police car turned in, heading in their direction.

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Grace stared out the window, and tried to think of nothing.

They were in a different police car now, with different police officers. Which was good, because if Grace had been made to endure the constable's syrupy smile a minute longer, she thought she might have snapped.

Dad had been arrested.

Not sent to prison though, to a 'detention centre'. Which meant she wasn't allowed to see him, didn't even know where he was. And because it wasn't a proper prison, he wouldn't be getting a lawyer, or a trial either.

They'd told Grace that Dad had written an article that violated Clause Thirteen. Which she didn't know much about beyond some graffiti she'd seen once on the way to school, demanding it be repealed. It had been scrubbed clean the next day. Instead the police had explained it to her. Had said it meant he'd been found guilty of encouraging civil disobedience, which was a terrible thing to do when there was a severe terror warning in effect. Mum had explained things differently, took her aside at the first opportunity and told her three things: that Dad wasn't a criminal, that she could still be proud of him, and that soon, this would all get fixed, and she could see him again.

It was when she started thinking about the third thing that she spotted them in front of the gate. She said 'them', but really, she meant 'him'. A tall boy who looked only a few years older than she was.

With blonde curly hair, round glasses, and wearing a thick brown duffle coat in June. It really didn't make sense to include the cat. A somewhat feral looking tabby. Even though it was perched on their garden wall like it was *supposed* to be there.

"Grace, who's that? One of your friends?" Mum asked quietly, as the police car pulled up at the curb.

"No, Mum. I don't have any guy friends."

"Well, maybe an older brother then."

"Definitely not."

They got out of the car, the police officers said they'd be in touch. Mum thanked them. Grace did not.

But they also didn't leave. Staying parked on the kerb instead, fiddling with their radios.

Up close Grace noticed the boy was holding a long black kit bag, and though he didn't exactly look lost, he didn't look like he wanted to be here either.

"Can I help you?" Mum said, and with the impatience of someone whose ex-husband had just been sent to prison, while a stranger stood between her and a strong cup of tea.

"Well, I... you see—" he lifted up the kit bag, as if to offer it, only the cat gave a loud meow, and Grace saw the boy cast a glance at the police car. The bag lowered. "Sorry, I think I've got the wrong address." He managed at last, stepping clear of the gate.

"Everything alright, Mrs Weaver?" One of the police officers said from the car, the front window wound open. And it was only then Grace realised they must have been waiting to see what would happen, with the boy and the cat. Maybe they thought they were spies or something.

Again with the 'they', Grace thought. The cat definitely wasn't a spy.

But the boy might be, she thought, even though he wasn't wearing any leather.

"Just fine." Mum replied, and looked to be having similar thoughts to Grace. "This young man's just gotten a bit lost." She turned back to the boy, and Grace hoped he got the idea, and took his bag and his cat before somebody started a scene.

"I'll try the other street." The boy said abruptly, and loud enough for the police officer to hear. Message received. "Come on then, Gingernacks." The last bit came out more of a mutter, followed by that kissy-wissy noise that all cats seemed to respond to. This one didn't seem to like it though, hopping off the wall to trot on after with what Grace could have sworn was a scowl. Which was only slightly less unusual than taking your cat out for a walk.

"You sure you don't know him?" Mum said as they disappeared down the path. "I hope the police don't decide he's trouble."

"No, Mum." Grace said. "But I hope so too."

They went inside. Grace wasn't going back to school today, even though her form teacher had insisted she return for the last two periods, because she really can't afford to miss anymore teaching time, what with her end-of-year exams coming up.

Mum didn't often argue with teachers, they were only doing their jobs after all, but this time she put her foot down, quite loudly, and Grace's form teacher had relented.

"I'm going out to pick something up for dinner, Grace. Alright?" She said as Grace made for her room, discarding her shoes and school bag in the hallway. "You'll be okay by yourself for a half-hour?"

Grace turned, one foot on the stairs, managed a weak smile. "Yeah, I'll be alright." Mum smiled back at her, just as faint and faded.

Mum nodded. "Love you."

But when the front door closed behind her, Grace sat down on the stairs, and cried.

Dad had been arrested, and it was only Wednesday.

Tomorrow she'd have to go back to school. All the teachers would know already, they'd be told not to tell anyone but somehow all her classmates would find out anyway. The rumours would spread like they always did, and everyone would probably stop talking to her. The daughter of a criminal. She wondered if it would make the news. Dad had been the one she looked up to. The one who made her feel like she could do anything. *Be* anything. Even if his job meant he was hardly ever around. Only now he'd be just another headline, another troublemaker from Grisdon who ended up in a cell.

Grace rubbed her eyes dry, made for her room. Dad's drawing was still there on her desk, surrounded by pencils and paintbrushes. But there was no point working on it now, flopping down on a beanbag instead to switch on her PlayStation. So that for a little while she didn't have to be Grace anymore, but Aquamarine, the legendary spellsaber. Clearing another level full of undead technomancers and their reanimated cyborgs.

That had been her dream for a little while, to grow up to be a video game artist. Turn her doodles into dungeon crawlers, draw worlds for players to get lost in for hours on end. Until Mrs Hughes had told her to pick something more realistic. Until she learned that girls born in Grisdon didn't get to design video games. But made headlines for the wrong reasons, or turned out to be nothing special at all.

It was about fifteen minutes into her playthrough that Grace was about to toss the controller aside, crawl under her duvet and wait for the world to disappear. But then something like a pebble collided with her bedroom window instead.

She jumped. Fumbled a move. Watched as Aquamarine got vaporised by a hex beam.

Another clatter at her window, and this time Grace scrambled over to look, peering out into the garden to see... nothing. There was nobody there. The garden empty save for a couple of deck chairs and a busted trampoline. And a kit bag. Placed neatly in front of the patio doors. The same kit bag she'd seen that boy holding just minutes ago. Which was strange, because that meant that somehow he must have climbed into her garden, and dropped it there.

Grace bounded down the stairs two steps at a time, hardly stopping to consider that there might be something dangerous about it until she had the patio doors swung wide open. The unassuming kit bag sitting quietly at her feet. Grace took a step back. After all she'd seen all that stuff on the news, about MPs getting letter bombs in the post, having panic buttons installed in their homes. What if that boy had been a terrorist, one of those Jackdaws? Mum worked for the government, kind of, the local council actually, it was mostly administrative, she didn't make up any *laws* or anything but still... *someone* might want to kill her.

And so Grace did what any sensible thirteen-year-old would in her situation, grabbing a broomstick from the understairs cupboard to loop the end through the zipper ring. Then she tugged it, hard, and dove behind the sofa.

There was no explosion, and from the reflection in the glass Grace caught sight of something gleaming instead. Carefully, she crept back to the open patio doors to peer inside. It was just a sliver, poking out from what appeared to be a tartan picnic rug, Grace knelt over it now, peeling back the zip to reveal more of its contents.

Only then she had a thought, remembering the way the police had hung about to watch the boy

and his bag and his cat. They had CCTV cameras all over Grisdon, black goggly orbs on swivels and stalks, and Ivy Langley said they had cameras up in space too. Hooked up to orbital satellites that could peer down into any street they wanted to, or garden.

She zipped the kit bag shut, pulling it inside as quick as she was could before smuggling it up into her room. Blinds closed, lights off, clambering onto her bed to switch on the fairy bulbs instead. She plopped the bag down in the middle, amongst an overstuffed audience of plushies, who bobbed in response as if in anticipation. Grace unzipped the bag completely this time, then peeled away the picnic rug to peer inside.

“What the frick?”

A crafted hilt attached to a slender blade, tapering to a point that glinted needle sharp, and all in burnished gold. She was looking at a sword. That boy had left a sword in her back garden.

And it was *glowing*.

Only the sword didn't shine in the normal way, but with a gleam that lit her face almost as brightly as her fairy lights. Radiating off of it in a faint but unmistakable glow. Nestled in the hilt was something stranger still, a fastened eyelid. Wedged between the crossguard, like it was somehow sleeping. Grace thought by opening the bag she'd get some answers, figure out why a boy she'd never spoken to before had gone to such lengths to smuggle it into the garden of a thirteen-year-old girl from Grisdon. But now she was only more confused.

It didn't look anything like the swords she'd seen in museums or read about at school, more like something straight out of a movie or a videogame. Except this wasn't some cosplay prop for Comic Con, or if it was it was a very expensive one.

It took her a minute to notice the folded bit of paper beside it. A note. She picked it up, unfolded it impatiently. It was written in black ink, and all swirly like.

*Dear Grace,*

*I expect the contents of this bag will only bring you confusion, but understand that it is of the utmost importance, and concerns, in part, the arrest of your father.*

*Meet me at the Old Pavilion in Grisdon Park, at four-thirty tomorrow afternoon, and I'll explain everything.*

*Bring the Sword, but show it to no one, the bag will open only for you.*

*Regards,*

*L*

Grace re-read the note, read it again. *Concerns? Utmost importance?* Who spoke like that? And how did he know her dad had been arrested? Her pulse was racing now, this was getting weird. Like she was in one of those prank TV shows where they set up hidden cameras all around the room, capturing every angle of your freaked-out expression before the celebrity host popped out to reveal you'd been had.

She looked back at the sword, tried touching the flat of the glowing blade with her finger, half expecting it to be hot. But it was cold instead. She gripped the pommel then, tried to lift it, only to find that, quite suddenly, she couldn't move at all.

Grace had never gotten an electric shock before, but as her body went rigid, she figured this is how it must feel. Like lightning shooting up her hand, her arm, her spine, before it blossomed inside

her head. It was Dad, she could see him. He was somewhere dark, and cold, surrounded by a black mist that crackled red and stung like fire. And he was screaming, and screaming, until Grace was screaming too.

She let go of the sword, dropping it onto the bed as if it had burned her.

“Grace?”

Mum, she was back. Grace hadn’t heard her come in, hadn’t heard anything except her dad cries. Had that been real? How could it be? She looked down at the sword, still gleaming as brightly as before, and found herself too afraid to touch it. Wondered then, if it was supposed to be some kind of threat.

“Grace, are you alright up there?”

But whatever this thing was she couldn’t let her mum see it, couldn’t let her *touch* it, and couldn’t let her take it away until Grace could get some answers.

The sword went back in the bag, scooped up with the picnic blanket before she zipped it shut and stuffed it under her bed. She was going to meet with ‘L’ alright, meet him and shake him until he told her what he’d done with Dad.

But first, Mum.

She knocked on the door once, before pushing it ajar to peer through the gap.

“I’m fine, Mum.” Grace said, sitting up on her bed. Doing her very best to look relaxed, if only a little upset, as opposed to in the middle of a nervous breakdown very possibly induced by some form of witchcraft.

The door swung open. “Are you sure?” Her mum replied. “I thought I heard—”

“My toe, I stubbed it.” Grace said, grabbing the end of her foot as if she’d been holding it the entire time. “It’ll be fine, uh, did you get anything from the shops?”

Her mother frowned, but appeared to buy it. “It would be an odd shopping trip if I hadn’t.” She said. “I got a lasagne for dinner.”

“And pudding?”

Mrs Weaver rolled her eyes. “Sticky toffee.”

Grace practically leapt off the bed to hug her, her mum’s smell mingling with the imagined scent of caramelised sugar, butter cream and—

“Mum.” Grace said, forcing her brain to focus. “Is it alright if I go to the park after school tomorrow?”

“To the park? What for?”

“Just to hang out, Mum. You know, with friends.”

Mrs Weaver raised an eyebrow. “Since when do you ever hang out outdoors?”

“Wouldn’t you rather they come here instead?”

“No, Mum.” Grace said, though she was right to be suspicious, the last place Grace would ever be seen in public was Grisdon Park, too much pollen, and teenagers. “Pokémon,” she blurted “we’re going to catch Pokémon.”

“Okay. Just make sure you’re back in time to do your revision.” Her mum replied, looking unconvinced as she freed herself from Grace’s grip. But on the other hand seemed far from suspecting that Grace might be going there with a magical sword to investigate the possible kidnapping of her ex-husband, which was good.

All she had to do now as survive tomorrow.

## HIGHLY COMMENDED



## AFUA BEDIAKO

### *Super Mortals: The Tears of Angels*

*Noughts and Crosses* by Malorie Blackman was the book which first sparked my interest in writing. Reading a popular book series written by a black female author gave me hope that one day I could write something worth publishing too. It also encouraged me to make the protagonists of my novel people of colour. Just as it was important for me to read books written by a black female author, I hope to do the same for teenagers of colour.

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# SUPER MORTALS: THE TEARS OF ANGELS

## Ama

New Town is a small town in the South East of England where I've lived with my Mum and Dad my whole life. It's about an hour's drive from The City—the capital of England—and is so small that after about half a year you'll come across pretty much everyone living here. It's a relatively pleasant place—if you don't mind everyone knowing your business that is. Outside of the tourist season, gossip is one of the few options to keep boredom at bay. So one Saturday, when Mum informs me that a family of Super Mortals have moved to New Town from The City, I'm all ears. Their arrival is going to cause quite a stir; their kind haven't lived in my quiet little town for over twenty years. It's funny because no one would give a damn if they were one of us but add 'Super' in front of 'Mortal' and suddenly there's a crisis. All you have to do is switch on the news: A building's on fire? Kids not doing well in school? Someone's cat is stuck in a tree? Blame Super Mortals. Now, I'm not mindlessly defending them, I'm very aware of what they are capable of. I know they can be dangerous. Still, I'd like to believe that every individual, no matter how deep down, is good until proven otherwise.

That Saturday, I let curiosity get the better of me and I venture out of the house to see this mysterious family for myself. I've never seen their kind in person but from what I've seen on TV they all share distinctive physical traits. Elegantly tall, faultless complexions, hair as white as frost and eyes of the palest silvery grey. As a child, I used to imagine they looked like angels who'd fallen down to Earth by mistake. Thinking this was rather clever and kind of poetic, I told my parents who were quick to scold me in a tone caught between mocking and disgust. So did my friends for that matter. From then on, I learnt it was easier to keep my opinions to myself.

Even so, I'm no better than everyone else, leaving the comfy confines of my duvet just to get a look at the newcomers. As I near the outskirts of town I expect to find an angry mob of protestors and spectators. Instead, I happen upon a quiet street no different to the rest in this town. A removal van is parked further along the road in front of a house with boxes sitting in the front garden. In the surrounding houses, curtains are drawn, and doors are firmly shut. Everyone is scared. *So am I*, I realise whilst rooted firmly on the spot, unable to venture any further. The front door of the house swings open and I catch a glimpse of dark brown skin and a flash of curly white hair. Fear lights up my veins and in an instant, I'm running in the opposite direction. It's not just the unusual physical appearance of Super Mortals' which my kind fear but what they can do.

They have powers.

I've heard some can move objects just by thinking it. Others can take control of your mind or even see into the future. They're not allowed to use their abilities in public, especially not against another Mortal. Doing so is punishable by life imprisonment and in some cases, death.

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That night, something peculiar happens. I'm in my bed, fast asleep when I'm woken by the sound of screeching sirens. Squinting from under my covers, I spy red lights flashing on and off in the gap between my curtains. The face of the digital clock sitting on my bedside table reads: *00:00am*. I slip

out of bed, edge towards the window and gingerly draw open the curtains. Perched on top of each streetlamp down my road is a small wailing siren. Everything, from the trimmed hedges of front gardens to the old crusty brickwork of houses is tinged with a pulsating scarlet glow. A few puzzled people peep from behind their curtains like I am. Others are on the streets, arms folded against the chill and chatting nervously with each other. Minutes later, the din ceases and all is quiet again.

Then it hits me. Curfew. The designated time Super Mortals are required to be off the streets. Every town and city in England has one. In New Town it's midnight till six am but it hasn't been enforced for over twenty years.

Until now.

## Gabriel

My burgundy and grey school backpack sits on my lap while I sit on a plastic chair outside the head-teacher's office. I feel like I've been waiting here for ages and my bum is becoming numb. I trace my fingers across the gold lettering embroidered on the bag. To the right of my chest, the same gold letters are emblazoned on my burgundy jumper: '*New Town High School.*' I clasp my hands together as my fingers begin to shake.

I'm nervous.

*I hate being nervous.*

I close my eyes and try to count to ten, just like Mum says I should whenever my emotions threaten to get the best of me. It doesn't work. My eyes flicker open to the distrustful eyes of students walking by. They're dressed in the same burgundy and grey uniform with backpacks of the same colours sagging on their backs. They'll never accept me and there's no point hoping they will. *All Mortals are the same.* That's my Dad's mantra and I never question it because I understand it perfectly. I *feel* it every day. I can feel other people's emotions, clear as day, as if the feelings are my own. It's like one big messy emotional salad if that makes sense. As far as powers go, I think it's safe to say mine is pretty useless. 'Unfiltered Emphatic Perception' is the official government issued name for it. 'Unfiltered' just means I can't control it or turn it off. Each day, I dread opening the door to the outside world. I grit my teeth, close my eyes and brace myself for the waves of contempt Mortals send my way. It's one thing to know they hate you. It's a whole other thing to experience what they feel as well.

When Mum drove me to school this morning, my body was trembling so much I had to clamp my teeth together to stop them from chattering. She parked the car near the school gates and stroked my hair.

"Ready for your first day of school honey?" she asked.

"No," I muttered, "I don't want to be here."

"Okay," she sighed, "I don't want to rush you. We can try again tomorrow."

I shrugged. Last week Monday was supposed to be my first day of school and the day after that and the day after that...

"Honey, please make a decision," Mum said whilst massaging her temples with her pale fingers. Her frustration hung over me like a cloud swollen with rain. I eyed her as she reached into her handbag and pulled out a packet of florescent blue pills and a bottle of water. She gets really bad headaches which are often brought on by stress. When she doesn't take her medicine, she shakes uncontrollably. It's terrifying to see.

“What do you want right now?” she asked, swallowing the medicine with gulps of water.

“I don’t know,” I answered, “My old life back?”

Even as I said those words, I knew I was asking the impossible. Truthfully, all I’ve wanted since last year is to move on and forget what happened. It’s hard to do that when the hatred from Mortals is constantly seeping into you like a sponge.

“Honey, there’s nothing left for you in The City,” Mum replied, “I know this is a big change, but you need a fresh start. The City was not a good place for you to heal...”

“Yeah, I know,” I snapped.

Her sadness began to fill the car, wafting and rolling towards me, clamping hard onto my chest. I winced, regretting my sharp tone but I’d heard this lecture a million times. It doesn’t matter where we move to, it’ll always be the same. Everyone will hate us because of what we are. It doesn’t help that since moving to this sorry town, I haven’t spotted any of our kind. How am I supposed to ‘heal’ if I throw myself amongst the kind of people who hurt me in the first place?

My thoughts settle on my little sister Angela. Unlike me, last Monday was her first day of school. She’s only ten but she’s a lot braver than I am. Although she was incredibly nervous for her first day, it was me she was worried about. Then again, what else is new? I’m always a source of concern for everyone I care about.

“Gabriel Silversmith?”

My eyes land upon a balding chubby man, possibly in his mid-fifties with a thick moustache, dressed in a mustard corduroy suit. I nod.

“Good,” he answers, “Please come in.”

I stand more than a foot above him as we enter his office which is small and cramped. Bulky filing cabinets swallow up a lot of the room and in the centre is a wide desk with paperwork and folders arranged neatly upon it. On either side of the desk are two high backed leather chairs facing opposite each other. The head-teacher sits on the chair with its back to a window where the light of the morning shines through.

“Please, take a seat Gabriel,” he says and I settle onto the soft leather, a welcome change from the bum-numbing seat outside. He grants me with an attempt at a genuine smile. Anyone else would be fooled but his anxiety tumbles off him, settling over my ribcage and shortening my breath.

“Welcome,” he says, sticking out a chubby hand. “I’m Mr Lloyd, head-teacher of New Town High School.”

“Pleasure to meet you sir,” I reply, shaking his clammy hand.

He begins to explain the many rules and regulations of the school. Such as the days my year group, has assembly and other boring pieces of information. I nod and say ‘yes sir’ in the right places while my eyes wonder around the room. Most of the space on the beige walls are taken up by framed photographs. Many are of Mr Lloyd at varying stages of growing bald, shaking hands with students holding a certificate or trophy. Underneath each frame is the name of the pupil and the date the picture was taken. I spot a few students who look like me but those date back decades. The most recent one was taken twenty years ago. It’s of a very pale boy with rosy cheeks and straight white hair falling over his silver eyes. He’s looking directly at the camera and smiling broadly as he receives a certificate. Below the photo his name reads: *Adam Jenkins* and for some reason it saddens me to look at him.

Perhaps after realizing I’m not as intimidating as I look, Mr Lloyd has become more at ease with my presence. He hands me my very own school planner and inside is my weekly timetable. The

column labelled Monday starts with a double lesson of Maths.

“Now, Mr Silversmith,” Mr Lloyd says in a new tone, “It is important I point out that your kind haven’t attended this school or lived in New Town for over two decades. Do you know what this means?”

I shake my head.

“It means people are not going to be used to your presence,” he smiles but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “They may stare, laugh and say unkind things but I’m sure someone of your background is used to things like that. Am I right?”

I don’t say anything. I keep my face blank whilst Dad’s words float in my head like an angry ghost. *All Mortals are the same.* They think they can taunt us and expect us to just deal with it. They’re lucky most of us are decent people. With one thought I could snap Mr Lloyd’s neck and I wouldn’t have to lift a finger.

“I don’t want any trouble Mr Silversmith,” he continues, “But I cannot promise that your time here at New Town High will be pleasant. Therefore, I do not want you making it worse by causing problems of any kind. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” I answer coolly.

“Good.”

He rises from his seat and extends a hand towards me. I get up and tower above him once more, shaking his hand with a grip firmer than necessary. The smug smile drops from his face and I bite the inside of my mouth to hold back a smirk. I can practically taste his unease.

“Is that all sir?” I ask.

“Yes, that is all,” he swallows, “Now off you go.”

The bell rings in time with my exit from his office. The smirk I held back spreads across my face. There are rare moments when having a freakish appearance has its perks.

## Ama

The morning bell squeals as I hurry down the corridor to an unfortunate double lesson of Maths. I’m about to open the door to the classroom when I spot an unusual looking boy walking out of the head-teacher’s office. Very tall, lean and broad shouldered with curly hair as white as snow. His high cheek boned face is long and angular, his skin is smooth and the colour of caramel. Students stare and whisper as they hurry to their lessons but he pays little attention to them. His eyes remain lowered as he strides down the corridor, the faintest smile dancing on his pink lips.

*He’s beautiful.*

He looks up suddenly and meets my gaze with glinting silver eyes. Startled, I scurry into the noisy classroom where the lesson is yet to begin. Mrs Nancy sits at her desk in front of the room, skimming through a textbook. I stroll down the aisles of students, taking my spot at a window seat near the back. Moments later, the boy walks in and I gasp. Everyone else falls silent. Mrs Nancy jumps up, her honey hued curls bouncing with her as she beckons him to her side.

“Good morning class,” she says, looking ridiculously short in comparison to his considerable height. “This is Gabriel Silversmith, he’s from The City. Please make him feel welcome.”

Gabriel’s jaw is tight as his hands rest behind his back, eyes lowered. He seems so mature, though not just in terms of his physicality. There’s something about his expression; he looks exhausted but

not in the way sleep could fix. Mrs Nancy asks him if there's anything he'd like to say about himself. He shakes his head and treads towards an empty desk beside mine. As he does so, every student either side of him flinches away as if he's diseased. He sits down slowly and awkwardly, his long legs cramped under the wooden desk. Almost mechanically, he neatly arranges his books and pencil case in front of him.

How is it possible for a human being to look so frighteningly *perfect*? I know it's rude but I can't help but stare. So I suppose it serves me right when a set of bright eyes bore accusingly into mine. I turn away, my face hot with embarrassment and peer at my own decidedly unremarkable reflection in the window. A dark skinned girl with black bouncy hair stares back at me. I begin to imagine what I would look like with grey eyes and white curls and how striking it would look against my dark brown skin. A sharp call from Mrs Nancy brings me back.

"Ama Owusu!"

"Yes Miss?" I answer.

"Is there a good reason as to why your focus is out the window rather than in my lesson?"

"No Miss."

"Then pay attention!"

I roll my eyes the moment she turns back to the board where she writes the page numbers of the exercises she wants us to try. Reluctantly, I pry my textbook open and look at the endless equations sprawled across the page.

*'If  $3x + 4y = 12$  and  $x + y = 2$ , find the value of  $x$  and  $y$ ...'*

*Who cares?* I can't imagine how finding the value of  $x$  or  $y$  will help me at any point in the future. Except in my upcoming Summer Exams...but those are months away. So armed with a pencil in one hand and a blank page in my exercise book, I begin to doodle. It starts off as tiny stars in the corner of the paper. Soon it flourishes into an elaborate cluster of flowers, hearts, stars, clouds, angels, suns and moons. After a while, I get the feeling I'm being watched. Glancing to my right, I discover Gabriel observing me. I smile this time instead of looking away. Surprise flickers over his features for a second before the corners of his mouth rise slightly, a dimple in each cheek. A smile so charming that a jolt hits me in the centre of my chest. This is the moment Jacob Bryans, commonly known as Jake, decides to chuck a paper ball at the back of Gabriel's head.

"You don't belong here *Pallid!*" Jake sneers.

A collective gasp resonates around the room and everyone directs their attention to Mrs Nancy.

"Jacob Bryans I will not tolerate such language in my lesson!" Mrs Nancy bellows, "Apologise at once!"

"Why? That's what he is, isn't it?" he sniggers, "A stupid filthy Pallid. He doesn't belong here."

"Enough, leave this classroom immediately!"

"I'm only saying what everyone else is thinking," he retorts and trails out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

*Speak for yourself*, I think.

"I am very sorry about that Gabriel," Mrs Nancy says.

Gabriel shrugs but he's rubbing his temples in a manner which suggests otherwise. Maybe being called a Pallid is something he's used to, especially since he's from The City. My Mum's sister, Mama Abena and her two children live in The City. Whenever she calls, she always complains about the gunshots and alarms heard at night, marking the beginning of Curfew. I reflect upon the first time

the sirens went off in New Town and how they've been going off every night since. I try to imagine gunshots accompanying them and shudder. What must go through Gabriel's mind when he hears them at night? Has he learnt not to care? Or does he feel like an outsider, knowing those crimson alarms reverberating through town are meant for him and his family?

Class continues as normal after Jake's outburst but the lesson drags on and on. When the bell finally rings for break, Gabriel is one of the first ones out of the door after Mrs Nancy dismisses us.

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At lunchtime, I sit with my friends Andrea, Rita and Clara in the lunch hall as I brave through a plate of soggy chips and suspiciously grey chicken.

"What's it like having a Pallid in your class?" Andrea asks through a mouthful of chips, "It must be scary."

"He's alright," I shrug, "Don't call him a Pallid, it's rude."

"Are you kidding?" she cries, her blue eyes widening behind her glasses, "His eyes alone creep me out."

"Well I think his eyes are beautiful," I reply.

There's a pause. I look up to find three shocked pairs of eyes peering back at me. Andrea's eyebrows have risen so high they've disappeared behind her blonde fringe.

"There's no way anything about a *Pallid* could be beautiful," Rita says, "My mum thinks they might not be human."

"So what are they then?" I scoff, "Aliens?"

"Who knows?" Clara chips in.

I look at Clara to check if she's kidding but it turns out she's not. Her forehead is creased with actual concern as she bites into her sandwich.

"You guys are insane," I conclude.

"Well, what do you think they are then?" Rita snaps.

"Human beings maybe?"

"You're the one who's insane," she sniffs.

"There is no way those *things* are human," Andrea interjects.

"Why not?" I demand.

"Oh come on Ama!" she practically yells, banging her fist on the table. "Nothing which looks that freakish can be considered human!"

As if on cue, Gabriel walks by with his tray of lunch. My friends fall silent and I'm mortified on their behalf, Andrea especially. She's my best friend but right now it feels as though I barely know her. Against my better judgement, I hoped she wouldn't be as close-minded as everyone else. Gabriel's eyes settle on mine as he passes by and that jolt I felt in my chest makes a reappearance. The briefest of smiles crosses his face but before I can return it he walks on and settles at a table in the furthest corner of the hall.

Throughout the course of the week, it becomes evident that aside from Art and History, Gabriel has the same classes as me. The odd thing is that although we haven't exchanged a single word with each other, we often exchange smiles. In a strange way, it kind of feels like he and I are already friends and out of everyone in the whole school he's chosen me. Crazy I know, but even if it's all in my head

it's refreshing to come across someone out of the ordinary for a change. With his slightly stooped posture and his eyes cast downward, I can tell he's trying his best to blend in. No one makes an effort to talk to him and he makes no effort to talk to anyone either. If not for his unique features or the way he towers above the crowd, you'd be forgiven for thinking he's invisible.

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As the weekend finally rolls round, my friends and I meet at New Town Park for a picnic. It's a beautiful Saturday afternoon; the sun is shining and there's not a cloud in the sky. A light breeze ruffles through the blossom trees, releasing pink snowflakes from their branches. The park is alive with children playing while their parents look on and old ladies walk their dogs. The occasional jogger shoots past whilst picnickers tuck into their personal banquets. My friends and I settle for a spot under The Old Oak Tree in the centre of the park. Its long branches stretch far and wide, providing shade from the unseasonably warm sunshine. Clara and Rita roll out a red and white chequered blanket beside its aged trunk. Its uneven bark is engraved with everything from rude words to the initials of lovers enclosed in hearts.

Andrea and I lay out our feast: sausage rolls, a pyramid of cheese and ham sandwiches, fruit juice, mini doughnuts and a bowl of chicken salad. Last but not least: Andrea's homemade cupcakes decorated with intricate icing flowers. I'm about to sink my teeth into a cake's soft icing when I spot Gabriel Silversmith sitting by the park lake, aimlessly watching its glistening surface. The others engage in some mundane conversation about the latest couple in school, unaware that I'm devouring the cupcake at a rate faster than my heartbeat. This is ridiculous. I don't know him. Yet I'm unable to remove my focus from the boy by the water.

*Is he here alone?*

In answer to my question, a young girl with the same caramel skin and silver eyes runs up to him. She wears a red dress and matching ribbons in her white curly hair. On her lips is a warm dimpled smile, leading me to assume she's Gabriel's little sister. She seems to be about thirteen years old though she may be younger since Gabriel looks older than his age too. A boy with floppy blonde hair runs up to them both. I can't make out everything they're saying but it seems Gabriel's sister is introducing the boys to each other. Everything seems to be going well until a big burly man—possibly the blonde boy's father—bounds towards them. Red faced and shouting, he yanks the boy away and Gabriel's sister bursts into tears. In anger, Gabriel yells something along the lines of "*What's your problem?*" It's at this point that my friends notice I've not been involved in their dull discussion. Andrea waves her hand in front of my face which I swat away impatiently.

"Earth to Ama," Rita says, "What are you staring at?"

"Look," I reply.

Their gazes follow the direction I'm pointing, just in time to catch the man shove Gabriel in the chest. Gabriel stumbles backwards and there's a horrible moment where he's teetering over the lake's edge, almost in slow motion before splashing into it. Seemingly pleased with this outcome, the man stomps away, dragging the blonde boy with him while the girl in the red dress screams for her brother. In an instant, I find myself half walking, half running towards her.

"Where on earth do you think you're going?" Andrea yells.

I ignore her and carry on, though I'm unsure of what I'm going to achieve once I get there. *To save*

*Gabriel? To make sure his sister is okay?* I can't even swim. Plus, I'm a *Mortal*. I highly doubt either Gabriel or his sister want anything to do with me. Whatever it is I'm planning to do I don't get to do it because as soon as Gabriel resurfaces from the water, I trip over and crash right into it.

The lake itself isn't extremely deep but it isn't exactly shallow either. My first thought when I land at the bottom of it is, *I'm going to drown*. My arms and legs flail about in an attempt to reach the surface with no avail. Everything in this watery world seems muted and distant from the dry land above. I can just about hear the faint screams of my friends calling for help. In sheer panic, my eyes squeeze shut as cold water rushes in through my nostrils and mouth.

*This is it then, this is how I'm going to die.*

A pair of arms break through the lake's shimmering skin and haul me out. Next thing I know, I'm on all fours with my body racked by coughing and spluttering. I collapse onto the grass, drinking in the cool air which soothes my angry lungs and stinging throat.

"Are you alright?" a deep voice asks.

My eyes flicker open only to be met with Gabriel's, shimmering like moonlight and full of concern. I note that this is the first time I've heard him speak. His voice, although very deep, is surprisingly gentle. I didn't expect him to be so soft spoken. Not too far from us both, a small crowd has gathered to witness me making a fool of myself. It is then that a thought occurs to me. *Gabriel just saved my life.*

"Are you alright?" he asks again, taking my hands in his and pulling me up. Like a magnet, my eyes train onto his shirt, now translucent from wetness and sticking to his lean torso. My cheeks warm up considerably.

"Yes," I manage to croak in reply.

This isn't entirely true. In addition to the rawness in my throat, my clothes have become heavy and cold and I'm shivering. I keep a firm grip on Gabriel's hands which are gripping mine just as tightly. Is it odd to admit that this feels entirely normal and comforting? Or maybe in the process of almost drowning I've lost a couple of brain cells. My friends snatch me away, shattering the moment and completely ignoring him. Andrea asks how I could be so stupid which is *not* appreciated. Rita pats me hard on the back in a failing attempt to comfort me. Clara, who has never been good at dealing with stressful situations, is sobbing uncontrollably. However, my attention isn't on them but on the boy walking away from me. I elbow my friends out of the way and call his name. He turns around immediately.

"Thank you," I say but the words seem insufficient.

"Don't worry about it," Gabriel smiles shyly, triggering that jolt in my chest. His little sister appears by his side, tugging his hand, her eyes still red from crying.

"Can we go home now?" she asks in a voice as twinkly as wind chimes.

"Sure," he replies.

Hand in hand, they do just that, leaving me cold and confused. *He saved my life.* The words replay in my head over and over again. *Gabriel Silversmith saved my life...*

## HIGHLY COMMENDED



**ANNE CHEN**

*Valley saves the Stone School for Magical Martial Arts*

Anne is a British Chinese writer and writes MG and YA stories set in ancient China with magical martial arts. She lives in southeast London with her husband and two children. Anne wants to help bring more diverse stories to children and contribute to the children's book publishing community. As a parent, writer and reader, she understands the importance of children being able to 'see themselves in a book'.

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# VALLEY SAVES THE STONE SCHOOL FOR MAGICAL MARTIAL ARTS

## Chapter 1

Ten-year-old Valley smiles down at the nook in which her little village nests on the Misty Mountains. The wind whistles in her ears and ruffles the fringe of her thick, black hair. She takes in a lungful of the fresh scent of pine and bolts up a steep, rocky path to a pavilion with ornate eaves curl up towards the heavens.

Now at the pavilion, she is ready to start her morning martial arts practise. Getting into the horse's stance, Valley keeps her back straight while she lowers herself by bending her knees. She holds the position, feeling her thighs burn under the strain. Her arms are bent with clenched fists held tightly at her sides. She shoots her right hand out in a sharp punch. With the next breath, she swaps arms, one hand out, the other brought back, over and over, punching out into the swirling morning mists as they rise.

The sound of loose stones crunching underfoot alerts her to someone approaching. A little voice calls out to her from below.

'Valley! Have you finished your practise yet?'

Valley peers down the narrow path to see her five-year-old half-sister, Lily, with her cheeks flushed pink and short legs working hard. Behind her is their older sister, eleven-year-old Peony. She is slim with thin, oval face. Peony gingerly walks up the path, calling for Lily to be careful.

Lily bounds to the pavilion and flings herself into Valley's open arms and giggles as Valley squashes her face against her peach-like cheeks.

'Ma-ma says to come down for breakfast. There's extra rice porridge for you.'

Valley's stomach gurgles on cue. 'Good timing.'

'Walking through cloud sounds pleasant,' Peony says as she leans against the wooden balustrades to catch her breath, 'but the reality is, it's cold and damp.' She tucks a stray tendril of hair behind her ear and says in a contemplative voice, 'I won't miss the Misty Mountains when we go away for school.'

Valley grins back at her. 'I'll miss it,' she says, raising her eyes to marvel at the majestic grey-green mountains.

'I'll miss both of you, I don't want you to go away for school!' Lily wails, tears springing to her eyes.

'How about I piggy-back you down the mountain?' Valley asks, quick to distract her.

Lily gives a little nod and stretches her hands up. In one swift move, Valley hauls her onto her back. As they make their way down, Lily buries her face in Valley's neck. Valley can feel her wet tears and a small sob or two as they walk. To cheer Lily up, she waggles her eyebrows at Peony to get her attention.

'How about a story? Peony, you can tell us Lily's favourite - the story of our family.'

Peony eyes sparkle and she begins.

'In a tiny village high on the Misty Mountains, there lived two families. In one family was a mother with a daughter named Peony, but her husband had left them when Peony was a baby. In the other family, there was an herb gatherer and his daughter, Valley. His wife had died when Valley was three

years old.

‘The two families had always helped each other out and in time they became close. The mother and father married, and they all lived as one. Then they had another little daughter named Lily and their family was complete. And although they were poor, they were happy.’

Lily claps, all cheered up now. Valley jogs along the path, bouncing Lily up and down, until they come within sight of their home, hidden away behind some shrubs and trees. It is a modest wooden building with a bamboo fence enclosing their herb and vegetable garden.

Valley can see their father through the kitchen window, skilfully tossing herbs in a bamboo sieve and setting them out to dry in the corner. As a rare-herb gatherer, he is strong and stocky, and Valley is built the same way.

Valley’s stepmother is setting the kitchen table bowls of rice porridge, a dish of pickled vegetables and plate of steamed buns. Her figure and movements are graceful, and she has the face of a heavenly deity.

Her stepmother speaks kindly to them as she always does.

‘Peony, Valley, Lily, my darlings, come wash your hands for breakfast. Valley, dear, you must be hungry after your morning practise. Have more rice porridge.’ She scoops more rice into her bowl.

When all their bowls are empty, their parents place their chopsticks on the table and lean towards them to make some kind of announcement.

*Could it be?*

‘Father, have you decided which school we will go to?’ Valley asks, breathless with excitement.

He smiles at his daughter’s forthrightness.

‘Yes.’

‘I want to go to the Storm School of Magical Martial Arts and learn to harness the power of the storms.’

‘I would love to go to the Jade Sea Academy,’ Peony says dreamily. ‘I hear they have a huge library of ancient scrolls.’

‘Yes, and they can control water and even the tides,’ Valley adds, having read up on the magical martial arts.

‘Or the Azure Sky School,’ Lily says bouncing in her seat, ‘where they can fly and there are floating islands!’

‘We would love to send you to the schools of your choice, but unfortunately, I have some bad news.’

He exchanges a look with his wife, who takes Lily for a nap leaving them to talk.

‘Remember the medicinal pills I had taken to sell in the capital city?’ he asks in a low voice. His eyes are sad and tense. ‘The pills were made from rare medicinal herbs that I collected over three years. They were very valuable. I was going to sell them for a high price.’

His heavy sigh sends a wash of dread over Valley. They were depending on the money for the school fees.

‘The city officials would not let me sell my pills because they said I did not have the paperwork for them. I offered to take them to an apothecary to authenticate the ingredients, but they confiscated the pills.’

Valley’s throat tightens. Her eyes sting with the injustice of it.

‘We have counted up our savings, but we don’t have enough money to send you the Storm School or the Jade Sea Academy. You can wait until we save up more.’

Peony eyes drop to her lap.

‘It’s alright, I can wait,’ she says.

He places a hand on Valley’s shoulder. ‘I’m so sorry. I know you had your heart set on joining the Storm School of Magical Martial Arts this year, but you have to wait.’

‘But I don’t want to wait,’ Valley replies at a loss, trying to take this in.

*How can this be? I’ve dreamed of learning the magical martial arts since forever.*

‘Well,’ her father says hesitating, ‘there is one school which we can afford.’

Valley and Peony sit up, holding their breaths.

‘The Stone School for Magical Martial Arts is a very small family run establishment with only thirty students. But they have no fees and only ask for affordable donations.’

Valley’s dark eyes look down, deep in thought.

‘You and Peony can think about it over these next few days,’ he says and leaves it at that.

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After the girls all help to clear the table and wash up, Valley’s father comes to speak with her.

‘Let us burn some incense for your mother.’

Valley nods. They go to the family ancestral shrine where there are upright wooden tablets on a long table. One tablet has the name of Valley’s deceased mother.

Her father lights a stick of incense and bows three times. He passes an incense stick to Valley. She lowers her head and also bows three times.

‘I know you wanted to go to the Storm School as your mother did. She was a skilled martial artist and a Storm Sect disciple. She died too soon.’ He gives a sad sigh. ‘If she were here, she would train you in the magical martial arts herself.’

‘All magical martial arts require the cultivate internal energy. You will be able to learn this at the Stone School – if you go there.’

Valley says raising her chin, eyes fiery in determination. ‘Then, I have decided that I will go to the Stone School and do my best to become a skilled magical martial artist like mother.’

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When Valley goes to the little bedroom which she shares with Peony, her stepsister is looking at a map of the empire spread across their bed.

‘The Stone School is in the sandstone region. That’s where the old capital of the empire is. There’s so much history about the place. It would be wonderful to see it.’ Her eyes are starry with excitement. ‘And the Stone School’s magical techniques sound interesting.’

‘I thought you were only interested in books,’ Valley says, teasing her. ‘Yes, the Stone School’s students can control stone structures with their internal energy.’

Valley stretches over to open the paper covered window and looks out. The sound of rain pattering on the roof tiles and the wind whistling through the trees is so familiar.

‘We’ve never been away from the Misty Mountains. What do you think it will be like there?’

‘The climate is hot. It’s very far - three days south of the mountains by barge. But it will be nice not to have rain all the time, don’t you think?’

‘I like the rain,’ Valley says wistfully.

‘Still, it will be nice to go together,’ Peony says giving her a warm hug.

Valley nods. Peony is her best friend and sister rolled into one. Valley turns back to the window and shivers unexpectedly. There is a tightness in her chest.

‘I feel strange thinking about leaving our home and the Misty Mountains. Like I will change, somehow, if I do.’

‘Valley, you are bound to change, if you stay or leave. But don’t worry, the mountains will still be here for you when we come back.’

## Chapter 2

It is the morning of their departure and the skies are overcast as normal. Valley feels a pinch of regret that she cannot do her morning martial arts practise as she has done every day for five years, but she has to pack.

On Valley’s side of the bed, she has a small pile of her belongings: her spare outer-robos, all blue, the same as the one is wearing, her white under-robos, a face flannel and her wooden comb. She stuffs them into her cloth bag and looks over at Peony’s side of the bed. She can see a neatly folded stack of pink robes, with patterns of cherry blossoms and peonies, hair accessories carefully laid out, some books, writing brushes and paper.

Peony is combing her silky hair, taking extra effort with it today. She braids it into three, then loops the side plaits up with pretty crab-apple blossom hairpins. She then coaxes Valley over to tie her hair into a high ponytail and adorns it with a long ribbon of sky-blue material.

Lily had been crying from the moment she woke up. Right now, she is sobbing on her mother’s shoulder. It is a wrench to be leaving her, but they all put on a brave face as they walk to the quayside together to catch the barge.

As the barge pulls away, the girls wave madly to Lily until she is a tiny dot. They manage to hold in their tears until they are out of sight, then lean on each other and bawl even worse than their little sister.

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The three days and nights on the barge pass quickly. Her father chats cheerfully to them. They all eat their buns and sticky rice wrapped in leaves, walk around on the deck, pointing out the villages and towns they passed. They napped and slept on hard narrow bunks.

As the barge glides farther south, Valley is mesmerised by how the overcast skies seem to lift as the clouds give way to a sudden boundless blue. The weather changes from cold and wet, to hot and dry. And then, they were there, at the Sandstone region.

It is so unlike anything they had ever seen before. Awe inspiring mountains of striped rock in wonderful colours of ochre, orange, yellow, pale green and purple. Formed from millions of years of sedimentary formations, the multicoloured rainbow of rocks seem almost unreal.

Peony is right about it being hot here. Valley can instantly feel warmth of the sun on her skin. Peony cheeks are very flushed. She tries to fan herself with her hand, though it doesn’t help.

Her father scratches the back of his neck, looking down one street, then the other, wondering which way to go. Peony points to a signpost. They all peer at it.

Stone School for Magical Martial Arts – Upper School Street

‘We just have to go up that road to the crossroad and turn right to where it meets Upper School Street,’ Valley says looking at the rough sketch etched on the signpost.

Her father and Peony beam at her with grateful eyes.

‘You lead the way,’ he tells her, and she grins back, then shows the way pumping her arms and legs with enthusiasm.

As they walk along the street, Valley’s eyes widen with interest. The town is busy and full of people going about their business: monks, scholars, merchants, beggars, vendors with customers haggling energetically over prices. There are shops with their wares spilling out, stalls stacked with fruit and vegetables, tea houses, restaurants and temples. The lively town is fascinating in itself, but also has the added bonus of the spectacular backdrop of the rainbow mountains.

Finally, they round the corner to Upper School Street and see the tall walls of the school, painted a warm orange colour. By the time they get to the shade of the school gates, they are hot and thirsty.

The doors are open and a white-haired man with crinkly eyes is sweeping the school steps. Their father bows to the sweeper, who looks at them in surprise.

‘Are you here to join the school?’ the sweeper asks. ‘Come in, come in. Let me get you a drink of water from the well.’ He smiles kindly at them, like a grandfather.

They step into the welcome shade of the school walls and follow him to a side courtyard set with ornamental trees in big earthenware pots all around. Drawing water from a stone well, their father refills his water bottle made from a dry gourd and they take a refreshing cool drink to quench their thirst.

‘Thank you, kind sir.’

‘Let me show you the way so that you can register,’ the man says with an amicable smile.

‘Thank you. Is the headmaster about?’

‘I am the headmaster,’ he chuckles, ‘I’ll take you to my office for the registration.’

‘Ah, thank you,’ her father says hastily and signals for Valley and Peony to greet the headmaster properly.

‘Greetings, Headmaster,’ the girls say bowing respectfully at ninety degrees to him.

‘Ah, no need for that,’ he chuckles. ‘I’ll introduce you to who is really in charge.’

He brings them to the reception hall. The interior is very sparse with only a long desk and three chairs at one end. There are no drapes, no painted screens, no ornaments or anything decorative anywhere at all. Instead, the hall has a worn-out, lived-in feel.

A rosy faced, white haired woman comes in with a tray of tea things and a platter of sweet red bean buns. The delicious smell wafts over to Valley and sets her stomach rumbling.

‘Ah, here comes my wife, the matron of the school,’ the headmaster says proudly. ‘She runs everything. I just do the paperwork.’

Quickly, Valley and Peony bow to the matron, but she lets out a jolly peal of laughter.

‘So formal!’ she says patting them gently on their cheeks. ‘Now don’t be so polite and help yourself. We are all family here. Just call me Matron.’ With deft hands, she pours out some jasmine tea in rounded teacups for everyone and hands Valley and Peony a bun each. They take them gratefully.

‘Now, would you two like to play with the other children while your father and Headmaster go over

the paperwork?’

Valley nods. Peony looks uncertain, but shyly nods too.

Matron indicates to a circular entrance into a stone courtyard. Inside, there are three girls all chatting together. They all wear faded red robes that were the uniform of the school. They stop when Valley and Peony approach.

‘Hallo, are you new?’ one girl asks.

‘Yes,’ Valley says, voice full of confidence. ‘I am Valley of the Misty Mountains and this is my sister, Peony. I’m ten and Peony is eleven.’

Curious eyes look them up and down, taking in their appearances. Valley has a stocky build, thick hair and open expression, whereas Peony is slim, with a shy, thin face and silky, fine hair.

‘You’re sisters? You don’t look like sisters.’

‘We’re stepsisters.’

‘Oh.’

‘Which orphanage are you from?’ the tallest girl asks. ‘The Humble Garden Orphanage?’

‘We’re not from an orphanage,’ Valley replies.

‘Clover, they’re not like us. They have a father.’

‘Oh.’

Just then, a cheerful older student calls to them, ‘An apple for everyone.’ He is carrying a big basket of apples. He tosses them to the girls and more children dash out from all corners of the courtyard.

He tosses an apple to Valley, which she catches one handed. He grins at her and asks in a joking tone, ‘Guess what’s worse than biting into an apple and finding a maggot?’

Valley grins back at him. ‘Biting an apple and finding half a maggot?’

‘Nope! Finding twenty maggots.’

Valley looks down at her apple - it is riddled with little holes. Peony shivers in horror.

‘Don’t worry, it’s washed with salt water to get rid of the maggots, but I’ll cut around the eaten bits for the squeamish kids.’

He proceeds to cut away at the apple, then slices them into even chunks and puts them on a plate, while Valley munches happily on hers.

‘Everything in the school is donated from local businesses,’ he tells her, ‘we can’t choose what we get, but it beats begging for food on the streets.’

He gives another huge grin at Valley before helping some other students pick at the holes in their apples.

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Their father is just finishing up when they come to join him back in the reception hall.

It’s time to say goodbye. Valley’s chest heaves. Even though she had been waiting so long to start school, the moment seems to have come too soon. There is so much she wants to say to her father. He also has a hundred pieces of advice to tell her, but he settles on three.

‘Be respectful of your teachers and work hard in your studies and cultivation. Look after each other well. If you are not happy here, I will come to collect you.’

He puts a hand on Valley and Peony’s shoulder, and they hug him tightly.

They all walk back to the school gates, where he bows one last time to Headmaster and Matron.

‘Thank you, Headmaster. Thank you, Matron. Please take care of my girls.’ Then he is gone.

Valley swallows hard to keep back her tears. By her side, Peony gives a little sob and squeezes her hand.

Kindly, Matron pats them on the head and says, ‘It is now getting late in the day. I’ll take you to the dormitory to put away your things.’

Matron leads them along a covered walkway, constructed of lacquered wooden posts and grey tiled roofs, and then indicates to plain, rectangular building.

‘Here are the dormitories. The washrooms are just next to them.’

She gives an enquiring glance at Peony whose face has screwed up in a tight anxious look. ‘Don’t you worry about a thing, dear. The older students always look after the younger ones, and so the younger ones look up to them. We are like one big extended family.’

## Chapter 3

When the morning sunshine seeps into the sleepy dormitory, like melted butter, Valley wakes up confused. *Why is it so warm here? Why is the quilt so thin? Where is Peony?* Then, when she looks around at the dormitory and realises she is at the Stone School, she bolts up, ready and eager to start her first day at the school. However, all the other girls, including Peony, are stretching like cats and taking their time to wake up.

Brimming with enthusiasm, Valley asks the girl on the mattress next to her, ‘When do the lessons for magical martial arts session start?’

The girl laughs. ‘You’re keen.’

‘Yes, I want to learn them more than anything.’

‘Well, it’s not ’til the afternoon. First, we have morning meditation after breakfast, then then literacy lessons in the Small Study. Only after the mid-day meal do we get to go to the training hall for magical martial arts.’

‘I have to wait until the afternoon to start?’ Valley’s chest caves in disappointment.

Just then, a cheerful Matron bustles in to hurry the girls along.

‘Good morning, did you sleep well?’ she asks Valley and Peony, then shepherds them to a large fretwork cupboard in the corner.

‘Just help yourself to whatever fits,’ she tells them, showing them the spare uniforms inside. There are tall stacks of russet-coloured robes, trousers, sash belts and white inner robes and under-clothes. The outer clothes must have once been a deep scarlet colour but were now faded from washing and age to a dull reddish orange. The white inner robes and underclothes all had a tinge of grey.

Valley is eager to wear her new uniform, but Peony is eyeing the frayed hems and clumsy patchwork on the knees and elbows. They quickly choose the right sizes and gets dressed, both glad to be in the same faded russet uniforms as everyone else.

A tinny gong sounds. ‘Time for breakfast!’

In the lively dining hall, the students all chat cheerfully as they clamber to set the table with mismatched bowls and chopsticks. The distinctive aroma of rice porridge and fried turnip wafts in the air, making Valley’s stomach rumble.

‘We get the same breakfast every day,’ a boy tells them, ‘and the evening meal has been the same

for three weeks now too.' Peony looks crestfallen.

'Lucky for us, Matron is a good at making everything tasty.'

Valley nods and eats up her breakfast very fast.

Next, Valley and Peony follow the others to the Mediation Hall. It is spacious with lofty high beams and a calmness about the place, as if the hall itself is taking slow deep breaths as the waft of incense permeates the air. All the beautiful details of the pillars and intricate ceiling panels, show that it had once been a very fine hall. At the far end is an altar with spirit tablets for the founders of the school. On either side of the altar are two life-sized deer statues made of sandstone. They are so detailed and elegant, with delicate antlers crowning their uplifted, noble heads.

A friendly voice calls to them, drawing away their attention.

'Welcome to the new students. I'm Master Harmony. I'm Headmaster and Matron's son.' Valley sees that he does look like a younger, dark haired version of the headmaster, and his smile has the warmth of Matron's.

'Now take a cushion for the floor and sit wherever you like.'

Valley and Peony grab a faded green cushion sit near to the sandstone deer on the right to admire it some more.

Master Harmony sits cross-legged in the centre of the hall, rests the back of his hands on his knees and closes his eyes.

The other students go to sit around the hall with their cross-legged in the same relaxed pose.

'The principles of mediation are very simple,' Master Harmony says with his eyes still shut. 'Just sit and clear your mind.'

Everyone takes on peaceful expressions and some close their eyes too.

Valley waits for more instructions. After a long moment of silence, it appears there are no more.

*Is that it?* she wonders staring around. All the children, from the youngest to the oldest, seem content just to sit in silence. Peony looks happy just to sit still too.

'Are we just sitting here for the whole session?' Valley whispers to the girl next to her.

'Well, sometimes we walk around the hall in a big circle,' she replies cheerfully, 'but it's mostly just sitting.'

Then, with surprise, Valley notices that Master Harmony's head has dropped drowsily to his chest.

'Is he asleep?'

'Probably. Master Harmony is tired a lot. He has a second job looking after the temple in town. The money keeps the school going.'

Very softly, Master Harmony starts to snore. No one seems to notice.

There is nothing else for it. Valley sits. Then fidgets. Her bottom is numb. Her leg prickles with pins and needles. Time seems to be crawling like a tortoise through thick honey. Then, finally, *finally*, the last stick of incense has burned down signally the end of mediation. Valley can't get out of there quick enough.

The next lesson is literacy. With mounting impatience, Valley follows the other students to a building where a wooden plaque is displayed above a door: 'Small Study Hall'. The hall is cosy with rows of low desks and cushion seats and everyone settles in happily. Teacher Charity introduces herself and explains she is the headmaster and matron's daughter and Master Harmony's sister. She is a girlish, quieter version of Matron.

'For our literary lessons, you may work at your own pace. I will come around the classroom to

those who need help,' she tells them softly, as she makes her way down the row of tables to hand out text and exercise books.

This is again not what Valley had expected in a school for magical martial arts. *Is this going to be as hard as sitting still in silence for a whole lesson?* Valley ponders, dismayed. Fortunately for her, it isn't: she and Peony are very far ahead of the others in literacy, owing to Peony's mother teaching them after dinner every day. Peony is at the desk next to her and is in her element, immersed in her reading. However, Valley can scarcely concentrate. All her attention is on the water clock in the corner, which seems to have frozen.

By the time they had their mid-day meal, Valley could feel her excitement rising through her body and bubbling to the top of her head and ready to burst. She gulps down her rice. She is *so* ready for her magical martial arts training.

The first to finish her food, Valley dashes out along the covered walkway to the shabby squat-looking building of the training hall. She springs inside, full of expectation.

The training hall is... *a bit mundane?* Valley takes a shallow breath to take it in. At half the size and height of the other halls, but with none of the charm, the Valley has to confess to herself that it's bit of a let-down.

Perplexed, she wanders over to the only furniture in the hall: two low, wooden benches. On one bench there are some earthenware bowls and on the other, some earthenware trays. Valley presses her palms together hoping they are filled with something profound and magical, or at least interesting. The bowls and trays are filled with... *sand*. Her lips press together in disappointment.

With a sigh, she bends down to poke her finger at a tray, sliding the sand around, and picks up a few gritty grains with her fingertips and brings it closer to inspect.

*Yes, just dull, yellow sand.*

She pokes her finger in the tray again and glides it around to make a swirl. The bottom of the tray is glazed indigo blue so the effect is rather pretty. She is thinking that there is something very satisfying about moving her finger through the sand, when a wrinkled hand shoots out and taps twice at her bench.

Valley jumps, like a startled cat.

'No drawing in sand with your finger, new student,' says a croaky voice.

Valley spins around to see the teacher standing beside her: a twinkly eyed old woman with a bun of white hair, who looked like she was shrivelled to the size of an eight-year-old.

'You only get to draw on the sand trays when you become competent in the Stone Magical Martial Arts.'

She gives her a toothy grin. 'I am your magical martial arts teacher - call me Gran-gran. Everyone does, apart from my son, the headmaster.'

Peony and the other children are all trickling into the hall now and sit at a bowl or tray.

'New students start at Complete-Novice-Level 0. And should sit at the bowls of sand.'

'Yes, Gran-gran,' Valley says jumping to her feet. She gives her a quick bow with cupped hands and plonks herself down in front of a bowl next to Peony.

'Now, when you move from Beginner-Level 1 to Competent-Level 2, then you can draw sand pictures,' she grins. 'But not with fingers - by using your internal energy.'

Valley's eyes open wide.

## HIGHLY COMMENDED



## AQSA ISLAM

### *An Unlikely Princess*

Aqsa is a British Asian woman who also identifies as a Muslim. She has been a teacher for almost 15 years and has spent much of this time advocating for a more diverse curriculum in secondary schools.

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# AN UNLIKELY PRINCESS

## Chapter 3

My mother opened her mouth to reprimand me but before she could, she was interrupted by an amused voice. 'What's she done this time?' It was Anaya.

'Anaya,' my mother squealed, unable to suppress her joy. 'Darling, I thought you weren't coming until tomorrow. Nobody here seems to understand how dreadful my nerves are at the moment. I'm so glad you're here!'

'Thank you mother. I thought I'd come early in case anything needed doing but the palace looks fabulous. Lady Manahil will die of jealousy.' My mother positively glowed at the thought.

'What were you two arguing about?' Anaya's enquiry made my heart sink.

'Oh you are not going to believe this girl.' My mother's voice rose by an octave. 'She practically *threw* a champagne bottle at Clara Unbridge at Madame Butterfly's salon - in front of everyone!'

'I did not throw anything *mother*; the assistant who wasn't looking where she was going dropped the tray.'

'The assistant that you barged into -'

'By mistake -'

'And poor Clara -'

'Was nowhere near the bottle!'

'Will you stop talking over me and stop frowning. How many times have I told you frowning gives you wrinkles and who wants to be married to their grandmother? No one that's who.' My mother's anger had slipped away since Anaya was in the room which was one good thing about having Anaya about.

Anaya looked at the two of us and then spoke. 'Let me get this straight. Emaan, did you cause a beautician at Madame Butterfly's salon to drop a bottle of champagne that had been intended for Clara Unbridge when you are aware that the paparazzi follow her every move?' My sister's voice was piercing.

'Yes,' I began wearily. 'But it wasn't my fault, Ahd -'

'Emaan,' Anaya cut in tersely. 'Even you must know that Clara Unbridge is an extremely important figure in Raghbat and you embarrassing yourself in front of her so publicly, well it's a reflection on all of us.'

'That's exactly what I was telling her,' my mother chipped in. I had forgotten how they could be when they were together and united on something. 'I just dread to think what she'll do on the day of the actual ball. And her outfit! Oh Anaya!' My mother implored my sister. 'She keeps saying that she won't wear a dress.' Her voice actually trembled at the thought. Trembled!

'Oh she'll wear a dress,' Anaya promised. 'You leave her to me.' The glint in Anaya's eyes meant business. There was no escaping this ball now. Getting around my mother was one thing but getting around Anaya was altogether a different matter. Anaya was a make-it-work kind of princess who did not let anything stand in her way of social success, especially unruly sisters who refused to conform.

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Upstairs Anaya was on a mission. ‘Now remember Emaan, the world’s media is going to be here and the whole world will be watching. You cannot mess up. It’s too important.’ I gulped at the thought. ‘And not just for us, but think of Raghbat. Think how we’ll look to the rest of the world if we don’t pull this off and just think of the benefits if we do. When I married Hussain, there were people in the royal court of Sayr who thought that he could have done better because I’m from Raghbat and these are people that supposedly like me. So please, let us use this opportunity to show everyone what Raghbat is really made of and prove to them that whilst we may be a small kingdom, we know how to pack a punch.’ I’d forgotten that Anaya could be Raghbat’s one woman cheerleader; she was definitely the type of princess that made any kingdom look good and for the record, the people of Sayr love her.

‘Now we need to find you an outfit that represents Raghbat but that will also get people’s attention. You’re not young anymore Emaan. We really need to think about getting you betrothed.’

‘Betrothed,’ I spluttered almost falling out of the chair that I was sitting in. ‘I haven’t even dated properly yet. I barely made it to date two with Oliver before he decided to ask out Elizabeth or Maya. Or maybe both.’

Had Anaya forgotten my lousy track record with boys? Boys didn’t want to date the royal princess, not when their every move on a date would be captured by the media. It was hard enough being a teenager without having the whole nation mock your mistakes. Then of course there are the boys who do want to go out with me because I’m the royal princess and they want their fifteen minutes of fame so that they can come to the nation’s notice and be asked to become an actor/singer/influencer, or whatever it is that they actually want to do and what they hope will happen if they date me. Of course those boys are out... so that leaves... no one. Anaya was mental if she thought I was going to get betrothed anytime soon.

‘Stop babbling Emaan,’ Anaya instructed. ‘You aren’t young anymore; in case you’d forgotten you are sixteen and are no longer a child, however you may act.’ She didn’t even look up from the pile of clothes she was going through.

‘Now, I’ll say it again, slowly so you understand. The ball is being broadcast to the entire nation! You cannot afford to look bad. Look at Clara. You’re the same age, you should try to emulate her not criticise her. I really don’t understand why you don’t like her.’ Thankfully that seemed to be a rhetorical remark.

Her voice trailed off for a moment as she paused to look at an assortment of evening dresses, lenghas and embellished shalwar kameez that she had convened in front of her. ‘Here try this on.’ It was a black and gold banarasi lengha. I put it on and waited for Anaya’s verdict. ‘Too old,’ she declared. ‘I never understand why young unmarried princesses always end up looking like their mothers on occasions such as these. I rolled my eyes and decided not to point out that a moment ago I was practically a spinster.’

‘Try this one.’ She passed me a beaded gold and blush pink ball gown. I tried it on but could barely stand in the outfit. It was that heavy and that big. ‘Hmm, no that doesn’t look right,’ she said dismissing it instantly and turning around to inspect a white and silver sari which was eventually dismissed as elegant but boring. A scarlet lengha with another mammoth skirt was discarded for being too bridal and not the right look. A canary yellow chiffon dress got a ‘Hmm, with the right jumke earrings and maybe a couple of chudiyah, it could actually work.’ And yet it only got placed in the maybe pile.

And then I heard her say, ‘Oh. Try this.’ She spun round so fast that I nearly dropped the clothes

that she had been throwing my way. ‘Oh Emaan. That’s it! Isn’t it perfect?’

She wasn’t wrong. Whilst the other outfits looked more like something Anaya would wear and look amazing in, this was a little more me. The lengha top was fitted with small cap sleeves and was covered in gold, yellow and pink zari embroidery and mirrors. The lengha skirt was soft and flowy and covered in a bright floral print. It sounds daft but it actually made me feel like a princess.

‘Well?’ Anaya prodded wanting a reaction.

‘I like it.’

Anaya clapped her hands together. ‘With the right hair and right make up you’ll definitely make it into *Z* and *Diamond* and all the major glossies.’

‘Anaya,’ I sighed. ‘I don’t want to make it into the glossies. I just want to make it through this ball without embarrassing Raghbat and ideally without dropping any food on my outfit.’

‘You really don’t want to be in the glossies?’ Anaya’s forehead creased and the frown on her face showed that she just didn’t understand where I was coming from. ‘Not even in *Z*? It’s a really classy magazine and when it mentions any scandals it omits the names of the people involved.’

‘I don’t want to be in the glossies Anaya, or the newspapers, or the entertainment shows dedicated to the ball although I don’t suppose I can ignore the cameras completely. I really don’t want my picture taken at all. Don’t you think it’s weird that so many people care about the dresses and not the people wearing them or what they are actually like? It just feels wrong.’ I trailed off unsure how to put my feelings into words without offending Anaya.

‘But Em, the dresses and the clothes *are* important. They help people feel confident and help them become the people they want you to see and the person that they want to be. Clothes can change a person’s perspective and if clothes make people happy then what’s wrong with that?’

I shook my head. Sometimes there was no way of winning an argument with my sister. ‘I concede. Clothes are the most important thing in the land, even more important than chocolate. But I still won’t make it into *Z*, and not because I won’t look fabulous but for the simple reason that Cinderella will be on the front page of every newspaper and magazine.’

My sister’s eyes narrowed. Oops, I had forgotten that Cinderella was a thorny topic with Anaya. Now a long time ago, Anaya dated Peter Coulter or PC as he had been affectionately christened by *The Royal Star*. PC was the neighbouring Prince of Haiden, the kingdom that never sleeps and *The Royal Star* loved PC because for some reason it was okay for him to mess up and he did – constantly. I merely walk near someone that drops a champagne flute and I’m labelled a hazard warning and yet PC who once actually destroyed a restaurant because of a dare from some of his equally horrid and entitled friends, is written about as someone who just needs help and understanding.

If you think he sounds awful, you would be right, and whilst the restaurant debacle was terrible, (especially for the poor restaurant owner), it was the last straw for Anaya and she broke up with him and eventually met Hussain.

So that’s Anaya sorted but PC decided that he was heartbroken and had to share this with the world. He wrote tragic love songs, and by tragic, I mean really bad, and continuously declared his love for Anaya until he met *her*. The One. His soul mate. Cinderella. She was working for the Baker-Harris’ when she first locked eyes with PC. It was love at first sight. *The Royal Star* was the first to report the engagement; it was huge news. The girl who came from out of nowhere and saved PC, henceforth known as Prince Charming thanks to Cinderella constantly gushing to the media that he was a changed man and her Prince Charming. Personally I never understood what Anaya saw in PC

and honestly Hussain is lovely. He really cares about Anaya and is always doing things to make life better for people in Sayr; he's a proper prince and Anaya knows this, she just hates that the media tried to pit her against Cinderella and that Cinderella seemed to encourage this.

'Cinderella will be nothing by the time I've finished with you,' Anaya promised. Her eyes flashed a determined warning. 'By the time this ball is over, the only person that people will be talking about is you.'

If only I had known at the time how true these words would become, I may have gone out and found some poison apples of my own. It would have saved us all a lot of trouble.

## Chapter 4

'In here please.' My mother walks into the room and addresses almost a dozen delivery men. 'Yes, just put the crates down here, Cook knows what to do with them. And these flowers need to be in the other room. No, wait, come back they need to go to the back of the palace. No, wait, let's ask Farooq. Farooq!' she screeched, walking straight back out of the room followed by the delivery men.

And then there was silence again, well relatively. Around me people were bustling. Food was being delivered, tables were being set and then reset, china was being polished, (quite viciously by the look of it) and I was most definitely in the way.

'Any chance of breakfast?' Zain asked, walking into the room, his eyes half closed.

'Considering that it's nearly lunchtime I'd say that the answer is no.' How he managed to sleep in this racket was beyond me.

He smirked. 'Someone in this family has to represent the family at all the preliminary parties.' He pretended to sigh. 'It's a hard job being a prince sometimes.' I threw a bagel at him which missed his head.

'Where's the rest of the clan?'

'Mother's around, setting or resetting tables.'

'So best to stay away.'

'Anaya's gone to collect Hussain.'

'Ah, so time to be on my best behaviour with big brother around.'

'And father's at some conference ...'

'You mean he's in hiding.'

I laughed. 'Yes, that's about right and for the record I cannot wait for Hussain to arrive, at least then Anaya gets to spread her stares and glares around the room. Do you know that she thinks that I should be considering getting betrothed?!'

Zain rolled his eyes. 'Oh she mentioned the same thing to me. Don't worry it's just a married couple syndrome - one more reason to never to get married.' At my unconvinced face he tries again. 'And anyway you don't need to worry about any of that since no one in their right mind would want to marry you.' He laughed and then ducked before the orange in my hand had a chance to hit his head. Unfortunately the vase it broke was enough to have my mother scurrying back into the room.

'Emaan,' she glowered. 'What have you done? Oh you know what? I do not have the time for you to break more valuable objects. It's a good thing that you are going to be busy for the rest of the day.'

I groaned at the thought of more chores but what she said next literally took my breath away.

‘Right. Cinderella’s etiquette tour has reached its final leg and ends in Raghbat what with the ball being held here. You are going to attend her etiquette class and actually learn something. Her classes have had rave reviews and you are not going to let me down on this one. And you,’ she said turning to Zain, ‘are taking her.’

‘But Anaya-’ I tried.

‘Isn’t here. You are going and that is final.’

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I looked around the opulent room that Cinderella was hosting her event at and not for the first time, I wished I was somewhere else. I also wished I had a companion but Zain had abandoned me before both my legs were fully out of the car and even my continuous pleading hadn’t worked: he had refused point blank to come inside. Not that I blamed him. Cinderella had a core group of followers who all wanted to follow in her footsteps by becoming a princess and whilst Zain would always be my annoying big brother who spent far too much time sleeping during the day, most girls found him extremely charming and were often desperate to get his attention.

‘Emaan?’ A gentle voice behind me made me jump.

‘Niyah,’ I cried pleasantly surprised. Niyah Mhahran might be related to Ahd but they couldn’t be more different. She was two years younger than him, a little shy but she had the sweetest disposition. Nothing like her brother. ‘What are you doing here?’ I asked truly perplexed. If there was one person that didn’t need etiquette lessons, it was Niyah.

Her cheeks flushed red but it just made her look more adorable. ‘Well... Cinderella is so pretty and assured and I would love to be like her. I was so excited to hear that she would be running this class.’ She ended slightly breathlessly.

‘But Niyah,’ I couldn’t help protesting. ‘You’re great just the way you are; you don’t need to be like Cinderella.’

‘That’s what Ahd keeps telling me.’

‘Really?’ Okay I’m actually not that surprised; he may be an obnoxious toad but he does care about his little sister.

‘Yes, I’m so glad that he decided to stay. I’m petrified that I’m going to make a fool of myself in front of Cinderella.’

I was incredulous. ‘Ahd stayed?’ I was going to have serious words with Zain when I got home.

‘Yes,’ said Niyah. ‘He wasn’t going to but then he changed his mind and I still don’t know why he did because well,’ she said looking around the room, ‘it’s not really his thing.’

I was about to reiterate my surprise when I heard a familiar voice not too far from us. ‘And then’ I heard her say, ‘the photographer, Cario Festino said that he’d never shot such amazing pictures and you know that he’s shot anyone worth shooting.’ It was Clara Unbridge with her dedicated group of followers. I guess that explained why Ahd had stayed.

‘And you won’t believe what Cario told me.’ But before we had the chance to find out what Cario had told her, a trumpet bellowed and a man in a white and silver tux announced that Cinderella was ready for us which almost precipitated a stampede.

Seats were filling up fast. ‘Over there.’ Niyah pointed to where Ahd stood. He had saved three seats. I wondered if he has saved the third seat for Clara. It said something about the power of Cinderella

that girls were glued to the front and hadn't actually noticed Ahd. Niyah sat on one side of him leaving me to sit on the other. I didn't look at him; seeing him and Clara had just reminded me of the incident at Madame Butterfly's. I had almost blocked it out of my memory which would have happened sooner if The Royal Star hadn't felt the need to write about it with the headline 'Oops, She Did It Again'. One of these days I was going to have to work on my lack of coordination if only to annoy the writers at *The Royal Star*.

'So,' whispered Ahd. 'Do you think she'll tell us that it's because you're worth it and swish her hair like she does in the commercial? Because that *might* almost make this thing bearable.'

'Shhh. No one is forcing you to be here.'

'Technically,' began Ahd but he was cut off by the silence that descended upon the hall and then through a smog of silver dust, in walked Cinderella. She looked resplendent in a silver evening gown even though it was early afternoon but hey, the girl's got an image to uphold.

'Ladies,' began Cinderella. 'Thank you all for coming today and thank you for helping yourself become the best possible you. Everyone sitting in this room right now is equal, titles do not matter in this room; what matters is that we all desire to better ourselves so that we can improve our lives and the lives of those around us.' She paused as a smattering of applause broke out.

'So let us begin. The first thing that I want to remind all you ladies of are the three Ps. Now who can tell me what they are?' Hands shot up in the air. 'Yes, why don't you tell us?' She pointed to a petite red head who sounded delirious to have been chosen.

'The three Ps are pretty, poise and perfection.'

'Wonderful. Now you might be wondering what the three Ps have to do with betterment and etiquette but they underpin everything that is good and proper about you.'

In fact I thought to myself, it is the three Ps that help us create a civilised society just as Cinderella opened her mouth and said, 'In fact, it is the three Ps that make us a civilised society.'

I couldn't believe it. She had stolen her lecture from *Lady Coquette's Guide to A Princess in Waiting*; a book out of print as it was written almost a hundred years ago and was also a little ridiculous. It was a book that my mother constantly referred to as I was growing up and a book that I disliked for its sexist and traditional ideas about what being a princess entailed. Did no one else mind that she was completely plagiarising her lecture and that it was in no way original? But as I looked around the room all I saw were enthralled faces; even Niyah was mesmerised.

'Now the three Ps make us the people that we want to be. Let's start with the first one. Pretty. What matters is being pretty on the inside, a person that acts ugly looks ugly and an individual that is kind and considerate, well they are the ones that are truly pretty. But that's not to say that presentation doesn't matter, quite the contrary and note,' she tittered, 'another P'. Her audience laughed hysterically at her feeble attempt at humour.

'Ladies, the way you present yourself to the world matters as it tells the world how you feel about yourself and your self-worth. So those of you who wear jeans and t-shirts that have seen better days, well, what you are saying is that I don't care about myself. And if you don't care about yourself then how can you expect someone else to care about you?' I couldn't believe that girls were actually scribbling down her every word. 'Now girls that look polished, well they present themselves correctly.'

'You don't seriously believe this do you?' Ahd whispered in my ear.

'Well,' I said looking down at my jeans and t-shirt which had obviously seen better days. 'Since this is my go to outfit, clearly I don't believe it. It's daft.' He grinned briefly and nodded his head in

approval.

Cinderella continued. 'Then there are those that say that a true lady should be a certain weight but that's ridiculous.' Finally some common sense from Cinderella. 'Now if you weren't born with a petite frame you will never be petite and if you aren't naturally tall and willowy then don't expect to turn yourself into tall and willowy. It's just not your natural body shape. However, that's no excuse for not making the best of the body you do have. Weight gain for example is something that we can all control and truthfully ladies it's something that we all have a duty to ourselves to ensure.' I couldn't help groaning out loud at this point and was given a few unappreciative glances by the row in front of us.

'As a rule, women look best when slim. It's that simple. And achieving a slim, lean frame isn't difficult so there's no need to feel apprehensive. Just follow my no carbs meal plans on my website which is updated weekly and follow the exercise plan on my new app, 'Once upon a time... 6 weeks to a magical new you' and you'll soon have the body you want and one that'll help you on your quest to becoming the best you possible.'

I was fuming and was hoping she could see the evil glares I was sending her way. Some of the girls in the audience were as young as 12. How could she tell them that they had to look a certain way and be a certain weight? It was pure madness. No wonder no one was ever happy with the way they looked when you had horrible and completely unrealistic messages being sent out by people that had a public voice.

I may have been in the minority though as girls were raising their hands furiously with questions about the best foods to be eating. It sounded like the answer was nothing. In front of us two girls were arguing about the merits of Cinderella's food plans versus the Zone X diet. Both sounded completely unappealing.

'Ignore everything that she's saying right now,' Ahd instructed Niyah who looked troubled. 'Exercising and a healthy diet is fine but not eating isn't.'

'I agree Niyah,' I chimed in leaning over him. 'Size 0 is not attractive whatever she might think. Even Anaya agrees and Anaya definitely doesn't do diets.' Niyah looked conflicted, on the one hand she idolised Cinderella but she adored Anaya and in return Anaya always had a lot of time for her. 'And anyway,' I sighed dramatically. 'A life without chocolate cake? Not worth living.' Niyah giggled and turned back to listening to the lecture.

'Thanks,' Ahd whispered seriously. Concern was still etched on his face about how his sister was responding to Cinderella's *advice*.

'Now let's move onto the second of our three Ps: poise. It is essential that a lady always remains poised. She must remain calm in the face of all adversity as that is what sets her apart and that poise must also extend to her carriage. You must sit up straight, you must stand tall and glide like an angel when you walk. Always serene.'

Again I felt uncomfortable and idiotic because I didn't understand what she was saying. Take Anaya for example; a lot of the time she's not serene and she definitely doesn't glide when she walks. She walks confidently, and yes people stare when she walks but you can't help it. You can sense that she has a purpose but gliding? How did one glide anyway and did one buy special gliding shoes because I had trouble with heels as it was.

'And then of course, there's perfection.' My thoughts were interrupted by Cinderella's final P. 'Now ladies, no one is perfect - yet! Perfection is something that we must all strive for.' She was practically on tiptoes with her arms above her head. 'It must be our collective goal and whoever tells you that you

cannot be perfect must be ignored. Perfection is in everyone's reach and by following the rules that I have outlined today, we can, all of us be perfect and the best possible you so that all those around us, including our loved ones, benefit and ultimately society becomes better for it.' She finished to the sound of applause and a standing ovation.

I rolled my eyes and noticed Ahd doing the same thing. Clearly he hadn't been taken in by the absurdity of it either. I was pleasantly surprised. It had been a long time since Ahd and I had been on the same wavelength. In fact, bar today the last time that we agreed on something was four years ago when we both agreed not to spend the holidays together at camp.

At this point Cinderella exited the room but not before telling us that we were being given a refreshment break. Some of the girls nibbled daintily on food but most only had drinks in their hands. I grabbed a large slice of cake and a glass of soda in defiance of Cinderella's stupid rules and then scanned the room for Niyah. As soon as the lecture had finished the girls had finally noticed Ahd and there had been a stampede to get to him. In the stampede I had lost her. Whatever I thought of Ahd, he was considered extremely attractive. Or so I had been told by my mother, my sister, my friends and even friends of friends who knew that I knew him and wanted to know what his favourite colour was or what attributes he was looking for in a future partner. Attributes. They had actually used that word and didn't seem to care how odd it was that they were asking a stranger this information.

Niyah was surrounded by a group of girls – a group that included Clara Unbridge who was fully focused on Ahd. She whispered something in his ear which seemed to make him laugh and I stopped to ponder what she had said that was so amusing since I had only ever heard her talk about herself or her favourite things. Clara loved being surrounded by people but I got the impression that she didn't actually like them and I wondered if Ahd could see that. Or maybe he didn't care and was dazzled by her beauty. Was that all that mattered?

I was so engrossed in watching the way Clara was twirling her hair and stroking his arm that I didn't see Cinderella walking towards me. And when she called me name, I jumped in surprise, my plate toppling towards her, chocolate cake making contact with her sparkling silver evening gown. A collective gasp filled the room. Cinderella looked down at her dress and a dangerous look flitted across her face. She didn't look impressed but she smiled tightly and addressed the room. 'It's just like I was saying earlier. Titles don't mean anything in this room. We are all here to better ourselves and learn how to conduct ourselves in *public*.'

'Now it's time for the group activities and *Princess Emaan*, why don't you lead the way back while I go change?' She flashed me a look of disdain and left. And just when I thought that things couldn't get any worse, I saw a camera man following me and a sign which said: Filming for Cinderella's new reality TV show taking place here today: 'Cinderella's Guide to Etiquette'. My mother was going to kill me.

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## HIGHLY COMMENDED



**SARAH NAZIR**

*A Minute Anthology*

Sarah is 18, a first generation immigrant and once again at a crossroads in her life. Her poetry is reflective of homesickness and grief and of yearning. It has carried her through these past few years and she proudly presents it to you, in the hope that you come to appreciate it in the manner she has.

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## A MINUTE ANTHOLOGY

### a different hunger

*(winner of the 2020 Poems On the Move Competition)*

in austere times even the children learn to save  
to hoard precious novelties for some other rainy day  
in a world that only rains; we have forgotten  
to play, remembered some carnal desire  
to yearn instead. austerity pick-pocketed  
all our hopes, so in turn we learnt to down-size  
our dreams, to envision only in black and white  
realities. no artists live here only  
accountants and administrative clerks and  
tax auditors – we surrendered to our futures,  
hoping to amend our pasts,  
left our presents untouched.

### love, in the movies

*(published and commended in Foyle's Children's Prize in 2019)*

sometimes I'm afraid we're just a little too good to be true  
a little too daydream-fantasy-come-to-life;  
a cheesy chick-flick with the quiet girl and the dreamy boy  
- every film critic's worst nightmare and a film we'd never watch.  
sat in that coffee shop in Cambridge on that June morning,  
the air heavy with moisture and superficial comfort  
i bet we're a sight to behold. outside, humid air shifts  
at the sigh of an infrequent wind, etches leaf-blown cursives  
into a world that seems to thirst for sickly sweet poetry.  
from this side of the glass the crowds are goldfish in a tank:  
shiny, slippery, volatile as they restlessly weave in  
and out of one another, their ruckus a pale sound  
against the rhythm of your easy breaths as you gently doze.  
i bet any good composer could make music out of you.  
in the real world, that burdensome air would render touch foreign,  
quietly from delicacy to prickly nuisance and yet  
my head rests perfectly in the crook of your neck,  
as if we were two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle finally in place.

as is the common cliché, time seems to hang still  
long enough for me to memorise every fold of your knuckle  
as your hand sits languidly in mine, long enough  
for every particle of glowing air to settle in our seams,  
seemingly bind us together forever. I wait  
for the sound of the clapperboard or the director's call or  
for you to stir and rise and exit, but it does not come.  
for now, i'll settle for this daydream,  
mark it in place in my memory, forget to anticipate  
our imminent untangling, that graceless separation  
as the light hardens and everything becomes a little too real.

## moth, at thirty-past-midnight

all life is precious and of god's might  
until there is you, moth, haphazardly  
circling my ceiling light at thirty-past-midnight.  
and then it is only a divine nuisance.  
we do our private dance in mournful shadows  
with only four walls to know of our little  
imprudence. I'd call us a match made in heaven,  
well aware we're too good for this salted earth.  
come love, let me gaze upon thee until mine eyes  
birth one thousand splendid suns to draw thee closer!  
with vision promising no virtue, only light,  
come shiver and shrivel, seethe my battle name, seek  
phantoms of other brother moths on my itching skin,  
starve for a sallow grace you think exists therein.

still, in the nights that come, I will know no respite  
lives for the numb. these hands bear wasted blood.  
in all truth, death is devoid of every dignity but  
perhaps a little mercy will inspire a more divine one,  
bring peace as we all draw closer to the bright light  
promising darkness one cannot fight.

## the secret garden, reimagined

when the gardener can sleep, he dreams of birds  
caught in red netting, then crushed in the palm of his hand.

most nights, though, he lies musing of desire and devotion  
– of the sickness of the eyes and the goodness of the hand.

he thinks especially of the cherry tree tilting over the walls,  
thankless and stubborn and flirting with the autumn breeze,

a swaying temptress with her glowing white blossoms,  
cradling the black night like a lover. she makes him seethe

sear, unsleep so instead he calls to the mother of all things  
for guidance, for constance, for mercy; she does not answer.

so, at dawn he shears her. yet still by june she is top-heavy,  
an exhibitionist ripe red and glowering in his eyeline.

in the end only when the boys have come and gone does he sleep.  
when they come first grasping air, then pulling leaf and bough

leaving her collapsed in on herself, stock-still in the wind, watching  
them step on pavement cracks, dripping cherry blood all the way home.

## growth

ask my body how many times it has been at war  
with itself and it will answer back in epithets  
of blood rain and cleansing fire in metaphors  
of unrefined poignance and in tales of affecting cruelty.

then you will ask for proof so it will answer back  
in exhaustion and weary silence with hands unyielding  
because no one ever did care for wounds  
which could not be seen or for once  
upturned battlegrounds that now do grow poppies.

## the disappearing act

i speak multiple languages, but i'm most fluent  
in english platitudes. and like the british raj,  
i have a secret talent; i call it the 'disappearing act'.

at eight, the first boy to spit "paki" at me wasn't white,

he was brown like the perfect cup of chai and between  
all the renditions of hymns and playground rhymes  
he must have overlooked the dissonance in his own words.  
his vernacular was hard to digest under the taste of  
my broken english, but venom is a universal language.

(it could be worse.)

and in the habit of the British, they stole.  
first, my words, and then my pride.  
but “paki” was always mine to savour.  
in the first years, young سراس became sarah,  
no matter my insistence and in the end,  
as became my habit, i relinquished.

(it could be worse.)

i have swallowed too much silence when  
he and others like him – and myself –  
told me to go back home; i wish they knew  
i only became a “paki” the moment i entered  
the golden gates of ol’ britannia, green passport  
in earnest hands, unready for metamorphosis.  
so instead, to dispel my green shadow ghost,  
i discussed the weather in lunchtime queues,  
donned skinny jeans, deafened by pop music,  
became obsequious, pulled a disappearing act.

(it couldn’t be worse)

but now my heart’s in the obstreperous –  
even the tick atop a lion trills it’s tune after a time.  
my tune is in reclaiming the name my mother gave me,  
giving myself room to breathe within the extensions  
of all its syllables: سراس; it’s in blasting qawwali’s  
from my father’s taxi on the way to pick up  
takeaway curries and in spontaneously quoting  
soppy desi dialogues at dinner. all this is mine to claim.  
with it, i claim the burqa clad sisters  
with nike’s underneath, the uncle on the bus  
speaking fervent punjabi, the local boys playing  
football in the park at 1am after taraweeh.

my restless tongue and i would gladly go home now,  
to where the weather is never a surprise,  
to replant my youth's pride in hometown fields  
that whisper mercy, to let it flower on sun-thirsting skin,  
sprout ivory molars in place of all that they took from me.  
with it, i will grow, a monument to the conquered,  
spreading limbs into a golden darkness, conquering.  
no more disappearing acts now.

## HIGHLY COMMENDED



### SERENA DECORDOVA

#### *Georgina Mensah's Secret Diary*

Serena, debut children's author, loves writing and walking. Parent, primary school teacher and education consultant, Serena advises parents, schools, private tutors and book clubs for 7-13-year-olds. Although she now calls London home, Serena was born and raised in Bristol and is a Bristolian at heart. Having worked with vulnerable children and young people for over 20 years in the charity and education sectors, she now wants to spend as much time as possible immersing herself in fictional lands and writing.

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# GEORGINA MENSAH'S SECRET DIARY

## MARK

“Ouch! You’re hurting me!”

“Bet it doesn’t hurt that much and someone’s just being dramatic and OTT as usual,” I call out from the hallway removing my trainers and tossing them into the cupboard under the stairs.

“Ouch! Mum. Stop! You’re pulling it!”

Georgina’s screeching pierces my ears as I enter the kitchen. Unfortunately for me, Mum, Dad, the neighbours and probably the entire street, every Monday evening during term time is the same at the Mensah residence. Between the hours of 5pm and 9pm, there is zero chance of any peace and quiet after a long hard day at school during what Mum calls ‘*Hair Wars*.’

“If you’d bother listening to mum’s advice about putting your swimming hat on properly, rather than letting yourself get distracted by your silly chatty friends, then your hair would stay dry and be less tangled.”

“Stop telling me what to do Mark, you’re not the boss of me.” Georgina growls. “You’ve no idea how it feels to get your hair done. You’ve barely got any.”

My twin sister’s tone and facial expression tell me that I am annoying her, a skill I’ve been mastering for the last 12 years. I prop myself up against the silver American style fridge freezer, fold my arms in a deliberately cocky pose and continue with the best impression of a Ghanaian uncle that I can muster.

“Chale girl, you should know by now that afro hair and chlorine water are not friends. At all. Oh, first you don’t wear your hat properly and then you complain when it is tangled and needs to be fixed. Every week it’s the same ting, we are forced to put up with you polluting our ears with this crying and moaning. Ah, maybe you don’t like your hair eh? Get our father to cut it oh, short like mine.”

Bursting into laughter, entertained by my own jokes, mum is also amused and struggles to suppress the smile forming across her face. I hazard a guess that fifty percent she’s laughing with me but, she’s also most definitely tickled by the weakness of my West African accent. Georgina on the other hand is less impressed, there is fire in her eyes as she balls her fingers into tight fists and adjusts herself in her seat. The metal legs of the grey leather dining chair that she is sitting on in the centre of the kitchen creak against the tiled floor.

“Go away Mark. Everything you say is so rude!”

“RBT Georgina darling, RBT.”

“What does that even mean Mark?!”

“AKA ‘Rude But True’. Keep up will you.”

Georgina rises out of her chair glaring at me.

“Mum! Will you tell him to leave me alone. Please?”

“Georgina, sit. Calm down and lower your voice. Mark, behave and stop annoying your sister. I need to get these twists finished, so that we can have dinner at a reasonable hour this evening and you’re not helping.” Raising her head and looking straight at me, mum adds, “I’m sure you’ve got some violin practise to do.”

“Mum” I groan. “Seriously? I’m really tired, cross country killed me today, can’t I have a day off?”

I am in no mood for violin practise tonight, my whole body aches, today has been hotter than hot

and all I want to do now is crash onto the small blue sofa, inhale the fragrant aroma of the fresh basil and garlic in the pasta sauce that is simmering on the stove and watch the re-run of 'The Fresh Prince of Bel Air' that is playing on the 40 inch flatscreen that Georgina's eyeballs are glued to. I've noticed for a long time now that the usual Mensah rules limiting television consumption seem to be miraculously non-existent whenever Georgina is getting her hair done, Mum says it reduces

Georgina's fussing because it gives her something to focus on. I disagree. In my opinion, she's still full of fuss.

"Those scales won't learn to play themselves" mum chimes with a slight tilt of her head and a smile that tells me it's probably the right time for me to exit the kitchen.

"Oooh Mark's tired, let's bring out the violin" Georgina taunts me in an annoying singing voice and begins mimicking a bowing action with her right arm as if she is playing the violin.

As mum shakes her head and turns to the charcoal granite island top to squeeze a little more hair conditioner into her hand, I can't resist the urge, as is customary in any battle of the words with a member of my household, to have the final word, mouthing,

"Drama queen."

"Mark Kwesi Mensah! Will you just..."

"Sorry, sorry mum, I'm going, I'm going."

I decide that I'll let her have this temporary victory. It's time to retreat. A Mensah parent calling out your full name is basically code for 'I'm running out of patience.' Let's just say, 12 years out of the womb I know our mother well enough to know that failing to stop soon, will almost certainly mean my evening ending badly and I am not keen on that. As far as adults go, Mum rates pretty highly in terms of cool, but it's still best to avoid getting into her bad books.

Leaning her big head awkwardly to the left, Georgina's mouth forms a self-satisfied smirk, hovering her right hand in front of her abs, she sticks out her index finger and thumb to make an 'L' shape and mouths the word "loser" back at me contorting her smug face in a way that makes it look as if she has just sucked the world's sourest lemon. In my opinion she looks super silly whenever she does this, but in her head, she thinks it looks cool.

Me, a loser? Duh, never that, I think as I walk away chuckling to myself. I can count on one hand the number of times that I've lost anything in my life. My darling sister has been getting a little too big for her boots these days, I think she needs a little reminder about who the senior sibling is. I need to teach her lesson. I'll give her a little surprise or two to wipe that smirk off her face for a while.

## GEORGINA

"Hey Dad, what about me?" I ask looking up at mum and dad, trying to sound cheerful. Dad kisses mum hello first. As usual. He kisses me hello last. As usual. I'm always left until last for most things in this family, because I'm the *youngest*. I wish I'd made it out first, but Mark beat me by three mins and thirty seconds and he never lets me forget it. I'm glad that Mum has almost finished with my hair. I love it when I get a fresh hairdo, I just don't love the process. I've been sitting in the same position for the last ninety minutes and my bum is completely and utterly numb.

"Hey gorgeous. Wow. Your hair looks amazing. I hope you've thanked your mother. Did you have a good day?"

“Well, I was having a good day until Mark started being annoying and rude... Anyway, it doesn’t matter.” Mum’s tap on my shoulder reminds me that I promised her I’d work harder on letting things go when people make me cross, but it’s really hard to do. I’m still a bit mad with my brother for teasing me. “Thanks for doing my hair mum.” I say as I give her a tight squeeze around her waist. Mum puts her arms around me too and squeezes me back. Mum hugs are the best, they make everything better.

“OK guys, dinner in five minutes.” Mum says loud enough so that Mark can hear her from upstairs where he is probably doing something that he shouldn’t be doing like reading on the toilet or playing Mine Craft on his laptop.

“Hmmm meatballs, I can’t wait, they smell delicious. I’ll be right back Mum I’m just going to the toilet.”

“Georgina, I said five, don’t pull one of your disappearing tricks on me.”

“I’ll be right back Mum.” I reply. Mum knows that I’m not really going to the toilet. I’m just going to do the same thing I do each time I get new twists, braids or cornrows. It’s part of my routine. I need to check how I look and of course do a few poses” I really wish that Mum would let me wear my afro out to school but she says that *‘it’s protective styles only during term time.’* The only time she ever lets me wear my hair loose is on special occasions, sometimes during the holidays or when she is way too tired to stand and style it after washing it. I guess it’s partly my fault. On the few occasions when she has let me wear it loose to school, I’ve come back with it super tangled, because all of my classmates have been so fascinated with it that they just had to touch it and play with it. Mum says it’s they’re probably just curious about the texture because it’s so different to most of the people in my class.

Midway up the stairs I hear the door to the second-floor bathroom close, so I stop in the hallway outside of my parents’ room instead. I can’t help smiling as soon as I see my reflection in the enormous black wooden framed mirror. My hair looks amazing. The only problem with using our hallway mirror is that I get zero privacy, which is super annoying if anyone catches me practising my poses.

“Georgina, Georgina, Georgina.” Dad chuckles.

I jump in surprise, “Dad, you scared me. I didn’t hear you come up.”

“Stop admiring yourself and get downstairs. It’s time to eat, we’re all starving, plus me and your Mum want to have a quick chat with you and your brother after dinner.”

I wonder what they want to talk to us about and hope it’s something exciting.

## MARK

“I’m glad that you are both up for it,” Dad beams.

I’m trying my best to look enthusiastic about the chess tournament, that Dad has just told us about because I am, it’s an amazing opportunity, but my mind is elsewhere. I’m wondering if I may have taken things perhaps a little too far. It’s not because I regret doing it. I don’t. I enjoyed it and she deserves it. I’m just not really looking forward to the aftermath. When Georgina finds out, Mum and Dad will find out, which means only one thing. Pure *wahala*. *Wahala* if you didn’t know, is another word for trouble. I hear my Nigerian uncles aka (my dad’s friends) say it whenever they are over for one of Dad’s epic barbeques and they start competing with each other over whose wife creates the most *wahala*.

“Georgina, this will be your first tournament so just relax, try and play a quick online game each

day, along with doing your daily tactics and you'll be fine. Your openings are really solid now, me and Mark will give you some tips to help you improve your middle and end game. Mark, you're more than ready for this. With all the online chess you've been playing, the work you've put in with your coach and the school tournaments, I think you've got a really strong chance of finishing in the top three."

"Thanks Dad," I reply. My faking it skills are not the greatest and I'm struggling to hide the sinking feeling that I have in the pit of my stomach.

"Mark, everything ok with you?" mum probes in her caring voice and looking at me intently from the opposite side of the oak dining table. "You've been a bit quiet this evening and you haven't finished your dinner. My meatballs not quite up to standard today?" Mum jokes.

I manage a smile. There's no hiding anything from our Mum, she notices everything. I sometimes wonder if she has mind reading powers. Meatball Monday, is my favourite day of the week, so, not finishing them today is an attention-grabbing error. Mum's meatballs have got to be the best in the world. She makes everything from scratch, well except the pasta.

"Mum, thanks. The meatballs were super succulent and scrumptious today. I'm just not that hungry, I had a big lunch. Dad you should ask Mum for her recipe," I tease, attempting to divert attention away from my mood.

"I should ask your mum?" Dad laughs.

It's a well-known fact that Dad is a really good cook, like proper restaurant type food. My Grandmother says he's too Westernised because he doesn't cook traditional Ghanaian food all the time, but Dad likes the variety and so do we.

"It's true Dad, I agree," Georgina adds, nodding her head with enthusiasm.

"I've told you guys before. Ask your mother where she learnt how to make meatballs and who taught her."

Dad is super competitive about everything. It's true he is better than Mum with most dishes, but meatballs and chicken curry are the exception. Mum's chicken curry is epic. The combined aroma of Caribbean curry powder, jerk seasoning, fresh ginger and thyme dance the Azonto around your nostrils and the soft texture of succulent chicken thighs just melt in your mouth with an explosion of spices that leave your gums tingling for ages.

"Yes, your dad taught me how to make meatballs, I just took his recipe and made some renovations, you could call it a form of upcycling."

Mum's retort causes an eruption of laughter amongst us all.

"Let me help you with the recipe Dad, I always help Mum when she makes them. Do you want to take notes?" Georgina giggles.

"Georgina be quick please because you need to be going up to get yourself ready for bed soon."

"OK, Mum I'll be quick tell me if I get anything wrong or miss any of the steps. Step one, you chop all of the vegetables very small to make the seasoning. When I say small, I mean small. We don't want massive chunks of vegetables in the middle of the meatballs. The flavours are the most important thing. Mum puts in shallots, garlic, peppers, carrots, courgettes and spinach. Step two, fry all the vegetables in olive oil, this is when you need to add the vegetable stock pot. After that two big teaspoons of garlic paste, ginger paste and jerk. I always add a bit more jerk when Mum is not looking for that extra spice. Did I forget anything?"

In normal circumstances I would be rolling my eyeballs by now, but Georgina rabbiting on this evening is actually doing me a favour. So instead, I turn to her, give her the thumbs up in support of

Mum's nods of approval and say, "Sounds right to me."

"Thanks Mark. Next, you need to pour all the fried veg into a bowl and then add the super finely chopped spinach to cool it down. Once all the heat is gone, mix it with the mince then add some milk and some breadcrumbs and bring it altogether. Have you got all of that Dad?"

"So, your mum can cook meatballs. What else?" Dad asks laughing.

"Excellent, Georgina, well remembered. Come on now, it's getting late. you guys should head up. Georgina you can use the bathroom first." Mum says.

I feel positively sick. I am starting to wonder how cross Mum and Dad are going to be with me and what level of punishment I'll get this time. If Dad decides to give me one of his talks, we could be up for hours. I'm hoping that my efforts in buttering mum up with compliments about her cooking this evening and giving Georgina some positive feedback will be remembered when Georgina finds out what I have done, but I'm not so sure.

## GEORGINA

"Come in." I say as I hear three light taps on my bedroom door. I am not expecting to see Mark walk in. He leaves my door open and rests against the purple wall by my wardrobe. I'm already snuggled up under my zebra print duvet.

"Hey, Georgina. I just wanted to talk to you. I'm, I'm, I'm sorry I teased you earlier about your hair and I'm ..."

Mark is interrupted mid-sentence by bellowing from the parents in the living room below.

"Mark, Georgina, why can we still hear footsteps? If I come upstairs and you're not both in bed, you'll both be in trouble. I want lights out in sixty seconds," Dad calls,

"Uh I, I better go, I just thought I come and say goodnight."

"Night bro, see you in the morning, have a nice sleep."

What is wrong with my brother? He never comes in to say goodnight to me and rarely apologises unless he's told too. He thinks he's too cool for that. I'm slightly tempted to check outside the window to see if I can spot a pig in the air. I think that he's acting a little bit weird, there was even weirdness over dinner. I thought he'd be pumped about the whole chess tournament, it's definitely more his and Dad's thing than mine. I just play to keep Dad happy. I guess he probably is just tired, but it was nice of him to say sorry. Even if he didn't totally mean it. I reach over to my bedside table to pick up my glitter gel pen and then I sit up a little so that I can take my diary out from under my pillow. It's an A5 diary covered in gold sequins which turn pink when you rub them in the opposite direction. I love it. It's where I can clear my mind and share all my inner thoughts and feelings. I won't write much tonight as I am super tired and I need to be done before Mum or Dad come up to check if we're in bed with the lights off.

I open my diary, my eyes do a double take, I gasp for air as my heart skips a beat. I cannot believe what I am seeing on the first page beneath where I have written in beautiful calligraphy 'The Secret Diary of Georgina Mensah' in thick black Sharpie ink, it reads 'EDITED BY THE ONE AND ONLY MARK KWESI MENSAH FACT CHECKER EXTRAORDINAIRE'

Saturday 25th July

## Left Luggage

OMG! Today has been super stressful!! I can't believe my suitcase was almost left behind in the airport! I was trying out all the amazing perfumes in the duty-free shop, which was A M A Z I N G! I think I got a bit distracted and then we got a hot chocolate and croissant in Pret, which was super yummy, somehow we or I guess I should say I must have left it at Pret and I didn't realise until we got on the plane, when I did a little scream and was a little bit upset, ok I confess it was a loud scream and it was more like a meltdown but then the cabin crew told me not to worry and made me feel really special whilst they sent someone to find it and thank goodness they did because I was just terrified that I was going to have to come to Portugal with no luggage and be forced to wear my Beastly Brother's Stinky Pants, just like when we went camping in Kent and he forgot to pack my rucksack in the car!

G

- **Firstly, how dare you refer to me as "Beastly?! Stinky pants?! You're lucky you're not here right now.**
- **Secondly, who leaves their luggage hanging around in the airport? I've never done that. I would never do that.**
- **Thirdly, why do you always need to emotionally overreact to every situation? Was it necessary to interrupt that softly spoken British Airways lady with that blood curdling scream? It is one of the top 3 most embarrassing moments of my life. Did you see the way all the other passengers on the plane looked at us? The flight hadn't even started and I couldn't wait for it to be over. You need to grow up!**

MKM

Monday July 26th

## Why can't girls do what boys do?

OK, I admit it, it probably wasn't the most appropriate thing to do, but I really thought it would work. I didn't make a mess on purpose and it wasn't as bad as mum made out. I was just feeling a bit jealous; I don't see why Mark and Dad get to stand up and I have to sit down. It's not fair. "I hate sitting down to pee.

Toilet seats are disgusting, stinky and dirty. I hate sitting on them, also it takes way too much time to cover them in loo roll. By standing up I was simply doing my bit for the environment too. It's Dad's fault that mum and Mark found out if he hadn't laughed so loudly, we could have just kept it a secret between the two of us. Can't wait to go back to the beach tomorrow. My sand sculptures are going to be EPIC x

G

- **Typical Georgina, there's always an injustice in your eyes.**
- **Number 1, if someone gave me 50p for every time you screeched the words "that's not fair" I'd be totally loaded.**
- **Number 2, you and Dad are both seriously lacking in volume control skills. Your attempts to speak quietly were pathetic, we heard you say 'Sssssshhh Dad. Please don't tell mum' so it was obvious that you were up to something.**
- **Number 3, your little diary entry here plays things down a little bit. The place was an absolute mess!**

**Those white ceramic tiles were covered in a golden lake I thought mum's eyeballs were going to pop out of their sockets, she could barely get her words out.**

**MKM**

*Tuesday August 15th*

**My Hero**

*So, you know how much I love books.*

*I've got to tell you about the most A M A Z I N G book I read today, it's about this woman called Rosa Parks and she lived in America and can you believe it that when she got on the bus that she had to sit at the back because she was black?! One day she just refused to go to the back and sat at the front of the bus and then there were lots of protests and she got told off but, in the end, they changed the rules and that made it better for all the black people in America. It's not easy standing up for yourself sometimes especially at school with your friends, but Rosa did and I am so proud of her. When I'm older I am going to be brave and strong just like her*

G

**1. You occasionally surprise me Georgina and once in a while impress me. (Of course, I'd never admit this to your face or say it aloud and if you tell anyone, I'll deny it)**

**2. You are still most definitely the silliest and most annoying sister in the world,**

**3. Also, you should really learn to use a full stop your punctuation skills are atrocious. (I guess there probably isn't room for more than one genius in the family.)**

**MKM**

*Wednesday 16th August*

**Running for my life**

*I am so cross with my whole family right now. THEY ARE MEAN and I mean ALL OF THEM. Mum, Dad and my BEASTLY BROTHER Mark. I have just had the most and I mean the most seriously terrifying experience of my life and did they help? No! Not one of them. They all laughed in my face! I wish there was someone who I could report them to. I was on my bed reading that book, about the horrible dentist and when I got to page 54 and (I'm taking a deep breath, my heart is still beating super-fast just thinking about it) It said that the eyeball was under the pillow and that made me think that the eyeball was right there under my pillow, when I read those words, I was so terrified I threw that book on the floor and ran for my life! I never ever want to see that book again. EVER! I can't even go back into my room tonight. At least they've let me sleep in the spare room and they brought me my pillow so I still get to write in you and tell you all about my day. I'm so glad Grandma and Grandad are coming tomorrow, when I tell them what's happened they'll tell them off. Mr Mark forgets that I'm the only granddaughter, so that makes me the favourite grandchild. He'll regret laughing at me.*

G

**1. Georgina, Georgina, Georgina. There is never a dull moment in the Mensah house, when you're around.**

**2. Maybe I should be a more caring type of guy, but that evening was ridiculously hilarious. It has to be**

**the funniest night ever! I have never in my entire life heard of anyone running away from a BOOK?! How, can paper and ink be scary? You were screaming and yelling as if someone or something was chasing you. I thought a rat had jumped onto your bed and bitten you or something.**

**3. Once mum and dad started laughing their heads off, I had no choice but to join in and laugh too (it would have been rude not too - right?). I must say I quite enjoyed the peace and quiet when you stopped speaking to us for 2 whole days.**

**4. As for your delusions about being the favourite grandchild, not even worthy of an eyeroll.**

**MKM**

*Thursday 17th August*

**Mr Not so perfect after all**

*I spoke to Grandma today and she made me feel loads better. In fact, she did more than that. She reminded me of some things that happened when we were younger. Like when we were 5 years old, he drew all over Grandma and Grandad's dining room wall? It was in pencil but they had just decorated and it was massive. OMG! I have never and would never dare to do anything like that. Secondly, he tried to put the blame on me for smearing E45 lotion all over mum's pillow. How rude is that? Grandma had more to tell me, but we had to stop talking as Mark came into the Livingroom, I need to speak to her again about this tomorrow before they head back to home to Birmingham.*

G

**1. I don't know why did Grandma told you all this stuff It's the past and none of your business. Perhaps you'd like to be reminded of all the bad stuff you've ever done?**

**2. About the artwork, I was being creative, laying the foundation for the fantastic artistic skills that I have today.**

**3. About the E45, I did that to punish Mum for going out to a party and leaving me at home with you. I had to say something, anything to try and avoid getting into trouble. So I opted for the wild and foolish. It's a great diversionary tactic. Parents fall for it most of the time. By blaming you, Mum was more focused on that, than why I had pumped that lotion all over her pillow in the first place.**

**4. The one good thing about that evening was that my favourite aunty was looking after us. The problem with having a younger twin sister is I get a lot less attention from the adults in my life than I should and every older twin in the world knows what that feels like. A boy has to express his rage somehow.**

**MKM**

*Friday 16th September*

**Vapour Rub Facial**

*My eyes hurt, my face won't stop tingling, I can't get rid of the smell and the worst thing is that I lied to mum and I know she knows that I lied and when I was telling the lie, I knew it was wrong but I still didn't stop. I wish I could take it all back. I feel sooooo sad. What if she doesn't forgive me?*

G

- 1. I've heard mum warn you a billion times about touching that stuff. Do you listen? No.**
- 2. You covered your entire face with it, that's why it was burning. Nobody does that.**
- 3. I know you hate your skin looking ashy but you took it too far. Duh! Use lotion, not vapour rub.**
- 4. By the way. You're lucky mum was so patient and that you didn't end up in A&E with permanent eye damage.**

**MKM**

“How? How could Mark do this? Why is he so mean?” I stammer looking at the wall of faces of all my heroes, singers, musicians, politicians, authors. Their eyes staring back at me.

Not only has Mark violated my privacy by reading my diary. He's written all over it too in his messy, mangled handwriting. A tear rolls down my cheek, I throw my duvet to the floor and I jump out of bed. I grab hold of the chrome door handle and open the door ready to give him a piece of my mind. I shut it again. I hear mum's voice in my head telling me to be calm and reminding me that when you speak in anger no one really hears what you are saying. I get back in bed, I place my head back on the pillow closing my eyes and taking a slow, deep breath in. I whisper to the four walls of my room. “I am Georgina Mensah, I am a beautiful powerful child of God. I believe in fairness, equality and justice. Mark Mensah, I'm not sure how yet, but I am going to teach you a lesson and when I do you will be very, very sorry.

## HIGHLY COMMENDED



## SYEDA TASMIA TAHIA

### *Uprising*

Tasmia is a poet, writer and theatre performer. Her playwriting credits include “Nemesis 2 - The Gamechanger” (Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2019); “Hostile Environment” (Season of Bangla Drama 2019) and “Daal-Bhaat: Us Two Bengali Girls” (SOBD - Home Seasoning - 2020). She is a member of the Romantic Novelist Association, the Society of Children’s Book Writers & Illustrators and the Megaphone Community for Writers. Tasmia’s poetry has been published in *Brown Girl Magazine*. She is currently being mentored by Nicki Marshall as part of the inaugural All-Stories mentorship, with the aim to further polish and develop this manuscript.

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# UPRISING

## Chapter 1: Escaping Reality

*The world outside burns with a familiar rage.*

*Fiery orange tongues eat away  
The peeling paint on rusty buses,  
Amber abandoned tyres reduce  
To plumes of toxic fumes,  
Crimson eyes blaze and water, until  
All is engulfed in the solid white gas  
Escaping from the rolling canister.*

*This isn't a road but a battleground.  
Its soldiers: puppets without strings.*

*– Puppets without Strings  
18th November; 2:19pm;  
somewhere in the motherland*

A sharp crackling pain dances on my skull, announcing my martyrdom. Calloused hands grab my shoulders as my legs lose their strength. Ma stands on the horizon, basking in the heat of the burning bus. Her red saree flutters, no match for the chilling northern breeze. Then she's gone. She's there and then she isn't, or maybe it isn't her after all. Sturdy boots block my view, black leather marred by a dry smattering of mud. My eyelids droop as the saree floats down to the ground and I too float along.

I pry my eyes open before air is knocked out of my lungs. It's a dream. A vivid dream, but thankfully, only a dream. The usual trick my brain plays, humoring my organs into fighting back. As always, I wake up in my sweat-drenched bed. Except these sheets are not mine.

And the room around me is also not mine. A wooden rack holds not my collection of classics but a handful of aluminium utensils. Clothes hang on wires tied to the hardboard walls with Bollywood stars peeking from cheap posters. They wobble as a rusty gust of wind blows outside. The Big Bad Wolf is here.

Bolting upright, I shake myself awake. This isn't home. Home is the five-bedroom, semi-detached, terraced townhouse in a leafy London–bordering–Essex suburb, that I share with my father and his mother. Home, for the time being, is the neat three-storey ancestral bungalow that my grandmother and I have been living in since flying here two months ago. But this slum is someone's home, and somehow I am their guest.

The room is different from the case studies on substandard housing I had revised for A-level Geography last summer. There are no calendars on the walls or any pictures of the residents. A smudged mirror sits atop a dented green trunk, enshrined by lipstick bullets and a rainbow of nail

polish vials. Plastic bottles in powder pink and parachute blue stand watch over a cascade of glass bangles and a pair of *jhumka*-style earrings. Their cut-glass pattern casts a kaleidoscope on the walls until a figure blocks the only light source, the doorway.

“You are up, *apa!*” says the bright voice, her native tongue coarse, unlike the refined accent I had learnt from my grandmother.

The girl sounds younger than me, perhaps early teens, although the surprising sensuousness of her walk makes it less obvious. A loose cloud of pungent floral scents wraps around her, almost visible. I blink to focus as she walks towards me, red saree fluttering in the wind. The searing pain at the back of my head returns.

“How’re you feeling now,” she asks, toweling the water dripping from her ink-black hair, the red and green chequered *gamchha* soaked translucent.

“Where am I?” I demand, my gaze darting to the unguarded doorway, my possible escape route.

Dust dances in the sliver of sunlight that pours in. The sun had only shrugged off its late autumn blankets the last time I was awake. I want to ask the girl what day it is, but her dark eyes are glassy with confusion.

“I’m fine,” I say, this time in her language, *my* language. “I’m okay. Where am I?”

“In my house, *apa,*” she replies with a matronly smile. “In my poor house. Let me get you something to eat. You must be hungry. Biryani?”

“How did I get here?” I ask as she busies herself, pouring out greasy rice from a cardboard box.

“Those cheats never put enough meat,” she says with an apologetic frown, holding the plate in front of me. “You should eat, *apa.* You fainted at the shutdown earlier.”

“Shutdown?”

I search my brain for the word, but it only intensifies the pain. As the plate dances insistently in my face, I push it away, swallowing hard to stop my stomach turning. Polite confusion laces my companion’s soft features as she tries to read my reaction.

“Shutdown,” she says, struggling not to roll her eyes. “Our national phrase. *Dawn-to-dusk shutdown.* Unless you’re rolling with the *Wheel of development.*”

“Wheel?” I say, fighting the urge to wince as my head throbs. “Are you talking about the government?”

“Government,” another voice scoffs, stepping through the cut in the wall that is the doorway.

Its owner is identical to the first girl, except for the deeper melanin of her skin and the lack of warmth on her more angular face. Paying little attention to me, she grabs the plate, scooping a large morsel into her mouth with her bony fingers, chewing it with animated satisfaction.

“Layla,” warns my host, her wide eyes darting to me, but the new arrival refuses to acknowledge her.

“The Wheel of development only turns to crush the poor,” Layla says, rice spilling out as she stuffs another mouthful. “And the Flame only burns down our homes. Both are the same. All these shutdowns and protests are for one thing only. The throne.”

“*Apa,* you okay? Let me get some water.”

“Who is she, Rajni?” Layla asks, another scoop of rice halting mid-way between plate and mouth.

She hands the half-finished plate to the other girl, wiping her pursed lips with the back of her hand. A grain of rice tumbles down, but she ignores it, sitting down next to me. Her eyes shamelessly scan my face, taking in the brown eyes and dark hair that mirrors hers. The bed creaks as I shift away, but

Layla moves closer.

“She fainted at the shutdown this morning,” Rajni replies with guarded nonchalance, handing me a shiny steel glass. “The mob was baying for blood. I couldn’t have left her there.”

“So, you dragged her here. You realise what would happen when Zari *Khala* finds out? You don’t even know her, but you decided —”

“Excuse me,” I say, unable to control the tremor in my voice. “My name is Saliha. And I need your help.”

“As you can see, we already have very little, so we aren’t up for charity. Shall I escort you outside, or will you manage?”

“You stay out of this,” Rajni shouts. “She’s my guest.”

“Keep it down,” Layla hisses back. “If you haven’t noticed, it’s trusting the wrong people that landed you here.”

“She could’ve been hurt, or —.”

“Terrible things happen to girls who get on the wrong side of Zari *Khala*. You know very well, no one cares what happens to us.”

A chill runs down my spine as Rajni stammers, unable to respond to this sinister statement. Then, as if nothing happened, Layla breaks into a song.

*“Mere lengha ke jhatak pe — eh — aatak gaya dil tera ...”*

Gazing at her reflection in the mirror, Layla turns and drapes a lazy arm across the doorframe. My bumpy translation skills have so far helped me understand the girls, but the song bounces in my head, incongruous. *Your heart hangs in the swirls of my skirt?* As I move forward to listen better, Rajni pushes me back into the shadows, pressing an urgent forefinger finger on her lips.

“Zari *Khala*, you like my song? The film’s out on Friday. I can’t wait to see my hero break some bones. *Mere lengha ke jhatak pe...*”

Layla hangs by the door, swaying her ample hips to the beats as Rajni paces behind her. When Layla finally turns to look her in the eye, she freezes.

“She must go. Now. Unless you want to end up as fertilizer for Zari *Khala*’s plants.”

“I will leave,” I say before Rajni can respond. “I owe you my life. I can’t get you in trouble. Can I borrow your mobile?”

Layla nods a silent instruction to Rajni, sitting next to me. Her penetrating gaze cuts through my out-of-place accent, as if to peel off the layers of my identity that link me to this country of my forefathers.

“You aren’t one of those ‘reporter’ things, are you? The ones who walk around with secret cameras, talking to people about their lives and making millions out of it? If you are, then back off. We don’t need your nonsense in our lives.”

“No,” I say with too much conviction, glancing at the open doorway. “I just happened to be caught out by the shutdown. Trust me.”

Toying with the cheap Android that Rajni hands me, I search my brain for my grandmother’s local mobile number. All my contacts lie abandoned on my phone, which I lost during the untraceable journey of the past 24 hours. I loathe that the only local number in my memory is one I had vowed never to dial again.

As my fingers leave sweaty smudges on the phone’s lit up screen, I negotiate with my unearned pride. Layla’s demanding glare makes it easy. With a mock gasp, I punch the well-remembered digits

into the keypad and hit the dial button. One ring. Two rings. Three rings.

“Hello?”

“Adil,” I whisper, my heart doing a curious flip as if nothing had gone wrong. “It’s me.”

“Saliha?” Adil says, a strange pulse of panic vibrating through the deep, husky voice. “Are you okay? Did you guys reach there alright? When you didn’t call Daadi yesterday –”

“I am fine,” I say, switching to English as the girls listen with unashamed interest. “Um, how’re you?”

“How—do you have any idea how worried I’ve been?”

For a moment, I think I must have misheard, but then there is an audible gulp on the other end. I don’t know how to respond, so I sit very still, waiting.

“I mean,” he says after a long moment, “Everyone’s been worried. With all that shutdown stuff in the news. When are you guys coming home?”

“I—uh—I need you to come and pick me up. Long story.”

“Where are you?”

“I actually don’t know,” I say, before turning to the girls. “Can you tell my – my friend how to get here?”

Layla makes a face at my broken enunciation, but takes the phone off my hand. Stepping away, she begins to quiz Adil’s knowledge of the city’s web of roads and by-lanes. Rajni gives me an alarmed look before handing me a threadbare *gamchha*. The dry fabric is rough against my hot cheeks as I wipe off the tears.

“He’s coming once the shutdown is over,” Layla announces, ending the call to my displeasure. “It’s too risky at the moment.”

“Don’t worry, you can stay here as long as you need to,” Rajni says, glaring at Layla before she can say anything.

“Thank you.” I say, choking on the sudden swell of emotion from speaking to Adil after two weeks. “For everything.”

“There is one issue though,” Rajni hesitates, looking around. “You should know, I guess — I mean, I don’t think you noticed but — ”

“This is a *kotha*,” Layla says, her voice flat, as if this is common knowledge. “The shutdown ends at sundown. That’s when our trade begins.”

“We will keep you safe,” Rajni adds hastily, as I recoil from the sheets. “But we have to be careful. If Zari *Khala* notices, she wouldn’t want to let you leave.”

“You don’t look competent enough to be a journalist,” Layla says, genuine curiosity replacing cynicism for the first time. “But you aren’t a kid either. So why’re you outside during the shutdown?”

My pulse quickens as I recall the events of last evening, and the revelations that led me to the middle of the violent mob. It makes little sense to lie, as the prophecy didn’t have any promises of secrecy. Drawing in a deep breath, I begin.

“I almost killed the *Guru Sahib*.”

## Chapter 2: Revelations

Rajni and Layla can only stare at me, my saviour with wide-eyed bafflement, and her friend's eyes narrowed with suspicions about my sanity. The room has little sign of the girls' faith, but the *Guru Sahib* transcends religions, a healer of spirits.

"I didn't want to," I say, heart racing, echoes of *witch* still following me. "I can explain, I promise."

\*\*\*

Daadi didn't think much about imposing our presence on the tenants who set up home in the ancestral house she and her husband had abandoned decades ago. The young country my grandfather had helped birth didn't offer the opportunities he wanted for his newborn son, so a flight to the old colonial mother had been the only option.

Fareeha's grandfather had promised to look after the house for the blood brother who he had marched with shoulder to shoulder. A generation later, Daadi's old china tea sets and dust-lined books welcomed us home. Only Miraj had looked mildly surprised when Daadi opened the door one morning, his polite eyes lowering after the obligatory check confirmed that he was at the right door.

Broken people often welcomed me into the cracks in their lives, sensing my loss in a way that went unnoticed by wholesome beings. Fareeha's fiance was unique in how unmarked he was by the preteen brother lost to cancer. In the absence of a father, the *Guru* had helped Miraj grow up to be the man who was more in rhythm with Daadi than me. Only Fareeha remembered the boy she fell in love with on the first day of university.

Quarreling politicians and their calls for mass hartals paled in the allure of the *Guru*, who had healed Miraj with the *blessed water* that promised relief from all ailments of the soul. With little faith and boundless curiosity, I asked Miraj to take me with him for the upcoming trip to the *darbar sharif*, even as the risk of transportation shutdowns loomed large.

The blanket of smog, characteristic of the capital city, lifted as we moved further into the countryside, early November sun warming up the chilly air. Alighting at the end of the bus route, Miraj hailed a cycle-drawn rickshaw to take us deeper into the rural town.

Tarmacked roads soon gave way to brick-laid paths between barren fields stripped of the winter crops. Miraj's hollow eyes twinkled as the rickshaw-puller reminisced about his last visit, when the wheels had refused to move, forcing him to wade through knee-deep mud. Thankfully, dry weather persisted as we continued by foot an hour or so later.

The mid-morning queue snaked past shops and homes, as devotees waited for proceedings to begin. A woman in a creased saree struggled to maintain her grip on a shirtless skeletal child and two plump speckled chicken. Further ahead, a man mopped his shiny bald patch with a patterned handkerchief. Next to him, a woman hid under the *aanchal* of her silk saree. Near the front, a group of boys in white and blue uniforms stood shifting their weight from one foot to the other, holding books, pens, geometry sets.

At the solid metal gates, volunteers divided the line into groups of five, waiting for the next batch to be called inside. After a round of hugs and greetings, Miraj held the side entrance open, beckoning me to enter, as the mouth of the queue glared at us.

The field inside was already semi-packed with common followers. Volunteers hassled them into neat queues, as a voice shouted for the next person to come forward. Loudspeakers boomed with prayers, the mechanised voice hypnotic.

Miraj led me along the long veranda that wrapped the field, before opening a discreet door into the residence of the *Guru*. The entrance hall gleamed in gold and white, marble floors reflecting the elaborate columns and cornices. Walking through a set of doors, Miraj handed me a bottle of water

“It’s for the blessing,” he said, avoiding my eyes. “Cover your head, it’s inappropriate to show your hair here.”

Fumbling, I wrapped the red and gold *dupatta* around my head. It sat in a stiff peak, refusing to yield to the task. Satisfied with my level of modesty, he beckoned me to follow. I unrolled the sleeves of my cream *kameez*, letting them fall to my exposed wrists, beginning to regret my choice of cozy jeans instead of a more appropriate loose *salwar*.

After passing a number of towering wooden doors, Miraj found an empty room, signalling me to enter. This room lacked any furnishing, but the floor was covered in a red rug marked into rows like prayer mats. Realising that Miraj was barefoot, I pulled off my shoes, my face heating up.

“Pray.” he instructed, stepping out of the room. “Pray for all you want. For forgiveness and for guidance.”

Left alone, my hands reached for my phone, but the place had no reception. Once I ran out of old messages to reread, I stared at the windowless ivory walls, shivering. When the afternoon prayer call floated in the air, I responded, raising my arms and sinking to my knees like Daadi had taught me as a child. Miraj returned as I turned to the right then left, saying the final blessings.

“Lunch,” he said, handing me a plate of mushy rice pudding. “It tastes a lot better than it looks.”

Coaching my face to neutrality, I scooped a spoonful into my mouth. The bland appearance hid a considerable kick. Grateful for my first meal of the day, I continued to savour chicken flavour until half of the rice porridge was gone.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” I asked, finally remembering Miraj as I reached for the bottle of water.

“I am fasting,” he replied carelessly, focusing on *tasbih* in his right hand.

With the acid of guilt rising up to the back of my throat, I finished the rest in a hurry, barely tasting it. He swapped the plate with prayer-beads, heading out before I could thank him for the food.

“How long do we need to wait?” I called out from the doorway, as if stepping out would burn the bare soles of my feet

“Keep praying,” he said, without turning back. “God will listen!”

Using the *tasbih* to keep count, I chanted holy phrases Daadi used to recite when she tucked me to bed. The cushion of silence was only interrupted by the prayer calls, once in late afternoon and once at dusk. As I sat whispering wishes into cupped hands, the door opened.

“You’ve been summoned. Please follow me.”

The messenger’s voice was scratchy, barely broken. Noticing his flip-flops, I pulled on my trainers. Despite standing a head taller, I felt like the child as he guided me past more empty rooms.

“Where are we going?” I asked, as we entered a twisty corridor.

“Keep following the path, sister, and you’ll get all the answers.”

The darkness abruptly spilled into an open courtyard. A canopy of multi-coloured lights lit up the heart of the *darbar sharif*. A small hole gaped in me: Oxford Street dressed up in garlands of light, wrapped packages under the Christmas tree, chewy turkey and cranberry sauce. Daadi had booked

our return ticket yet.

Sitting at the centre of his choicest followers, the formidable Guru Sahib ran a hand through his wizard's beard as he listened. Miraj stood behind him, whispering wordless prayers. I inched closer to the stage, passing men who averted their gaze. As the sweet haze of incense sticks settled, the *Guru's* eyes settled on me, widening with fascinated revulsion.

His fragile frame began to convulse, silencing the tranquil buzz of prayer. In the paranoid emptiness, I searched for Miraj in the faceless crowd. The *Guru's* mouth foamed as he spasmed, but no one approached him. Then, he spoke:

*"A monster prowls around the corner, biding his time. He's thirsty for blood. Innocent blood. Faith is the shield and faith is the sword, but faithful blood will flood the roads. Tables laid, but not a morsel will pass the lips, for the lips they pass will not move again. Blood Sun will rise as enemies join hands. The mob will lynch the fool, but he will slip through. The graves of the innocent will form his palace."*

A collective gasp reminded me I wasn't alone. The *Guru* fell to his side, the raspy voice spluttering as he continued to shake and shiver.

*"The power to change is the power to destroy, for future lies under wreckage."*

"Let's go," said a voice in my ear, making fresh goosebumps crawl up my arms.

Someone broke from the crowd to tend to the fallen spiritual leader, who continued to stare at me, unblinking. Other men followed his gaze, their faces turning to me in confusion. A burst of electricity sparked through me as Miraj touched my elbow.

"Let's go," he repeated, this time using physical force to get me moving.

"Witch!"

A taut shout rose from the crowd as it closed in, faces burning in the changing lights red, orange, green. Miraj sped up at the shout of *Stop*. As hands rose towards us in zombied attraction, he pushed me into the dark corridor.

"Lock up," he called out to my young escort.

The heavy bang shut out the light, but angry condemnations denouncing my inauspiciousness followed. The grip on my wrist returned, pulling me through the maze of corridors and doors. I dared not look back.

At the iron gates, Miraj rummaged through a bunch of old-fashioned, ornamental keys in the flickering light of a solitary oil. As I stepped out of the creaky side exit, a door burst open, flooding the veranda with yellow light. Miraj slammed the gate shut before taking my hand again.

We continued to run, ducking into alleys, scrambling through empty fields, sharp remains of stalks nipping at our ankles until we reached the bus stop. Clutching at stitches and rubbing cramps out of our legs, we jumped on the first bus out.

\*\*\*

"We hadn't planned on coming back until tomorrow, so we got caught out."

Rajni is the first to move, standing up as if to test her legs. Layla observes me, searching for a loose thread to pick. Avoiding her eyes, I smooth the creases in my *kameez*.

"Do you have my scarf?"

"You didn't have a scarf," Rajni replies, focusing on folding the clothes drying on the walls.

"It's red," I insist like a child. "Fancy. Brocade, I think it's called. Gold patterns"

“I didn’t see any scarves. Maybe you lost it when you and Miraj –”

“Miraj,” Layla says somberly. “What happened to Miraj?”

“I – I don’t know.”

## Chapter 3: Road-tripping

“We were on the bus,” I say, as tears prickle in my eyes. “Then the mob and, and then I don’t know what happened to him.”

An icy chill settles in the room as the walls quiver and the breeze rushes through the unprotected doorway. Rajni brings me more water, patting me awkwardly on the shoulder. My breath slows as I press the cold steel glass to my brow.

“Who’s this Adil?” she asks, her feigned cheery voice failing to lift the cloud of despair, but I open my eyes.

“He’s my — uh — neighbour.”

“Neighbour,” she says pointedly, taking the glass back. “Just neighbour.”

“We had a — a thing. A stupid thing. ”

“Is he rich?” Layla asks, settling down on the bed, propping herself up on her elbows, the momentary sobriety fast dissipating.

“His father is rich. And corrupt.”

“So like everyone else here. Everyone’s got a price tag, it’s just us cheapest ones they call whores.”

“Does your Daadi know,” Rajni calls from the far corner, setting up a small camping stove. “About you and Adil?”

“Daadi trusts him. His mother used to work for my grandparents before they moved to London. Daadi remembers lending her a saree for her wedding. Aunty insisted on returning it, saying one day she’d have every saree she wanted. She was right.”

“How’d she land such a big man?” Layla says, the relaxed posture taking the guarded edge off her voice. “I’d love some tips.”

“Adil’s father wasn’t rich then. He worked for a garment factory. Learned the trade, formed some contacts then, with a bank loan, opened his first factory before Adil was even born. Now he’s rich and respected. Exporting worldwide, and employing thousands locally.”

“At least he’s still with her. Rajni’s millionaire *husband* gifted her this palace, coming only when he pleases.” Layla’s vicious laugh bounces off the fragile walls, making my ears burn.

“How did they end up as your neighbours,” Rajni asks, her face pensive in thought, until Layla shouts her back to attention, the pot on her stove starting to bubble over.

“After Adil’s birth, they moved into the bungalow next to ours. Well, technically ours, since no one from my family has set foot there since my parents’ wedding.”

“Is that why you are here? For *your* wedding? Were you meant to marry Adil?”

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London was its usual overcast self as we crawled down the motorway, an appropriate farewell. Phone-in guests bickered about the NHS on the rush-hour radio blaring in our app-ordered taxi.

Daadi observed me through the corners of her eyes as if I might jump out and tear through the stationary traffic waiting for the accident fallout to be cleared. Her worries were pointless. My world had already fallen apart six weeks earlier.

On the morning of the third Thursday of August, I had opened my A-level results envelope where a soup of non-A letters reconfirmed the reminder that I had not met the minimum requirements for my university offers. Since then, my life had spiralled down the same aimless abyss that would now end up in a visit to my grandparents' birth land.

I was far from the only person with disappointing results in the crowded school auditorium. Next to me, my best friend, Harriet Knightley had stared at her letter in blank confusion. I reached out for the hand I had held onto since the first day of primary school when a teaching assistant had paired us together, despite my confusion at how Night-Leigh came next to Kareem on the alphabetically ordered register. Leaving me hanging mid-air, Harriet had looked at the nearest teacher, who gave her an encouraging nod.

"I'm going to Oxford!" she yelled, causing someone to pull a cracker, multi-coloured scraps of paper drifting mid-air, ignoring gravity just like Harriet had defied all odds.

Camera flashes and congratulations had engulfed her, as the fast-forming crowd consumed me. The first good news of a morning where particularly harsh results had blighted the school that usually ranked highly on the results boards. Harriet lapped up the attention, her champagne-blond hair swishing like a phantom in the sea of gloom. Her ringing laugh and mock humility needled me as the shared dream of walking into our first Politics, Philosophy and Economics lesson, a dream jointly harboured since our first year in secondary school lay in tatters among the fallen confetti.

"We might miss the flight," Daadi said as the advertising jingle added fake cheer to our otherwise wordless journey. "You should text your father."

Always a should. You should have worked harder, you should have avoided that girl. You should have checked the route.

"I'll make sure you don't miss the flight." the driver said, his clipped accent echoing my grandmother's. "The flight's in 3 hours."

Daadi turned a soft shade of fuschia, her deliberate use of English didn't prevent the driver from recognising her destination, a homeland they both shared.

Unlike me, the driver managed to fulfil his promise, even if only just. Boarding at last call, I was too busy catching my breath to take one last forlorn look at the city's of oppressively tall buildings that I had learnt to lose myself to.

Later, flying over Oxford, I did peer down although none of the evening lights managed to penetrate the thick carpet of clouds. Somewhere below, Harriet probably sat in the dorm-room that we were supposed to share or walked the halls that my mother had once walked.

The familiar patter of rain welcomed us to the unfamiliar country. Daadi was unable to recognise the airport as we navigated through immigration. Despite her last minute decision costing us triple price fares, she had had the sense to inform the current tenants in our ancestral property, our only acquaintances in a city long-forgotten.

Fatiha's mother was however both unprepared and visibly unhappy, opening the second floor flat, its furnishing cloaked in dust sheets. After a brief attempt at cleaning, Daadi retired to bed, exhausted by two decades worth of debris.

Unfamiliar beds seldom offered me rest. Instead, the large balcony overlooking the front yard

whispered a siren song. Off-season rain had cleared the famously caustic air, an autumn breeze filling my insides with renewed melancholy.

The moon swam ahead in the lake opposite, its round face slashed into geometric waves. The balcony wasn't as high as my mother's 22nd floor office roof-garden, nor the bridge over the motorway. But it would have to do. I stepped closer to the parapet, arms outstretched.

That's when I saw him first, bathed in the silver, my angel and my end.

"I've never seen you before," he said, rubbing at sleepy eyes, tuft of hair sticking up above his left ear.

"Forget you ever saw me," I said, tearing my eyes away from the contours of his bare upper body.

"That'd be very hard - you aren't the forgettable type."

The wind caressed my too-warm cheeks, as I searched for a witty response. *I didn't need this. Not right now.*

"Perhaps I should climb over and join you on Titanic."

Realising how absurd I must look, I lowered my arms, grabbing the parapet for support. Adil observed this scratching his head in sheepish confusion.

## HIGHLY COMMENDED



## SUAD KAMARDEEN

### *Muslim Enough*

Suad Kamardeen is a writer, photographer and engineering graduate. Based in Essex, she would love to use her writing to show that this world is so diverse; there are so many different ways people live their lives. Her writing is fuelled by her desire to impact people's lives positively, especially through storytelling. She hopes to show black girls, Muslim girls and assault survivors that they are not alone in their stories. She's currently writing a young adult novel.

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# MUSLIM ENOUGH

## Chapter 1

‘Sumayya Opemipo Abdullahi!’

When Mum shouts my name – not just my full name, but my government name – in a voice laced with anger, frustration and defeat, I realise I have failed again. I let out my breath and pull my duvet further over my head. There’s no point rushing downstairs now, not when she’s waiting to bite my head off. I can already hear her voice in my head: ‘You never take your prayers seriously, but if I ask you to stay up all night to earn the latest iPhone, you won’t do as much as blink!’ She’ll tut, shake her head, and then continue, ‘Why does your priority shift when it comes to God? Do you know He created you? Gave you life, gave and continues to give you everything you have. Yet, you refuse to worship him.’ Then she’ll move her hands to her waist, standing akimbo and staring down into my soul.

It’s the same speech all the time, usually followed by a punishment of some sort depending on her mood. Especially striking where it hurts. Last week, she refused to let me go on a road trip with my older brother, Teslim and his friends, even after I reminded her that he’d be leaving again for uni soon. She thinks his friends are a bad influence, and they’re rubbing off on him and she’s worried I’ll be caught in the loop too. Since that day, many years ago, when Mum caught Teslim holding a girl’s hand (Mawiya) outside sixth form, she never let him hear the end of it. That’s how my mum is. She never lets you forget the thing you’ve done wrong no matter how much of a new leaf you’ve become. It’s surprising she even allowed Tes go to uni outside London, but I’m pretty sure he didn’t apply to uni in London either. He knows how to tip the scale. Mum would rather have a son who goes to uni, which she can tell the world about, than one who’s stuck at home because she doesn’t trust him enough to be a good Muslim. She let him leave home for uni, yes, but not without the ‘If I don’t see you, Allah sees you’ speech every night before she and Dad have to go drop him off at uni.

I’ll be getting a lot of her speeches this morning, for sure. To think that just yesterday, I argued and had an almost-bet (because betting is haram, obvs) with her that I would wake up on time for Fajr – the dawn prayer – today, without fail. She snorted and I shook my head, running my mouth about how she wasn’t giving me the benefit of the doubt. Yet here I am struggling to climb out of bed while the sun peeks through my curtains, casting its rays wherever it sees fit, to remind of my failure.

It’s not that I didn’t try to wake up in time to pray, it’s just praying Fajr on time in the summer is like climbing a mountain barefoot. It’s basically mission impossible. Okay, I’m being extra, it’s not entirely impossible, but there’s a whole system to it. If you go to sleep early enough, there’s a chance you’ll make it, but it’s not a high enough chance, because you have to pray before the sun rises. Sunrise is at 4:30, and I only climbed into bed at 1ish, so I was doomed from the start. To be honest, I played

myself. I really shouldn't have started another season of *Alexa and Katie*, especially knowing I would want to watch the entire season in one go, but I couldn't help myself. I've been missing my best friend, Amal, a lot lately and this series is the closest I get to the friendship cheesiness we have. I wish she didn't have to take up a summer job, but her Babu passed away last winter, and since then things haven't been the same. Even though she says she took the job to support her mum, I know it's really to keep her busy. Babu was an integral part of our summer. He was a writer, so he usually had a flexible enough schedule to spend time with us. He'd sit down with us a week before the summer holidays, and we'd create a "SumAmal Summer Plan" together. My dad is always busy, even during the holidays. When he's not spending extra time at work, he's busy studying for one Accounting certification exam or another. So, I really appreciated the time with Babu. Anyway, with Amal's job, I only get to see her on Fridays, but the time between the previous Friday and the next feels like eternity, and in between calling and texting her, the least I can do is watch everything which reminds me of her.

When the clock struck one, it made sense to simply stay up for the prayer seeing as it started at 2:30, so I carried on watching my show. It's holiday season, I have no responsibilities, so it doesn't matter how long I sleep in after praying, at least until Mum decides to wake me up because I'm 'sleeping my life away'. The issue though is this isn't the first time I tried staying up for Fajr. In fact, every single time I try to stay up until prayer time, I fail, but for some reason, last night I manage to convince myself that even with my lower than low probability, I could totally do it. It would be the one night I'll beat the odds. And I tried. I really did, but sleep decided to encompass my soul at two-ish, or somewhere around that time, I guess. In between trying out my several stay-awake techniques – washing face multiple times with cold water, sitting in the bathtub and sticking feet in cold water the entire time (which actually made me sleepier), pinching myself in places that don't hurt too much, sitting on the floor – I somehow ended up asleep in bed. I don't know how I got into bed, but I was gone before I realised it.

That's how much effort I put into my prayer. Mum never witnesses all the work I put in to try make it for Fajr, ever. All she sees is this daughter of hers who refuses to make her five daily prayers her number one priority in her life. Every morning I don't make it in time to pray, I wake up to the venom in mum's voice, which is actually better than waking up to her towering over me. That used to be her tactic until I turned sixteen last month, and Mum suddenly decided I needed to be more responsible blah blah. Since then, she simply shouts my name from downstairs but never climbs all the way to my room. But how does she expect me to simply transition from having her as my personal never-failing alarm clock to waking up by myself? It doesn't make sense. If I go to sleep literally thirty minutes before prayer time, Mum's presence in my room is enough to slap me awake. I'm so sure it's killing her that I haven't made it downstairs on time at least once since I turned sixteen and I wonder how much longer this responsibility thing would last for.

Of course, she can't continue to be responsible for my getting up to pray, but my motivation to get

up just isn't strong enough. It's not that I don't like praying, it's just that praying for me means moving limbs according to how Mum does it plus how I was taught in Arabic school and saying the right phrases at their appropriate positions without being aware of the meaning of the words I utter. My mind wanders so much when I pray, I have to fight to bring it back to the present. I'm so clueless, and there's only so much motivation one could have to do something that doesn't have a deeper meaning for them. It's such a struggle. For me, getting it done, ticking the box is all that matters. As long as I don't have to battle with the haunting feeling of lying to Mum or live with the guilt of owing a prayer, I'm good.

I kick my duvet off and drop my legs to the floor, one after the other. Now that I'm awake and have fed my mind with guilt, there's no way I'll be able to go back to sleep without praying. It only lasts a few minutes anyway.

★

I have a love-hate relationship with Fridays.

I absolutely love it because I get to see Amal, and we meet to have our favourite dessert – ice cream – in our favourite dessert shop, Les Gelatos. And this Friday is extra-special because our at-least-once-in-the-summer sleepover is today! We only have two weeks until we start Sixth Form, which I'm super excited about especially because we don't have to wear a uniform. I spent most of my summer holiday pinning potential outfits on my private boards on Pinterest. Fashion is my thing, my superpower. I transform outfits, I know the right pairs to put together. Sucks that Amal doesn't benefit from my expertise because she chooses to only wear black abayas, with varying hijabs. I created an entire board with diverse modest outfits, but my girl didn't care for it. I sent her the board anyway, for when she changes her mind. I grab my phone from my dressing-study table and send Amal a dancing gif, with text: 'Can't wait to see you this afternoon! \*dance emoji\*'

I hear Mum downstairs preparing to leave for Jumma, so I throw on my rust-coloured maxi dress with floral patterns. I consider adding a cream hijab to the outfit, but I don't want to give Mum any ideas. She's bound to make one comment or another about my choosing to wear it when I want etc.

I take a deep breath at the top of the stairs as I prepare myself for my conversation with Mum. When I arrive downstairs, Mum's in the kitchen dishing freshly made jollof rice into large used-to-be ice-cream containers.

'Salam alaykum, Mum!' I hurry to the sink and begin washing the dirty dishes, even though it's the one chore I detest with a passion. My nails get super soft and snap easily. Thankfully, mum usually cleans as she cooks so there aren't many dishes to wash.

'Wa alaykum salam, Sumayya. It's about time you dragged yourself downstairs. Your mates are out doing something with their lives, and you come downstairs for the first time at noon.' She shakes her

head and pushes the lid hard on one of the food containers. 'You don't even have to look far for good examples. Look at your friend, Amal, making the most of her summer holidays. But what does my daughter want to do? Eat and sleep until the end of time.' She kisses her teeth long and hard. She's already in a sour mood so I have to try to play my cards right, even though what I really want to do is roll my eyes until my iris disappears.

I try to look as solemn as possible, as I move past her to grab a towel. Once I'm done drying the dishes, I wash the pots and serving spoons too, in silence. Mum wants to say more, I know, but I've learnt that staying quiet usually shortens her rant. Besides, I need to ask for something, so I have to be on my best behaviour.

'Mum, I haven't just been sleeping, I promise. I've been spending time reading on those career websites to really figure out what I want to do. I don't want to waste my time at university and knowing from now would give me the motivation I need for sixth form.'

She throws me a side eye, and I'm not sure she buys my story. But when she doesn't ask for evidence, it means I'm good to go.

'Speaking of sixth form...can I sleepover at Amal's place tonight, Mum? We only have two weekends until school starts and Amal can't do next weekend.'

She sniggers and shakes her head. 'You want to go for a sleepover?' She asks in her *are you seriously asking me this?* tone as she pulls off her apron and throws it into the washing machine. She walks out of the kitchen without a response.

This is going to be long.

I tag along to the living room, pleading 'Mummmm' all the way.

Mum adjusts her scarf, puts on a deep blue hijab which matches the stones on the lace of her dress, and I'm certain her shoes will be the same colour too. She loved to match the colours of her outfits; I guess I get my fashion genes from her, even though she constantly tells me, 'You don't know fashion. *Oo mo* fashion.'

She settles on the arm of the sofa, and finally glances my way. 'Did you wake up on time for Fajr today?'

I shake my head. 'No, mum, but I made it up as soon as I woke up.'

'Well, since you've decided to obey God when you want, I can do what I want too. No sleepover for you. You must be back in your father's house before six.'

Technically, it's not my father's house since he only rents it, but I bite my tongue. 'But it's summertime. It doesn't get dark until much later. Why can't I spend a bit more time with Amal since I won't be sleeping over?'

She lets out a deep sigh like my presence is bothering her. 'You must be in this house no later than six pm. Who's going to serve Mustapha his dinner when he arrives?'

Aaaand that's why I hate Fridays. Why do I have to serve Uncle Mustapha dinner? God blessed him with two hands and intellect. Surely, dishing out food shouldn't be too much of a task. But in my

house, the women AKA Mum or me, do the cooking and the dishing out of food. Not for Teslim, of course, but especially for the older men like dad, his friends and all those uncles that weren't really my uncles. Like Uncle Mustapha.

We're not related in any way. His mum and my mum went to school together in Nigeria and have been best friends since then. Though he's married with a child, he moved to the UK without his family to study, and so our house became his home away from home. He comes over every Friday and leaves on Sunday evenings.

Uncle Mustapha is the son mum wishes she had. He's memorised the entire Qur'an, he teaches the kids at the mosque on Sundays, and all he talks about is religion. Literally every single time he comes by our house, he always brings an Islam-related book. Mum even had him give me a speech about wearing the hijab a few years ago.

But lately he's been acting weird. So weird, I can't even dare put words to his actions because it feels like a sacrilege. I feel like I'm overthinking things, but I'm not so sure. Like last week, I *think* he grabbed my waist, but I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt because how do I bring this up? And with whom? So, I just decided to keep my distance as much as I can and be civil with him.

'Mum, what time are you back today?' I need to know I won't be left alone with this man.

She looks up from her phone with a frown. I probably interrupted something important, but my life is just as important.

'What business do you have with when I'm back? Why are you standing here idly and not getting ready for Jummah?'

I grunt. 'Mum, I'm not going to the mosque to pray in their kitchen. They should have thought about women when they were building the mosque.' Perhaps they did, and only decided our place was in the kitchen, but I could never voice that out to Mum.

She opens her mouth to speak, shakes her head and moves her gaze back to her phone.

I guess I'll have to hope Tes returns home early today.

## Chapter 2

I secure a seat for us at the far corner in Les Gelatos. It's our favourite spot and the staff know Amal and me by name because we're regulars. My favourite thing about the corner seat is that you can just about see everyone and everything in the restaurant. The windows are also super long and wide, so you can follow people with your eyes as they walk past. I glance up from time to time as I twist the folded pink napkins on the table. Amal's never late, so I wonder what's taking her time. She hasn't texted me either, but it's only been five minutes so I'm not worried. I take in the scent of vanilla and hot melting chocolate which fills the air as a waiter sweeps past my table, balancing a tray on each hand.

When I raise my head again, a young couple have taken up the table two away from mine. They don't take their eyes off each other, and when they read the menu, the boy loops his arm through the girl's so they can hold the menu with one hand each. Eugh, it's weird, but to be honest it's also super cute. The boy brushes the girl's hair off her face; he's literally acting like she's some delicate egg, my gosh. Must be nice to be treated in that manner, not that I care about boys. I guess that's the joy of going to an all-girls' high school. Though some of the brave girls spoke to the boys in the boys' school across the road, I wasn't that brave. I couldn't even make friends with people in my school. To be honest, I don't know how I would have survived without Amal.

I spot a neon pink hijab through the window bobbing towards the entrance and I immediately know it's Amal. My girl likes to rock brightly coloured hijabs, because in her words 'she likes to be seen'. I'm certain she's got on her white Airforces with the pink tick to match. That's as far as her fashion goes.

Her lips spread into a big smile, and then she begins to grin when I return her smile. She drops her bag into the chair.

'Girl, you took your time!' I tut.

She rolls her eyes and pulls me into a hug, even as I resist. 'Pleaaase, it's the first since we've been friends that you've had to wait for me. And how long is that?' She pulls back with her eyebrows raised.

She's right about that so I have nothing to add. 'Whatever.'

'Yup that's right!' She bursts out laughing, her all-teeth on show laughter and I couldn't help but join in because this girl's laughter is contagious.

'New hijab bun?' Her hijab bun is never this smooth. This one is so perfectly round, and it gives her a cute side profile.

'Actually, I've been experimenting with different braid styles to figure out which one wraps best, and this by far is my favourite. Guess you're not the only one who cares about looking good.'

My eyes widen. 'So you're always fronting then?'

She picks up the menu and runs her finger along the options like we aren't going to settle for the usual: Ferrero Rocher sundae. She does this every single time, play around with the menu, toy with the idea of trying something new, but we end up being boring Sumayya and Amal ordering the same thing as usual. Something feels off from the way she traces her finger across the edges of the menu, like she's here but not here. I snap my fingers in front of her face a few times until she shudders.

'Girl, do you want to put your fingers in my eyes?'

'Well, I wouldn't have to if you were with me, would I?'

'What do you mean?' She twists her hijab end around her fingers, and I know something is up.

'Ams, what's wrong? And don't say nothing because I know you.' I fix my gaze on her. She never likes to talk about anything that bothers her, even her father had to cajole her to speak up. She's always worrying about burdening people, but Babu told her countless times she has nothing to worry about. And since he passed, she's grown even worse. I have to try harrrrd to squeeze the truth out of her, and that's if I even manage to catch the difference in her demeanour.

She lets out a deep sigh. ‘It’s just work. I’ll tell you about it tonight while we munch on all the sweets I have in my bag for our biggest sleepover.’ She wiggles her shoulder.

I should tell her I can’t make it but I don’t want to ruin the evening just yet. ‘Woow, you really want to get hyper tonight, don’t you? An entire sugar festival all in one night!’

‘Well, it’s not every day we do this so I’m sure my body can manage. Are you going to keep talking about my sugar choices or are we going to order?’ She flicks her hijab as she gets up and knocks the chocolate sauce off the table.

Our eyes widen and we burst out laughing again.

★

Amal licks her spoon over and over again. ‘That was so good, my goodness. I love how desserts can just turn my day around.’

I lean back. ‘Only desserts or?’

She pokes my shoulder with the end of her spoon. ‘And your presence, Queen Maya.’ She shakes her head. ‘I hope you’re ready for the second round of stuffing your face at my house?’

I shift in my seat and move my spoon around the sundae glass. My throat feels itchy and my tongue grows heavy all of a sudden. I feel like I’m letting her down even before breaking it to her. ‘Girl, about that—

Her eyes widen and she stares in disbelief. ‘Nah, don’t tell me you’re not coming?’ She raises her eyebrows. ‘You’re not coming? You’re really not coming?’

I drop my spoon and meet her gaze. ‘Ams, you know if it was left to me, I’ll move in with you forever.’

She nods, ‘So what’s up then? You’re too old for sleepovers now?’

I nudge her. ‘Come on! I can never be too old for sleepovers. You know it’s Friday, and ever since Uncle Mustapha started his Masters, he’s been coming over to our house for the weekend. Last week he said he wasn’t coming this week, and all of a sudden he changed his mind, and Mum wants me to be there when he arrives to serve his food.’ I drawl the last words because I hate that I even have to utter them. I wish I could scrub my tongue clean of the words.

‘Serve his food? Why did God give him hands?’ Amal kisses her teeth.

‘Baby girl, we’re on the same page. But I would never dare ask my mum that though. The woman would bite my head off!’

Amal chuckles. ‘And then she’ll give you her disrespectful speech. Your mum and her very many speeches.’

I snap my fingers. ‘Gurl, you know! I’m so gutted about tonight, but mum wasn’t having it. Nothing I say could make her change her mind.’

‘Your mum is a woman of her words. But on a side note, I don’t like the idea of you tending to a grown man like Uncle Mustapha. That man gives me weird vibes and I’ve only met him twice.’

‘You and me both. He gives me more than weird vibes. To be honest, I don’t even like him. He’s been acting a bit off lately...like just last week when, urg, never mind.’ I swallow my words because I have no evidence, and I don’t want to make a deal out of nothing. Saying it makes it real, and it’s nothing serious yet, and it will remain that way because I plan to stay away from him.

Amal sits up straight, grabs my hands and look into my eyes. ‘Last week when? You better spill, Maya. You already started the sentence, and you know the deal.’

I shrug. ‘Girl, it’s nothing really.’

She leans back. ‘I don’t care if it’s nothing. We don’t hide anything from each other especially when you’ve already began to spill. You made the rules, you can’t go back on them now.’ She smirks.

I made the rule, but it was one of my tactics for when Amal was being tight-lipped. I have absolutely no problem spilling everything to Ams, but this Uncle Mustapha situation seems a bit too big, almost untouchable. It feels like a volcano waiting to erupt, and my words are like the trigger to set it off.

‘It’s nothing, but since you really want to know, I was just gonna say like last week when he was bossing me around. You know how my parents are with respect blah blah. Well, I think he’s taking too much of an advantage of it and he’s turning me to a maid.’

She snorts. ‘Gosh, this man reeks of bad news.’

I nod. ‘Exactly, so let’s forget about him before he ruins the rest of our evening. I’ll make it up to you I promise.’

She moves the menu from side to side. ‘Nah, it’s not right.’

‘What’s not right? That I make it up to you?’ I know what she means, but I don’t want to go down that lane for now anyway.

‘Come on, it’s not right that Uncle Mustapha uses you that way. He’s a grown man, not a man-child.’

I chuckle. ‘I need you to come sing this to my mum’s ears, man. Whenever I try to bring it up, she says I’m being disrespectful by complaining.’

‘Disrespectful?’

‘Ams, you know my mum already. Why are you surprised? Anyways, let’s talk about the most important thing in our lives.’ I drum on the table and Amal gives me a blank stare. ‘Sixth formmmmm!’

‘How is sixth form the most exciting thing in our lives?’

‘All the outfits we get to wear?! Have you even thought about your outfits? Do you have a plan in mind? Now could be a good time to put my board to use.’

Amal cracks up and is laughing so hard.

‘What’s so funny? I’m being serious, girl. I already have half of my outfits planned and the goal for next week is to plan the other half.’

‘Girl, good luck doing this for the rest of the term! Do I look like I care about outfits? I’ve got my

beautiful black abayas, my loud and proud hijabs and my shoes to match. What else do you want from me?’

‘Black abaya and varying hijab still? It’s sixth form, a new school, an entire new world. I was hoping you’ll put in a bit more effort.’ I shake my head.

‘Effort for who? The only person worth putting in an effort for is myself and I love my style the way it is.’ She pulls her bag onto her knee, unzip it and take out her phone. She stares at her reflection in the dark screen. ‘I mean, this hijab screams style if you ask me.’

‘Wow.’ I roll my eyes. ‘Girl, you’re such a lost cause to fashion.’

She presses a button on her phone, but it doesn’t come on. ‘Ugh, I charged it this morning.’ She ruffles through her bag for her power bank, and I wonder how she finds anything in that bag of hers. Amal’s bag is a supermarket which carries everything you can think of from lip balm to tissues to spare hijab pins, loose change, spare hijab scrunchie, a snack. Literally, anything you need is in there.

‘Why does your bag have compartments if you’re not going to use them?’

She lifts her head to look at me and battles with her phone button to get her phone on. Her messy bag is her only flaw. It’s so weird because she’s super organised and likes to plan everything, but for some reason her bag doesn’t seem to fit in the equation.

She presses hard on the button again and her phone comes on. ‘Woah, girl it’s getting late we need to go catch the bus.’

That’s why I left my phone in my bag. I don’t want to confront my reality, but I guess I have to. ‘Are you trying to get rid of me because I can’t come over? I was hoping you’d cherish our last moments together.’ I pull a sad face.

‘Do you want to leave your Uncle Mustapha starving?’

I squeeze my face. ‘Ew who cares, man?’

Amal shakes her head. ‘Your mum, girl. Your mum.’

I jump out of my seat, throw my bag over my shoulder and pull Amal’s hand. ‘I totally forgot about her! Ya Rabb, please don’t let her be back.’

‘Ameen,’ she shouts as we rush off to the bus stop.

## COMMENDED



**ABENA EYESON**

*Running My Race*

Born in Ghana, Abena Eyeson has lived in the UK since the age of nine. Now married with three children, she is educated up to a PhD and has had a career in HR. Abena writes upper middle-grade fiction and was one of the children's writers shortlisted by David Higham Associates for their January 2021 New Writers' Open Week. She self-published her first novel *Looking Up* in 2019. Abena completed the Faber Academy Writing a Novel course online in 2021.

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# RUNNING MY RACE

## 1

Kofi Obeng

*September 2016*

The Dead Poets' Society is Dad's favourite film. Sure, he has others, but when he wants to chill with me on the sofa on a Sunday afternoon, when Mum and Abigail are out and there is no football on TV, it is almost guaranteed that he'll suggest we watch the DVD. I'm not that bothered about the old film – I'm more of a Marvel movies fan myself. But I love spending time with Dad eating spicy, plantain crisps and drinking coke. I have watched the film so often, I know many of its lines by heart. Like 'Carpe diem, seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary.' That is what the teacher guy in the movie says to the boys he teaches.

Dad whispered, 'Carpe diem,' to me this morning as he hugged me tight before he left for work. I know what he was getting at. He was telling me to *seize the day* when I start Nunford School today.

The *mega*-expensive, private school offers a full scholarship to a couple of state school children every year for a place in their senior school starting in year nine. Mum wanted Abigail to do the scholarship exams when she was younger, but she refused. She and Mum argued about it for ages, but Abigail stuck her heels in. She has always been able to stand up to Mum.

'It's my life and I don't want to go to that *snooty* school,' she would say to Mum.

Mum would reply, 'Who cares if it is *snooty*! You're black, Abigail. You need the best education you can get to compete out in the real world.'

But Abigail wouldn't budge, so Mum had no choice but to allow her to stay on at St Vincent, the local comprehensive school. Now that Abigail is in sixth form, she and Mum are arguing again because Mum wants her to go to university, but Abigail is having none of it. She says she doesn't have time to waste going to university. She wants to be earning ASAP! She already has an offer for an engineering apprenticeship with a big company in central London where she did a summer job after her GCSEs. They have offered her a place as long as she gets good grades in her A levels. I'm sure she'll do that because she's clever ... unlike me. Dad is proud of Abigail for wanting to go into engineering, which isn't something many girls are interested in, but he never says anything when Mum is going on and on. Dad always does that. He once told me that he stays quiet so that Mum doesn't give him *wahala*. I get that. That's why I stay quiet too. That's why I am going to Nunford school today, even though I'm really not sure I want to go there.

It was such a shock when I found out that I had been given one of the scholarships to Nunford school. Sure, I sat the scholarship exam because Mum insisted on it and then, by some miracle, was called for an interview with Mr Fortesque, the headteacher. The interview was an absolute nightmare until I mentioned I would love to be a professional athlete.

'Doing what?' Mr Fortesque asked straightaway, looking me dead in the eye.

‘Running,’ I said quietly, wondering why he was so interested.

I don’t even know why I brought it up. I have never talked about wanting to run professionally to anyone before or since – not Abigail, Dad or Mum. I am afraid they will think it is a silly idea and try to change my mind, especially Mum. She thinks running is something you do when you are playing. But Mr Fortesque seemed to take me seriously because next thing I knew, he had called Mr Dunn, the Head of Sports Education, to come and meet me. I was taken to the school’s outdoor athletics track which blew my mind. I swear! I couldn’t believe a school could have something that looked like a mini championship athletics stadium in its grounds! Mr Dunn gave me a spare, baggy, Nunford PE kit and black spikes to wear and told me to run around the track twice. When he blew his whistle, at first it felt weird running in a kit that wasn’t my own and being watched by him with a timer in his hand. But as I sped up, everything faded away apart from the happy, tingling feeling inside. I love running. The longer the run, the better. When I run, something happens to me that I can’t fully explain. It’s like I am free and floating on air like a superfast superhero. It feels amazing! I could have run forever on the Nunford school track. It was so much better than any surface I had run on before. But Mr Dunn blew his whistle, so I had to stop and then he said something, which all this time later, still makes me smile.

‘You are good. Very good, in fact.’

I was so happy. It was the first time someone had said that to me about my running.

A few months after that, a letter from the school arrived offering me the scholarship. Dad looked at me with shiny eyes. He said, ‘You did it, son,’ and squeezed me tight. Abigail gave me a funny look and a nod – like I had gone up in her estimation. Mum jumped up and down, shouting, ‘Thank you God.’ She made sure she told all our friends and family the news.

Then the local paper heard about it and a journalist came to interview me in the flat with Mum and Dad which was very exciting. What was less exciting was that Mum made me wear my smartest suit, the three-piece, navy-striped one she got on sale from Debenhams, so in all the photos the journalist took, I looked like a pint-sized man on his way to work. *Cheers Mum!* The journalist was the one who told us that I was the first person from Exby to ever get a scholarship to Nunford School. When the article was published in the paper with a photograph and everything, I became famous in Exby. Well, for a while anyway. Our friends, people from church and just random strangers would stop me in the street and shake my hand.

‘You’ve made us proud,’ they would say.

*How*, I would wonder because I don’t actually know why I got the scholarship.

Charlie, my best mate, reckons I’m going to become posh because I will be mixing with a load of posh children. He thinks I won’t want to know him when I’m posh.

‘Bruv,’ I said. ‘There is as much chance of that as there is of me getting tall like you.’

That made him laugh. ‘That’s zero chance then.’

‘Exactly,’ I said, confident nothing was going to change.

That was two days ago. Today, I woke up feeling funny with my tummy doing somersaults. I told Mum my tummy wasn’t too good, but she insisted I eat the full English breakfast, she had specially cooked for me, to give me strength for my big day. That was *so* not a good idea. My tummy is now spinning around like a washing machine. I just pray I don’t throw up. It would not be a good look to have sick down my front when I start my new school.

Mum and I have just got on the jam-packed 304 to Nunford. A few people smiled and nodded at me on the way to the bus stop, but not as many as when the article first came out in the local paper. To be honest, I'm pleased. All the attention was getting a bit much.

Mum leads the way, squeezing past people in the aisle, as we look for somewhere to sit. Among the children on the bus, I can't see anyone wearing the Nunford school uniform. The bus is warm and full of chitter-chatter. It's a good thing I decided not to wear my school overcoat today – I'd be boiling by now.

'Eh Evelyn. Good morning.'

The shrill voice belongs to a beaming, dark, tall woman in the aisle seat by the exit door. I recognise her – she is one of Mum's regulars.

'Oh Vida. How are you?'

I follow as Mum makes a beeline to her friend.

'I'm fine, by the grace of God.'

'Kofi, say hello to Auntie Vida.'

'Hello Auntie,' I say politely.

'Hello Kofi. You're looking very handsome today.'

I give a tight smile, though I know for a fact I look far from *handsome* in the grey-tweed uniform that resembles an old man's suit. There is a silly hat that I am supposed to wear as well but that is in my school rucksack along with my PE kit. If people see me in a straw hat in Exby, they will laugh their heads off! I will put it on when I get to school.

'You're right, Vida.' Mum smiles, her eyes twinkling. 'Baby K is looking dashing this morning.'

*There she goes again, calling me Baby K in public.* Yes, even though I have turned fourteen, Mum still sees me as her *baby*. It is *sooo* embarrassing. Already, because of my shorter than average height, low-cropped hair and round, dimpled face, people think I'm younger than my age. So Mum's nickname really doesn't help! I did tell her once to stop calling me that, but when she said, 'It's a term of endearment, Kofi,' I just sighed and went quiet. I can't stand up to Mum. I hate it when she's upset or angry with me, so I do what she wants me to do.

'Oh, nice fragrance,' says Auntie Vida, sniffing the air and looking at me. 'What is it?'

I really don't want to answer. *Why is she being so nosy?* But ... it would be rude not to. 'Lynx Africa,' I say.

'I like it,' she says, bobbing her head. 'It's lovely to see a young man presenting himself so well.' She looks at Mum. 'You have done such a good job with Kofi, Evelyn, and you are looking lovely as well this morning.'

Mum smiles with her whole face. 'Oh, thank you,' she says in the high-pitched voice that comes out when she is pleased about something. She moves her body from side to side to allow her friend to have a good look at her red skirt and matching lacey top. Mum is short and a little big but she likes to squeeze herself into clothes that are a bit too small for her. Plus you always know she is going somewhere special when she tries to make herself look taller by wearing high heels and having a *high* hairstyle. Today, she has on black, high-heeled boots and has styled her straightened hair into a big, beehive thing. I can smell the flowery perfume she normally wears to go to church. Why she is all dressed up like this? I have no idea. She is only going with me to my new school.

'You must be off somewhere special,' Auntie Vida says.

'Kofi is starting year nine at Nunford School today,' Mum says proudly, making sure the other passengers hear her.

And they do. People start staring and whispering. A group of school children, standing down the aisle, look at me and start talking among themselves.

'Of course!' says Auntie Vida. 'Eh, Kofi. Starting Nunford school today. You are putting Exby on the map.'

*Really??*

'Congratulations, my sister.' The tall, black man standing next to Mum leans over. 'I knew your son looked familiar. He was in the paper, wasn't he?'

'Yes, he was,' says smiling Mum in her high pitched voice.

'Good on him. I wish you all the best, son,' the man says, looking at me.

Feeling like I have to say something, I mumble, 'Thank you.'

'Thank you so much,' says Mum, her smile even bigger than before.

Mum, Auntie Vida and the tall man carry on talking about me. *Haven't they said enough already? And why do they have to talk so loudly?* More and more people stare. I pretend not to see them but my tummy is on fast spin.

Luckily, the man gets off at the next bus stop and I hear Auntie Vida say, 'Are you working today, Evelyn? I was going to pass by after my shift to see if you could squeeze me in.'

'I'll be working from late morning,' replies Mum. 'I have a few appointments booked in, but you are welcome to come after work, if you are happy to wait.'

Mum will never turn away a client. It's a sign of how much it means to her for me to go to this school that she isn't starting work at her usual 8.30 this morning. Our living room in the flat doubles up as Mum's hair salon. From morning till evening, she has clients, mostly from our neighbourhood, coming in and out.

Dad could have brought me in his car but he had an early appointment today installing someone's boiler. He is a self-employed gas engineer.

'Emmanuel, you go to work. I'll take him,' Mum insisted.

I'm not surprised. It is *her* big dream that at least one of her children will go to Nunford school. Mum is still busy chatting, so I guess we are not looking for a place to sit anymore. At least, the other passengers are no longer looking at me and my tummy is calming down. I gaze out of the window at the Exby tower blocks and terraced houses as the bus moves from one bus stop to another. When I start to see swanky flats and large, fancy houses, I know we have reached Nunford. I have only been to Nunford five times and that includes the day I did the exam and the day of the headmaster's interview. I swear, you have to be loaded to live here. Everything looks so expensive. I bet, everybody who lives here owns their own home.

There are actually four people I know who own their homes and they are my grandparents. Mum's parents in Ghana, Nana and Grandpa, had their two-storey house built for them in Accra. We have been to stay with them three times on holiday. I spent most of my time there outside in the sun - running in the big, lawned garden, round the neighbourhood in East Legon and a few times on the beach, when we drove to Labadi. I loved it. I wonder sometimes if we should move to Ghana to live. But when I mention this to Mum, she laughs and says,

'Life in Ghana is tougher than you think.'

Dad's parents, Grandma and Grandad, bought their council flat in West London years ago and sold it for a lot of money two years back when they retired. They bought a bungalow by the sea in Kent to enjoy their retirement. Other than them, everyone else I know rents like us.

Nunford and Exby may both be in London but I swear, that is all they have in common. Look at Nunford high street with all its different shops, restaurants and coffee shops. What would it be like to live here and have all of this on my doorstep? It would definitely put Exby to shame with its poxy parade of five shops and two takeaways. But nah, I just can't see myself calling this place home.

A glimpse of something right at the end of the high street makes me swallow hard as my tummy starts fast spinning again. In what seems like no time at all, the bus is in front of what I glimpsed - the tall, black wrought-iron fencing and large, gated entrance, with Nunford School written in black letters on a big, white sign on the side of the gate. I glance at Mum, still chatting, not even noticing where we are.

'Mum,' I say. 'We need to get off.'

'Oh. Look at me now. I nearly missed the stop,' she says, hurriedly pressing the red button on the metal pole near her.

A minute later, the bus jerks to a standstill at a bus stop not far from the gates. We step out into the sunshine and a welcome breeze. I swear, the air smells different here - more ... fresh. Mum waves goodbye to her friend as the bus moves on and we walk towards the gate. At the sight of the school, we both stop and stare. The long, winding drive leads to huge, grand buildings, surrounded by extensive, green grounds. The school looks like something out of a film and ... just as intimidating as I remember. My tummy spins faster than ever.

Mum says, 'Look at it, Baby K. This is your school now. When you go to a school like this, the world is your oyster. You can become somebody - a doctor, lawyer, politician, even prime minister.'

I glance at her in disbelief before looking back at the school. *Talk about laying on the pressure!* It still feels surreal that this is *my* school. It couldn't be more different from St Vincent. Yes, St Vincent has a playing field but it's a small fraction of this. Not to mention how miniscule its sixties-built school building is compared to the size of this place.

'We better hurry. You don't want to be late on your first day,' Mum says.

'Are you coming down the drive as well? I thought we were going to say bye here,' I say, panicked. If Mum walks down with me, I just know that she will get emotional in front of all those posh people and I will be sooo embarrassed. 'I can walk down by myself, Mum.'

'What do you mean?' says Mum. 'Of course, I'm walking down with you.' She strides off down the drive, leaving me no choice but to follow her.

Apart from a frizzy-haired girl already halfway down the drive, I can't see anyone else walking. Car after car swish past us, stopping in front of the white, double-fronted, main school building for children to pop out and climb up the grand stairs to the large, wooden entrance door.

We have only been walking a few minutes when I see Mum starting to hobble in her high heeled boots. Clearly, those boots were meant for posing and not standing all the way here on the bus and walking. Serves her right for choosing to wear those silly boots and for walking down when I told her not to. A large, silver Mercedes drives past and two white boys at the back of the car point at Mum and laugh. *That is it!*

'Mum,' I say, catching her up. 'Thank you for walking down with me but I can see that your feet are hurting.' Mum shakes her head and opens her mouth, but I quickly add, 'Let's just say bye here. I

will continue walking down and you can go back to catch the bus. Otherwise, your feet will be killing you and how will you stand to do people's hair?'

Mum is quiet for a bit before reaching out for my face and kissing me on both cheeks. I cringe but say nothing.

'Alright, Baby K, you have a point,' she says. 'Thank you for thinking about me.'

I nod and smile, willing her to start walking back.

'Make sure you apply yourself today and work very hard so that they know you mean business.'

'Yes, Mum. I promise,' I say.

'You have made me so proud, Baby K,' she says, this time with tears in her eyes.

*Oh no!* 'I need to get going, Mum, so I am not late. Remember?' I say. 'Bye.' I start walking quickly down the drive before Mum starts crying and making a scene. When I glance back, it is a relief to see her walking towards the gate. *I love Mum but she is too much!*

When I get to the foot of the stairs of the main school building, my tummy is spinning like mad. I stare at all the children, in brown tweed, pounding up the grand stairs. It is clear to see that there is no-one like me. I am the only black face. *Am I going to fit in here? What if I don't? What if they don't like me?* My legs start quivering and the temptation to leg it down the drive is strong. Only the certainty that Mum would kill me keeps me going up the stairs. Remembering Dad's words, I mutter to myself, 'Carpe diem,' over and over again as I slowly climb the stairs with my rucksack in my hand.

'Where is your boater, young man?' says a deep, male voice.

Startled, my head snaps up to see the headteacher, Mr Fortesque, looming large in his *Harry-Potter-like* cloak by the entrance door. *Boater? Oh, that is the hat. Oh no, I forgot to put it on.*

'Sorry sir, it is in my bag,' I say, bending over to hurriedly pull it out.

'It is meant to be on your head, not in your bag,' replies Mr Fortesque.

I shove the hat on my head. 'Sorry, sir,' I say.

'Since it is your first day here, Master Obeng, I will not give you a punishment. But if it happens again, you will be punished. Your boater has to be worn when you arrive at school, between all lessons and at the end of the school day, it has to be worn until you leave the school premises. The uniform policy is to be adhered to at all times.'

'Yes sir,' I say, surprised he remembers my name and surprised he is making such a fuss about a hat. Still, being told off by the headteacher on my first morning is not exactly a great start.

'I am sure things will all fall into place soon, Master Obeng,' Mr Fortesque adds, the sides of his mouth lifting into some kind of smile.

*I'm not so sure.*

'Master Roberts,' he calls out, through the open front door, to a tall, dark-haired, older-looking boy standing in the hall, a little way away, next to a group of six children. One of them looks like the frizzy-haired girl who was walking ahead of me on the drive. Short and on the chubby side, she has her head down and looks uncomfortable. Maybe she is new like me. Near her, a tall, curly-haired, tanned boy stares at me before exchanging a smug smirk with the stocky, ginger-haired boy next to him. *Are they laughing at me?* I swear, they look like the boys at the back of the silver Mercedes.

'This is Master Obeng,' says Mr Fortesque to the dark-haired boy. 'Please add him to the group of year nines that you are in charge of.'

'Yes, Mr Fortesque,' the boy replies.

'Master Obeng, if you kindly join Master Roberts, he will take you to your form room.'

‘Thank you, sir,’ I say.

‘Oh, and welcome to Nunford school.’

*Yeah. Some welcome.*

## 2

# Miles Channing

*September 2016*

‘Are you ready for this?’ asks James.

We are at the back of the group following the tall, sixth-former to our year nine form-room. Walking through the musky, poorly-lit, wood-panelled corridors of the main school building, I am spotting famous actors and sports people among the framed, old Nunfordians peering down at us.

‘What?’ I say.

‘Senior school.’

I glance at him and shrug. ‘As I’ll ever be. I haven’t given it that much thought.’

‘Brad says it’s tougher than prep school.’ Brad is James’ older brother who is about to go to Oxford to study Philosophy, Politics and Economics.

I shrug again. ‘I’m not worried.’

‘Should have known. Chilled Miles. What does worry you?’

‘Don’t know but I’ll be sure to let you know when I do.’

*Of course, I won’t.* I do have things that worry me – I just don’t talk about them. I keep that stuff to myself. That is what I have always done.

‘Do you know ... you’re looking more like your mother now?’ says James, his eyes on me.

‘No, I am not!’ I say, stunned that James can say such a thing.

‘What is wrong with looking like your mother?’

‘Everything when I look nothing like her.’

*And don’t want to be anything like her.* James knows little about how I feel about Mummy. She is not like James’ mother Bella. I watch him with Bella. All hugs and kisses. What he doesn’t know is I can’t remember the last time I hugged Mummy. I’ve been friends with James since we started Nunford Pre Prep. I was four and he was nearly four. Now I am fourteen, we come to school together with Bella who also takes me home. But I don’t speak to him about Mummy. I don’t speak to anyone about her. Well, I do say a little to Granny and Grandad but not much. I doubt if they would want to hear how I really feel about her. Like how sometimes I get so angry with her I hate her, but I know I love her.

‘Well, I still say your face looks more like her now,’ says James.

I silently stare ahead. If I ignore him long enough, he will soon get the message and stop talking about Mummy. James is not like me. He has a *normal* family. Mother, father and brother. I, on the other hand, have no father and no sibling. Just a housekeeper, Isabel and my mother Caroline, who I barely see. She leaves for work at her city law firm early in the morning, stopping at the gym on the way. She often doesn’t get home until late at night, having gone out for drinks or dinner first. It

is crystal clear where I fit in her list of priorities. Isabel cooks, cleans and looks after me. Until Bella decided to do it, Isabel used to drop me off and pick me up from school in the car Mummy had given her to use for errands.

I do have Granny and Grandpa but living in London, I am far from where they are in York, so I don't see them very often. But I suppose that is something I have that James doesn't. James' grandparents are all dead. *I wish I had a father.* That is what I would love to have the most. I have never met my father and know nothing about him. When I see children with their fathers, like James with his dad, it hurts. James doesn't know that. Nobody knows. I haven't told Granny, Grandpa and definitely not Mummy. She doesn't care anyway. I sometimes wonder why she had me when she has no time for me.

'Earth to Miles. You look like you are *miles* away,' says James with a smirk.

'Ha ha. Very clever James,' I say.

'But seriously, you do look like your mind is elsewhere. Am I boring you or something?'

'Well, I didn't want to say ɾ-'

James jabs me with his elbow and smiles. 'Cheeky.'

'Hey!!!' Someone has just stepped on the back of my shoe – my brand new, black-leather, Tommy Hilfiger shoe. I turn to see the klutz. The only person behind me is the short, black boy who Mr Fortesque directed to join our group after telling him off for not wearing his boater. The same boy James and I saw on the drive behind the stumbling, fat, black woman. His eyes are open wide like a deer caught in the headlights.

'What the hell!' I say, checking my shoe isn't scuffed. It isn't. 'Look where you're going.'

'Sorry,' he says, his eyes getting wider. 'I didn't mean it. It was an accident.'

'Well, don't do it again.'

He nods, barely looking me in the eye. *The boy is such a dweeb and what is that cheap fragrance he's got on?*

'What prep school have you come from?' I wonder aloud.

'Prep school?' He looks confused. 'I have come from St Vincent Catholic School.'

I have never heard of it. Then it clicks. He is a comprehensive kid. Wow, why did the school let this *dweeb* in?

'Hi,' says James with a silly smile. 'I'm James and this is Miles. Welcome to Nunford School.'

Comprehensive boy looks at James with a relieved smile and opens his mouth to speak, but I pull James away by the arm, moving us closer to the bean-pole sixth former, leaving Comprehensive boy right at the back of the group.

'Why did you do that?' says James with a frown on his freckled face, partly hidden by strands of his floppy, ginger hair.

'Why are you being so friendly with him?' *Honestly, I do sometimes wonder about James.*

'Oh ... hi Miles.'

A girl's breathless voice makes me turn to my right. Amanda is walking beside me, her blue eyes fixed on my face. I give her a half smile. Giggling, her eyes light up as she twirls a strand of her blonde hair. Amanda isn't a friend. I don't consider any girl to be my friend –they're not on my wavelength. But since eleven, when I shot up and my muscles started developing, girls have been gravitating towards me like Amanda is now. I rather like it. This is why I make sure I look good at all times.

'Hi Amanda,' I say, looking as disinterested as I can.

Amanda's pale face flushes bright red. 'How ... was your summer ... holiday?' she stammers as she moves closer to me.

I shrug, stepping away from her and closer to James. 'It was okay. Two weeks on the French Riviera and three weeks in Orlando,' I say in my best blasé voice.

## COMMENDED



### DESHANI SHAN

#### *The Scent of Jasmine*

Deshani Shan felt for many years that she might have a novel in her, if only she had the time to write it. When a period of ill-health prevented her from working as a doctor and granted her an undeniable amount of free time, she thought she would try. Through a series of creative writing courses she found that she was drawn to children's fiction. In the last year she has won the Golden Egg Award (from the Golden Egg Academy), a London Writers Award (from Spread the Word) and has been shortlisted for Penguin's WriteNow scheme for her middle-grade novel *The Scent of Jasmine*.

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# THE SCENT OF JASMINE

~ 1981, England ~

## 1

The silhouettes of jumbo jets could be seen through the misty airport window, extending towards the horizon like a row of Russian dolls. There was a loud roar overhead, as one came in to land. The window vibrated, sending the raindrops caught on its surface trickling downwards, like reluctant tears.

“Please Dad, let me stay” said Meera, craning her neck, trying to catch his eye as he looked away. She blinked hard, determined not to cry, and grabbed her father’s hand between both of hers. She felt the familiar deep ridges on his nails and his rough, dry skin. She wished she could place her chin in the crook of his elbow like she had sometimes done when she was younger, but now she was ten and almost reached his shoulder. Instead she tried to bur her face in his sleeve. Shaking her off his arm, he took a step back and checked his suit for wet patches.

“I just need some time to process...”

“But I don’t want to go to Sri Lanka!” Her voice echoed in her head, the words louder than she had intended. Passers-by tutted and frowned at her and her cheeks burned with shame.

“I can’t look after you,” he snapped. Clearing his throat, he straightened his shoulders and smoothed down his moustache. When she reached for his hand again, he pulled it away and fiddled with the knot of his tie. Panic swelled inside of her, and she could feel her heart racing.

“Think of it as a holiday. Sri Lanka is beautiful. Palm trees, sunshine, all the mangoes you can eat.”

The tears rolled down her cheeks and she couldn’t stop them. Her chest felt tight and her shoulders heaved as she gasped for breath between sobs.

“It’ll give you a chance to see where you’re from,” he continued.

She stamped her foot in frustration.

“Don’t make a scene, Meera.” He said sharply, glancing around the room.

There was a loud clicking of high heels on the hard floor and a lip-sticked stewardess appeared below an arch with the word ‘Departures’ in large letters across the top.

“Are you Meera? Come on love, we’ll need to rush you through security. The plane’s going to take off soon.”

“Go! You can’t keep everyone waiting.” He shooed her towards the arch, flapping both hands.

“Why the tears?” The stewardess crouched down, her pencil skirt straining at the seams, and placed a reassuring hand on Meera’s shoulder.

“She’s just anxious. First time flying and all.”

“Oh my love!” Her thin arched eyebrows shot up her forehead with exaggerated sympathy, creating three little lines across it.

“Travelling all on your own too. Don’t worry I’ll be looking after you and we’ll make sure you get

to your uncle in Colombo safely. You're in good hands."

Meera hesitated. She looked at her father. Despite the dark circles under his tired eyes he looked determined. Though she was terrified, she knew it was pointless arguing with him when he had made up his mind. She looked back at the smiling stewardess who was holding out her hand and took it. Her father breathed a sigh of relief. With dragging footsteps, they headed towards the Departures sign. She turned to wave at her father but he was walking briskly away. She watched his retreating figure merge into the airport crowds before taking a deep breath and steeling herself for the next two weeks.

The stewardess smiled down at her, "You'll be fine, come on."

\*\*\*

Meera shivered and pulled the cuffs off her jumper sleeves down over her knuckles. It was cold inside the plane, and it smelled of stale cigarette smoke and peanuts. As the stewardess helped buckle Meera in, she told her to get comfortable because it was going to be a long flight. Next to her, a slumped elderly lady in a white saree and oversized woolly cardigan was dozing off with her mouth wide open.

Meera reached into her backpack and pulled out the letter her mother had left for her on her pillow a few weeks prior. Smoothing out the crumpled edges of the envelope, she stared at her name on it. She traced the pretty cursive letters with her finger, feeling the indentations that the black biro had left on the paper. She imagined her mother writing them.

*My Dearest Meera,*

*I am sorry that I must leave you like this. I hope you will forgive me one day. I cannot go on living this lie.*

*All My Love,*

*Mum.*

She had read the note so many times but still couldn't work out what lie her mother was talking about. She put the note back in her bag, closed her eyes and tried to picture her. It was no good. The picture in her mind was blurry no matter how hard she tried to concentrate. The familiar sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach returned and she swallowed hard to suppress it. Guilt. She felt certain it was all her fault. She should have been able to stop her. If she had been less trouble, better behaved, easier to love, she thought, it never would have happened.

She adjusted the small pillow behind her head, and let her mind drift back to that awful day. She strained to picture her mother's expression, searching for a clue that might have predicted what was to happen. She remembered how her mother had hugged her before she had left for school that day, seeming less stressed than usual. Meera had thought that maybe her mother's sadness, the depression, was lifting. Maybe things were getting better, she had thought. She wondered now how she could have been so foolish.

She couldn't help replaying that day, rewinding it, wondering if there was anything she could have done differently. She remembered running up the path to the house on the way home from school, eager for the weekend to start. She had rung the doorbell three times, the way she always did, so that her mum knew it was her. No answer. She had hooked a finger round the string she wore around her

neck and pulled up the attached key through the collar of her gingham school dress. The key had been a bit stiff in the latch and she had to tip toe to reach it. Eventually the door had swung open.

“Mum?” she had called, checking the rooms downstairs and peering through the window into the back garden in case she was hanging out some laundry. No sign of her. She had raced upstairs, eager to share the news that she had scored top marks in the maths quiz at school that day.

There was a knot in her stomach and she recoiled at the memory of her mother lying on the floor, surrounded by empty packets of tablets.

Meera had screamed and instinctively tried to wake her mother up. She wouldn't wake up no matter how much Meera shook her. She had wondered whether she should call for an ambulance or call her father at work. He didn't like to be disturbed at work but surely this was an emergency? Fingers trembling she had dialled the number. The resentful engaged tone had beeped back at her. She felt queasy just thinking about it. She had spun round the number nine on the mechanical dial three times, her heart thumping harder each time it spun back. She had spoken to the operator and given them their address. They had said they would be on their way as soon as possible.

She had then gone into her room and collapsed on her bed. It was there that she had found the note on her pillow. Reading it that first time she had realised with horror that her mother had intended to end her life. She had raced down to the front door, waiting for the ambulance to arrive, hoping it wasn't too late. She heard the wailing sirens before it appeared with its blue lights flashing, pulling up by the curb. She could hear them even now, echoing in her head. She squeezed her eyes tight, trying to block out the memory. She needed to focus on something else.

She took out her colouring pencils and the sketchbook that she had been given for her previous birthday, thinking that perhaps it would help pass the time. Snapping open the tin pencil case, she thought back to the previous July when her mother had gently woken her up and sung *Happy Birthday* to her, stroking her fringe away from her eyes. She didn't want her birthday to come this year. She didn't want to be a year older. The thought of going to secondary school in September was scary.

The paper in her sketchbook was thick. Her mother had said you could paint on it without it crinkling up and bleeding through. She had been really good at painting and had shown Meera some good tips with her own art work. Her mother had only painted when she was feeling happy though, Meera had noticed. At first, she had thought it was the painting that had made her happy, but later she realised it was other way round. She only painted when she was in a good mood.

Last summer, in the school holidays, they had visited the library together a few times. On one of these days, her mother had taken down some large books on art from one of the shelves and shown her pictures of paintings she admired. Some of them were in black and white and some in colour. She had looked pleased when Meera marvelled at how some of the paintings looked so real, like photographs. Others, she had noticed, were full of tiny blotchy splotches which came together prettily. Her mother had explained how different styles of painting had developed in different countries at different times.

The very next day, she had taken Meera on the train to London where they had taken a big red double decker bus. The sprawling grey city was bustling and exciting. Everybody walked really fast, like they were in a huge hurry, and she had held on tight to her mother's hand for fear of being swept away in the crowds.

They had visited a gallery where some of the paintings from the library books were hanging in real life. They looked so much better in the gallery. Meera's mum had looked truly happy that day and it had surprised Meera how happy that had made her feel. They bought some breadcrumbs in a little

bag from a man outside the gallery, on Trafalgar Square, and together they had fed the pigeons with them, laughing the whole time.

Looking out of the tiny aeroplane window, Meera saw that they were so high in the sky that there were clouds all around them. She watched as the dense clouds turned to a fine mist when they flew straight through them, fading like memories dispersing under the pressure of concentration. She wondered what she should draw. Thinking back to her father's words she decided first on a palm tree, and then the sea in the background with some yellow sand in the foreground. She blended together shades of red and orange to create a sunset, wondering whether there would be a beach near her grandmother's house. She had never been to a beach.

"That's a lovely drawing," said the elderly woman sat next to her, startling Meera, who hadn't noticed her watching.

"It's Sri Lanka," said Meera.

The woman smiled and nodded, deep in thought. "Yes there are parts like that. Have you been before?"

Meera shook her head. "You might be in for a shock."

"A shock?"

"Culture shock, they call it. It might be quite different from what you're used to,"

## 2

Landing in Colombo, Meera realised the elderly lady was right. The dense heat and the noisy chaos of the airport was overwhelming. Her mouth was parched. Beads of sweat swelled and trickled down her face and back. She removed her thick jumper and wiped her forehead with the sleeve of her T-shirt. In the airport, throngs of people of various shades of brown pushed past each other, all eager to be somewhere else. They waved their hands emphatically as they spoke in dialects she could not understand. She felt like she had been transported to another world. Her pulse throbbed in her eardrums which, still tense after the flight, muffled external sounds but amplified her breathing. Panic rose in her chest, and she stood close to the stewardess as they waited for her Uncle.

"Meera! You made it." Her Uncle Bala crouched down and ruffled her hair, flashing the deep dimples that Meera's mother had also had. "How are you?"

Unable to muster a smile, Meera looked at him blankly, her shoulders slumped under the straps of her back pack. He frowned, concerned, his expression suddenly serious.

"So sorry to hear about your mother. She ..." his voice trailed off. He shook his head, at a loss for words, and embraced her. "It's so tragic. What a shock for you, finding her like that."

He spoke briefly with the stewardess and then turned and smiled at Meera again.

"Right, so now we have a short flight and then you can rest in the car on the way to the house."

While they waited for the next flight, they bought some cream soda, condensation dripping from the glass bottles as they sipped it through straws, the fizzy bubbles tickling the backs of their throats. It was sweet and delicious, and nicer than any she had ever tasted before. Once finished, they returned the bottles to the vendor for recycling, and set off to catch their flight.

They boarded a small plane to the airport in Jaffna, where her grandmother's driver, Siva, met them in the old-fashioned family car. It was a white Ambassador with poor suspension, and Meera felt

herself bouncing along on the back seat whenever the road became bumpy, which was often. Peering out of the open window, she squinted against the dusty breeze, her tired eyes burning. Brightly coloured auto-rickshaws zoomed past, buzzing their way through the traffic like busy bluebottles, and palm trees lined the roadsides. Vehicles tooted their horns incessantly, and for the slightest reason. They passed artists painting billboard signs by hand with paint brushes, perched precariously on ladders, and entire families with nonchalant expressions zoomed past them, balanced on motorbikes. Wide streets with road side stalls, selling coconuts, boxes of mangoes and bunches of bananas still attached to their branches gradually gave way to quieter streets. They passed cattle on the roads and weaved their way through villages of huts where little boys in dusty shorts chased after the car, trying to outrun it, laughing with excitement. People selling snacks, flower garlands and other various crafts would try to sell their wares whenever the car was stationary for more than a few seconds.

Eventually they pulled up the driveway of a two-storey, red-brick house with a skinny cow tied to a tree in the front garden. The lawn was balding in parts but exotic flowers bordered it.

“Ok, here we are,” said the Siva, pulling up the handbrake and turning off the engine.

Meera got out of the car and walked gingerly past the cow, giving it a wide berth, her uncle carrying her small suitcase behind her.

“Welcome to our family home Meera” he smiled, “this is where your mother and I grew up.”

Her uncle called out as he opened the door.

“Amma! We’re here! Did you miss me?” He tried to plant an affectionate kiss on his mother’s cheek as she approached the doorway to greet them, but she shooed him away. She was a straight-backed woman with a stern expression. Her greying hair, thinner towards the centre parting, was scraped back into a severe bun at the nape of her neck. She wore a crisply pleated saree, large gold earrings and a diamond stud in her nose. She looked Meera up and down, assessing her unbrushed hair and worn-out trainers in the blink of an eye.

“Meera,” she said, her lips pressed together forming a thin line, the corners of which were turned downwards. She did not seem at all pleased with what she saw.

“Well, are you going to let us in Amma? Meera’s had a long trip. I’m sure she’s tired,” said her uncle cheerfully. Her grandmother gestured for them to come in.

“Meera you’ll stay in your mother’s old room upstairs. Bala, show her the room and the bathroom. Dinner will be ready soon.”

She followed her uncle up the stairs into the room she was to stay in. It was sunny with a view of the back garden and the coconut grove beyond it. A magnificent mango tree laden with fruit stood on the left, its branches overhanging the flat roof below the open window. Fluorescent parakeets squawked amiably to one another, perched in its boughs. In the distance she could see a banana tree and pretty shrubs of pink and purple hibiscus and bougainvillea flowers. Meera felt herself smiling. Her uncle ruffled her hair again.

“Not a bad view?”

Meera nodded in agreement. He showed her the peach tiled bathroom where there was a huge bucket of water below the shower head along with a tap in the wall. There was a smaller jug floating in the water. The floor was cool under her feet, and wet in parts. Uncle Bala said that to conserve water it was best to wash with the water in the bucket and not use the shower head.

“You just pour the water over you, like this.” He demonstrated using the empty jug.

“Why do we need to conserve water?”

Uncle Bala laughed. “So we don’t waste it. There’s less water when the weather’s this hot. We don’t want to run out.”

### 3

When he’d gone, leaving Meera to unpack in her room, she picked up her towel, soap, toothbrush and some fresh clothes from her suitcase and made her way back to the bathroom, locking the door. After her long journey she had never been more desperate to brush her teeth. The familiar minty taste was a comforting reminder of home and she brushed her teeth until they shone. She then washed her face on the sink, allowing the coolness of the water to linger on her skin. She looked at her reflection in the mirror above the sink as she dried her face. She felt oddly lost, as though not being surrounded by the people and places she knew somehow made her not quite herself.

She glanced over at the large bucket with curiosity. A wash would be good. Her last bath at home felt like a lifetime ago. She undressed and headed over to the bucket. Taking the jug of water she poured it over her head. It was freezing. She gasped, resisting the urge to scream. She hurriedly repeated the process, lathering herself up with soap and then taking a deep breath to brace herself before pouring water over herself with the jug. She dried herself hurriedly with her towel afterwards and got dressed into fresh clothes. Well that was certainly one way to cool down quickly, she thought. Balling her dirty clothes under her arm she dumped them in the laundry basket in her room and trudged downstairs.

At the foot of the dark wooden staircase was a ceiling fan in the hallway. She paused beneath it, enjoying the breeze from its lazy, hypnotic spinning. She listened as it creaked and groaned, as though begrudging its work. Beneath the whirr of the fan, she heard some other curious sounds. There was a scraping noise and a loud clicking. Wondering what could be making such a strange sound, she looked down the hall, in the direction in which they were coming from. What she saw made her gasp and her eyes widen with surprise. A little girl, who looked about her age, was looking up at her with curiosity. She was sat cross legged on the tiled floor next to an older woman just outside the entrance to the kitchen. The girl was cutting green beans into equal pieces with a knife that looked large in her small hands. The woman was grating a carrot with firm rhythmic strokes.

Meera watched the woman’s long, bony fingers, the shrinking orange stub and the growing mound of thin strips behind the metal grater.

“Why is he staring at us?” the girl asked her mother, under her breath, as reflected sunlight from the window bounced off the blade of the knife in her hand.

The woman did her best to suppress a smile, but her eyes twinkled.

“She’s a girl. That’s how little girls in England dress. It’s normal for them to have short hair and wear trousers like boys.”

Mortified, Meera flicked her wet fringe from her eyes, and looked down at her jeans. She supposed she did look quite boyish. Her mother, who had worn her own hair cropped close these last few years, had refused to allow Meera to wear hers any longer than a bob, stating it wasn’t fashionable.

Meera looked at the girl’s long hair with envy. It was pulled loosely back off her face, held half up with a plastic slide, into which were clipped some small white flowers on a string. She wore a traditional silk pink blouse and green skirt. She looked back at Meera with equal curiosity. Meera

had never seen another child with skin and eyes the exact shade of her own. Despite their differences, something about the girl's features made her feel like she was looking at her own reflection.

"I see you've met Shalini and her mother, Nallani." Meera turned at the sound of her grandmother's voice as she approached from the living room. Shalini stiffened and looked down at her beans intently. Her mother's grating grew firmer and louder until there was nothing left of the carrot and she got up hurriedly to go to the kitchen.

"Shalini! I need the beans now- quickly," the woman called from the kitchen. The girl got up to leave. She glanced back at Meera.

"Wait, do you want to play? I have a deck of cards upstairs. Or we could go outside?"

Her grandmother looked horrified and Shalini, embarrassed, scurried into the kitchen.

"Play with a servant-girl?" she whispered. "No- absolutely not. I will not allow it."

"But why?" said Meera, confused. She hadn't expected to see another child at the house, but now that there was one, she realised she could desperately do with a friend right now.

"You cannot play with her because she is *poor*. *You* are my grand-daughter."

"She doesn't *look* poor."

Her grand-mother frowned and looked her up and down again. Her eyes moved from the weathered cartoon character on her T-shirt, cracked and peeling from multiple rounds in the washing machine, to her creased jeans, faded at the knees.

"Shalini is wearing her best clothes in honour of you visiting us. It's a pity you did not do the same. Do you have any skirts or dresses?"

Meera pulled a face. "Not my style."

"Your *style*?" said her grandmother, arching an eyebrow and looking for assistance from a wall hanging by the door depicting a Hindu deity. He smiled benignly back at her. She shook her head and pursed her lips. "We'll need to get you some decent clothes. I'll get a *parvada* made for you."

"*Prvada*?"

"A traditional skirt and blouse," her grandmother rolled her eyes. "Come, I'll take the measurements now." She gestured her into the living room and took out her measuring tape and a spiral bound notepad.

"Lift your arms." Meera, not wanting to make a fuss, grudgingly did as she was told.

"But I like my clothes," she mumbled. Her grandmother ignored her and finished taking her measurements. Shalini and Nallani entered and silently placed a bowl of salad, made with the grated carrot, and the cooked beans on the dining table at the far end of the room before hurrying out.

"Okay, sit. Bala will be down soon." Her grandmother spun her round and pointed at the table which was laden with lots of other steaming bowls of curries and fluffy white rice.

Footsteps bounding down the stairs could be heard and Uncle Bala appeared, fresh from a shower, his hair still damp, wearing a white shirt and verti.

"Rolling out the red carpet for Meera, I see," he joked, looking at the vast array of dishes on the table. "Why the long face Meera, don't you like curry?"

"It's ok."

"Only ok? What do you eat at home – fish and chips?" he laughed.

Meera shrugged and nodded. "Yeah, stuff like that."

Her grandmother joined them at the table, carrying that day's newspaper. Outside, through the window, in the fading golden sunlight, Shalini and Nallani could be seen leaving the house on foot

with the driver.

“Siva is Nallani’s husband, and Shalini’s father,” said Uncle Bala noticing her curiosity.

Meera nodded. He stood up and served a heaped spoonful of rice onto Meera’s plate.

“Say when-”

“That’s enough,” she said hurriedly. He put another spoonful of rice on her plate.

“What, dieting, eh?” he laughed. “You need to grow, child. Help yourself to the curries.” He started serving himself some rice. “Amma, aren’t you eating?”

Meera’s grandmother joined them at the table, carrying the day’s newspaper.

“I ate earlier,” she said, holding the paper out at arm’s length and squinting. She took her glasses off and gave the lenses a clean with a handkerchief. It didn’t seem to help.

“These glasses,” she said. “Can’t see a thing. I wanted to read about the election. I’ll need to go to the optician tomorrow.”

Meera gasped as she bit on a chilli. Her eyes watered reflexively and it felt like her throat was on fire, causing her to cough and splutter.

“Here, have some water,” said her Uncle pouring her a glass from a jug. “It happens to the best of us,” he smiled. Meera gulped the water down gratefully.

“Do you eat much spicy food at home Meera?” he asked.

Meera shook her head.

“Can you cook?”

She shook her head again. “Dad does it.”

“You let your father cook?” her grandmother put the paper down on the table. “Didn’t your mother teach you to cook?”

Meera shrugged.

“You need to start taking responsibility for these things, Meera. You cannot rely on your mother. She has proved that. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“But Dad has always done the cooking,” Meera objected, prompting Uncle Bala to choke on his food laughing.

“Sounds like Shanthi’s idea,” he said

“Mum didn’t think it was fair for her to do all the housework so they shared it – Dad did the cooking and Mum did the cleaning.”

“Well, you will learn to cook while you are here,” her grandmother said.

“She made your mother learn when she was your age too,” Uncle Bala chuckled. “She wasn’t exactly a natural. She burned her hair once and another time she made a cake using salt instead of sugar by mistake!”

“When you go back home you must do the cooking and look after your father properly. No more of this fish and chips. Your mother was always eccentric. Trousers and short hair, thought women could drink whiskey like men, and men could do the cooking like women.”

“Amma, you shouldn’t be so old fashioned,” Uncle Bala objected. “What about all those top chefs that are men?”

“Pah!” she waved her hand in the air. “Tomorrow, you will join Nallani in the kitchen and learn to cook with Shalini. I don’t care if you don’t like curry,” she looked pointedly at Meera’s barely touched plate of food, “You will learn to cook it, to love it and to love cooking it.” She looked up at the ceiling and shook her head, “What have I done to deserve such a grandchild?”

Meera frowned and took another gulp of water.

“If you have no respect for the food of your country,” she went on, looking at Meera, “you have no respect for your culture. And if you have no respect for your culture, you will bring shame on your whole family.”

Her grandmother didn’t seem like the type to back down so she resigned herself to learning to cook. At least she would get to spend some time with Shalini, she thought.

## 4

The following morning, Meera joined Shalini and her mother in the cramped kitchen. Steam and the scent of fried onion rose from the two silver saucepans on the hob, one containing lentils and the other okra. It was hot and stuffy despite the open door which led outside onto the garden. There was a faint odour coming from some rotting vegetable peel in the bin in the corner which needed emptying.

“There are so many ingredients to remember,” she said, watching Nallani toss differing amounts of various powders into the okra. Jiggling the pan by its wobbly handle and giving it a good stir with a wooden spoon, Nallani raised an eyebrow at her, and nodded without reassurance.

“Help peel and chop these with Shalini.” She handed her three onions, a chopping board and a knife. Meera looked over at Shalini who was diligently working her way through a much larger pile of onions with what appeared to be great speed and precision. She watched and tried to imitate the movements but it was fiddlier than it looked. By the time Meera had finished peeling one of her onions, Shalini had completed her pile.

## COMMENDED



## FELICITY YEOH

### *Make Like a Tree and Leave*

Felicity Yeoh was a Foyle Young Poet of the Year and won the college poetry prize from Queens' College, Cambridge when she was a student. As a Chinese daughter of immigrants, she hasn't really had fictional or real-life role models that look like her. As a mum, godmother, Sunday school/library/classroom volunteer she borrows, buys and swaps hundreds of picture books a year – this story is about the immigrant experience (with jokes!). Felicity has been shortlisted for the Penguin Random House WriteNow Award 2021 and is currently looking for representation.

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## MAKE LIKE A TREE AND LEAVE

Away from the city and out past the towns  
Lay the green belt: the forest, green fields and downs  
From the top of the hill the views were so pretty  
At night you could see all the lights of the city  
Which seemed to burn brighter with each passing year  
More dazzling, sure - more clear, and more... near?

The trees were uneasy - the future was plain  
The growth of the city could not be restrained  
Sooner or later the green belt would break  
But as trees, they were stuck - what steps could they take?

They conferred with the conifers, planned with the planes  
Willows wept as the elders were racking their brains  
Until they decided, "our only salvation  
Will be if a tree can achieve transplantation!"

The youngest tree, Rowan, no more than a sapling  
Suddenly found himself urgently grappling  
With a concept he found it quite hard to believe  
"Are you telling me that you want me to...leave?"

The forest replied "Oh, we wish we could guide you!  
But you'll always carry the forest inside you.  
Our roots are too deep, so we can't be saved  
But you can break free - can you be really brave?"

Our sweet summer sapling, our darling, please go  
Find a new home, find yourself room to grow."  
Leave the wood that had been his entire existence?  
But a pillar of smoke had appeared in the distance –

The air filled with sawing, a terrible sound  
As the first of the trees fell down on the ground  
He tugged at his rootlets, he worked each one free

With a wrench, it was time - to make like a tree  
And leave - he could not bear to see the wood fall.  
“They’re coming! Go, Rowan, smallest of all.”

His branches a-tremble, he rushed through the rain  
He got to the station and boarded a train.  
The friendly conductor said “Here is your bunk!  
I’ll help with your suitcase - or is it your trunk?!”

The train gathered pace as it chugged to the city  
As the view from the window grew less and less pretty  
The lights were so dazzling, the traffic so loud  
Each square and each street was heaving with crowds

A whole concrete landscape - he just couldn’t see  
How the big busy city had room for a tree?  
They arrived at the station, the guard called “All change!”  
Rowan entered a world that seemed terribly strange

He gathered his things and searched for a wood  
“Maybe there’s room in this nice neighborhood?”  
A terrace of houses, a high rise estate  
With little trees out on the pavements - oh, great!

The trees waved their branches and said “Come and rest!”  
“Can I grow here?” asked Rowan. “Oh, it would be best  
To put down your roots where there’s more room to grow  
Trees like us cannot ever be forests, you know.”

He stretched out his roots and leaned back on a wall  
The tower blocks made him feel terribly small  
Then a voice from a balcony somewhere up high  
Called “Hello! Are you new to this town? So am I!”

The boy rushed downstairs - “I’m Yang Lu, what’s your name?”  
“I’m Rowan - I’m new, nice to meet you!” “Wow, same!  
My family just moved here, we came from Hong Kong  
I’m still learning my way, finding where I belong.”

“Me too!” replied Rowan. “I’m not fully grown,  
My forest was felled, so I need a new home.”  
“Let’s ask my phone,” said Yang Lu. “Find - a forest!”  
His phone led the two of them straight to - a florist!

Rowan didn’t fit in - he had leaves, but no petals  
Plants came in and out, but none of them settled  
“Uh oh, this won’t do! Yang Lu, I believe  
We need to make like a tree and just - leave!”

Yang Lu tried again. “Take us to the copse?”  
They followed the route through the streets full of shops  
Then the phone said “Now you have reached your destination.”  
Where did they find themselves? The police station!

A kind policewoman asked “Are you okay?”  
“We’re lost, but don’t worry - we will find our way.”  
“Uh oh, this won’t do! Yang Lu, I believe  
We need to make like a tree and just - leave!”

“I know!” said Yang Lu. “The arboretum?”  
“Finding the route to the Harbour: E Term...”  
They arrived at the harbourside, just as directed  
“Sorry Rowan! This place isn’t what I expected!”  
“Uh oh, this won’t do! Yang Lu, I believe  
I need to make like a tree and just - leave...

Maybe there’s no space for trees to grow here.  
If I boarded a boat I could just disappear...”  
“Don’t give up, Rowan! It won’t be long.  
Till you and I both find a place we belong.”

He felt better knowing that Yang Lu was there  
Rowan reached out a branch and ruffed his hair  
Which made Yang Lu giggle, although it felt good  
“Phone, can we go to the - hahaha! - wood?”

The boy and the tree headed off, branch in hand...

“Hold on - we’re back home? I don’t understand?”  
The phone said, “You said to go back to the ‘hood?”  
“Oh dear,” said Yang Lu, now that he understood.

“Rowan, come stay! I’ll find you a spot  
With sunlight and water, a nice flowerpot!”  
“What a beautiful tree!” observed Yang Lu’s mum  
“An excellent bonsai!” He felt so welcome!

But he couldn’t forget, even if he had tried,  
That he held a whole forest within him, inside.  
As he settled his roots in the pot for the night  
He dreamed about growing up to his full height

In the morning he asked “Is that green space a park?”  
He hadn’t been able to see in the dark.  
Yang Lu’s dad said, “Let’s all go and see!”  
And they walked down the road: boy, mum, dad and tree

A lady was digging. “Good morning, beg pardon!  
Is this a park?” “A community garden!  
Not much to look at yet, as you can see  
But we’re making space for some flowers and trees.”  
Space for trees? Rowan felt almost dizzy with joy!  
“Is there space for this tree? Can I help?” asked the boy.  
“Of course!” said the lady, and lent him her spade.  
“Let’s find him a spot with enough light and shade.

If we get it just right, this tree will grow strong!  
How about here?” Rowan thought: “I BELONG!”  
They dug a deep hole and poured in fertiliser  
“Mmmm!” murmured Rowan, “This couldn’t be nicer!”  
Uncurling his roots he stretched out underground.  
Yang Lu and his family were glad to have found  
A new friend who lived in the block next to theirs  
And before long they met even more volunteers.

Now lots of them meet up to garden together

The garden is lovely, whatever the weather!  
In springtime they carefully plant lots of seeds  
In summer they work hard to pull up the weeds

By autumn the veggies and fruits have all grown  
But in winter the ground is as hard as a stone.  
All the year round, Yang Lu and his friends  
Play football, have picnics, climb trees at weekends  
His parents share recipes, learn to make jam  
Teach their friends how to cook the choi sum and kai lan  
And as Rowan grows tall, and his canopy broad  
He releases the seeds of the trees in his hoard

With him as their shelter, they germinate fast  
And the forest inside him is planted at last!  
“How peaceful!” say people who visit the garden.  
“It’s an enchanted wood! Like the Forest of Arden!”

Close to the heart of the city, the trees  
Are like a green lung that helps it to breathe  
They block out the noise, their leaves clean the air  
And everyone’s glad that the forest is there.

Now Rowan’s delighted - he no longer believes  
That to make like a tree you just have to leave.  
And if you like trees, maybe go out and plant them -  
Find some space, make a community garden!  
There’s space for us all if we learn how to share  
And life is sweet when there are trees everywhere!

## COMMENDED



**J. E. SEUK**

*A Curiously Long Walk Through a Tree*

J. E. Seuk is a writer, freelance editor, and former English teacher, at work on her first full-length novel for children. She studied English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and was recently accepted into Cambridge's MSt in Creative Writing. She has been published in *Kissing Dynamite* (May 2021's Featured Poet), *Ellipsis Zine*, *Ghost Heart* and elsewhere. A '1.75 generation' Korean American immigrant, she now resides in Brighton, England where she enjoys music-making, sea air, and walking behind dogs on sidewalks.

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# A CURIOUSLY LONG WALK THROUGH A TREE

## 1

### *The Tree*

‘Why do they always gotta be skinny?’ Kira wondered.

Kira was angry. Again.

Perhaps she’d been angry these past two years, if she really stopped to examine herself. But who wants to do that?

Today she was angry inside the school library, holding a book in the deserted fiction section. Books and libraries were among her favorite things, and having to be angry over her favorite things—and there weren’t many of them—well, that just made her really, really extra angry.

‘Main characters have to be skinny all the time,’ her brain raged. ‘Even my favorite! They call her plain, ugly, even lookin like a freaking toad! . . . I mean, why does even beautiful-on-the-inside, ugly-on-the-outside Jane Eyre have to be skinny for Mr. Rochester to like her? Can’t even be average-sized. Nope, you gotta be trim, agile, slender. Slight, elfin, delicate . . . wiry, lanky, bird-like, petite. Boys, too. Skinny, skinny, skinny!’

Kira had just picked up a tantalizing new novel to discover, within the first two pages, the hero described as a scrawny, scrappy, clever boy, and his sidekick a chubby, loyal, slightly dim-witted best friend.

Kira rolled her eyes and sighed. Time to find another book. If it were up to these authors, she’d never be the protagonist of her own story.

To be clear, eleven year-old Kira had absolutely nothing against skinny people. Her friend from church was tall and slim. Her dead grandmother had been tiny and skinny, and Kira loved her Halmeoni more than anything. But Kira herself was not a skinny girl.

Some days she felt like a toad. A toad with unfashionably thick black hair. Other days she thought she might even be pretty, with her heart-shaped face. Yet skinny she was not.

Neither was she dim-witted. She was, in fact, one of the smartest kids in the grade. Teachers were generally pleased with Kira, who concealed her anger well. She was in the sixth grade at Winsfield Upper School, a Winsfield student for over two years now. She felt lucky; back when she was six, she’d had to move three times in one year. Kira prized steadiness and security in life. She’d had so little.

Teachers were pleased with her, yes, but that’s where it ended. They weren’t delighted with her as with charismatic Sasha, who was picked first for everything and got away with anything (Mrs. Kirschbender called her ‘cheeky’). No one found Kira exasperating like Dan, whose ‘over-the-line’ jokes could land him in the principal’s office. They didn’t uncomfortably overlook her like they did reticent Manny, who politely ignored them right back. Kira simply pleased them.

She earned straight As, kept her head down, and when anyone learned she lived in Merryville Group Home, jaws dropped. Everyone expected foster kids to be unwashed modern-day street urchins. Oliver and the Artful Dodger with the cussing and the fisticuffs, minus the Cockney accent.

No piercings or neon-dyed hair, even.

She was well-behaved, simply, ‘oh, yes, that nice young lady’. Faintly approving smiles and minds

busy elsewhere. And that suited Kira just fine.

The only adult these past two years who'd taken any notice of her at all was the school librarian.

Kira liked the librarian, though she never really showed it.

Miss Lourdes Armada reminded Kira of the dusty fiction section. Like the rows of overlooked plastic-covered books concealing marvelous stories (when they weren't enraging Kira, that is), the Cuban American had stunning good looks that no one noticed. Kira knew why: thick glasses, terrible clothes, no make-up. This new school year Miss Armada swam in dowdier outfits than ever. Kira appreciated the librarian's sartorial choices, without which this sanctuary of a half-empty library might be overrun with moon-eyed adolescent boys. Kira guessed Miss Armada was in her late twenties, though she was actually forty.

Miss Armada liked Kira, though she'd decided not to show it.

Two years ago, she'd taken instant notice of the new student, the sole student, in fact, to check out stacks of books for pleasure rather than assignments. But the librarian had also taken note of how the girl knitted her brows and ducked her head slightly when Miss Armada exclaimed over some chosen titles at the circulation desk. A student sitting nearby had briefly lifted his head at the sound, then went back to scribbling—last-minute homework, to be sure—but even that meaningless motion made Kira's eyes dart to the side and down, though her countenance stayed serene.

Here was a girl who preferred to remain inconspicuous. Miss Armada decided to keep future transactions brisk and short on conversation, which put Kira at ease.

Each continued to mutually half-ignore, half-appreciate the other.

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But this particular Tuesday afternoon was a different story.

Whatever mad architect who'd built the school library had oddly proportioned the large room with jagged corners, angles, and twelve or thirteen walls of illogical lengths, depending on how you counted them. Behind the forlorn fiction shelves, Kira had managed to find a hidden lunch spot in a nook under a small window, out of sight until you were practically on top of it.

When Miss Armada came upon her there, she drew in her breath sharply.

'Well, then!'

Of all disrespectful things for a purportedly respectful student to do!

Then her eyes took in the half-eaten limp cheese sandwich perched next to a waxy apple on a napkin, somehow devoid of breadcrumbs, spread out in front of the cross-legged girl. The faded water bottle filled from the hallway fountain, cap secured, tucked upright in the crook of Kira's folded legs. How neatly the girl sat, how little space she was determined to take up, bookbag wedged under her left elbow.

How distraught her expression. 'I—I'm so sorry...'

Kira struggled to stand, careful not to touch anything.

'Please excuse—I was just...'

Miss Armada pursed her lips at a flashing memory of her eighth-grade self skipping lunch rather than brave the cafeteria when her best—and only—friend had moved away. The stale odor behind the stairwell where she sometimes hid to wolf down an energy bar. That had been a long year for young Lourdes Armada.

‘Well, then.’

And she shocked both Kira and herself by continuing to dust the bookcase and around the corner to the next, as if she hadn’t seen the girl whose heart was surely making more racket than any librarian ought to condone.

The next morning Kira entered the library, intending to apologize properly. Miss Armada was busy with Principal Gordon in the corner. He was puffing out his chest in his arrogant way, leaning over her. She stood, feet planted, neutral expression, slight crease in her brow. There was no way Kira was going to interrupt those grown-ups right now.

But Miss Armada noticed Kira and gave a brief smile, flicking her eyes towards the fiction corner.

Uncertain, Kira walked down the crooked warren of shelves to yesterday’s luncheon spot. She found a Japanese folding screen, looking for all the world as if it had always been there, disguising that corner nook. Kira peeked behind the screen and saw a small bright yellow napkin folded origami-style into a crane on the floor, exactly where her sandwich sat the day before.

Kira hadn’t felt such a welcome in over two years. She beamed and tucked the yellow crane into the inner pocket of her backpack. She’d be back again at noon.

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What a weird kid. Just standing there like that.

Kira gazed out the window as she polished off her sandwich—peanut butter today—and a bruised banana in her newly screened-off corner. She’d eaten lunch in her library nook for the past couple of days, quite comfortably now. She was looking at Manny Morales.

Manny was in her sixth-grade class and he was the kind of quiet that unnerved teachers. It wasn’t exactly disrespectful in any way that you could pinpoint, but you couldn’t call it perfectly respectful either. Kira’s diffidence brought about approving adult smiles before she blended into the background. Manny’s dogged silence seemed loud, in contrast: he invariably left behind furrowed brows, teacherly uneasiness. Only the P.E. teacher, Mr. Weiss, was fond of Manny; the rest of the staff all felt that ‘something must be done’ to make that young man speak up and contribute, but they were left oddly unmoored as to *how*, so they mostly left him alone, however disapprovingly, then forgot about him.

Kira wasn’t bothered by Manny. The two had been paired up on worksheets last year, and always earned 100% in companionable near-silence. They’d never shared a conversation outside of class.

Now Manny stood at the schoolyard’s edge in front of a tree as if he himself were rooted there, mouth wide open. His yellow and red soccer jersey stood out against the bark, and his normally tidy brown hair looked rumpled, as if he’d been clutching at it. She’d always thought he was pretty inconspicuous, like she was; now her eyes scanned the field to see if anyone else was clocking his weirdness today.

The students were absorbed in recess games or huddled into cliques. She was the only one watching Manny.

Who was watching the tree. Not just looking at it—watching it. Manny was the shortest boy in the sixth grade, and he looked even smaller than usual next to this imposing tree. He stood utterly still, yet utterly animated. Would he explode from his tensed-up energy? Why was he intent on this tree of all things? Was there maybe a kitten stuck up it?

She looked at the tree again.

Why had Kira never noticed it before? It was nearly a month into first semester, and other trees had already started fading to yellow, reserving their orange and red explosions for late autumn. A high fence around the entire schoolyard separated it from nearby woods. But this grand green tree was inside the fence. How had she never taken note of it? Indeed, how was it not the center of all activity, with kids running around it, wannabe tree climbers getting yelled at by a teacher, groups of friends lounging under its generous canopy... how, and why, did everyone else ignore such a spectacularly inviting thing?

The tree had an immense trunk and crown of triumphant branches. Thick knobby knees broke through dirt in a sweeping radius. Braided, cratered and gnarly, the red-mahogany wood was streaked with gray and cocoa and silver, with abundant leaves shaped unlike any other leaves, rippling greens unlike any other greens.

Then it was gone.

Kira jumped up. *What?* She pressed against the window and saw Manny, frozen, still gawking. Still there, of course. He took a half-step forward, arm outstretched.

The tree vanished again. Gone!

And there it reappeared.

Kira grabbed her backpack and sprinted out the library.

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‘You see it too?’

Kira nodded, eyes wide.

‘It’s so real,’ Manny said. ‘But I tried and tried and can’t touch it. It just disintegrates, blips out. Like a holograph. Hologram? Whaddyacallem. Anyway, look.’

He stepped toward the tree again. It dissolved. He stepped back. It returned.

‘But it’s definitely there! Right?’

Kira glanced around. None of the other kids were watching. ‘Definitely. But are we... this is insane... are we the only people who can see it?’

‘Seems like. And I’m positive it wasn’t here yesterday. Paul kicked a soccer ball to me right here, by the fence. I know this wasn’t here. I know it.’

‘It’s impossible it grew overnight. Maybe planted overnight?’

‘Nah. The soil would be fresh.’

They remembered the cherry trees trucked in full-grown last spring and planted with loosely packed dark loam in the town square. The high school band had played and Town Hall distributed free miniature cherry pies. The most exciting thing to happen in Winsfield all year—the pies weren’t even that good.

‘No,’ Manny continued. ‘Feels like it’s been here forever.’

‘Yeah.’ Kira understood. ‘Feels a thousand years old. Even the air.’

Once you were beside it, even more striking than its size was the surrounding air—cleaner, ancient somehow. Like the Quinault Rainforest outside Seattle that Kira’s Halmeoni had taken her to five years ago. They’d expected humid hangings like the Amazon, but it felt like Jurassic Park. There was a crisp, dry, protective feeling among the green; the chatter of tourists muffled by old, old air, the forest scorning such modern sounds. They’d wandered wordlessly for hours gazing upwards at the canopy,

and left with cricked necks and full hearts. This tree felt even older than that remarkable rainforest.

The two children stood there. Kira felt a warm prickling inside.

This tree became all-absorbing to her, the most important thing in all Winsfield. Or anywhere.

Pure love welled up. How lucky they were to see it! Kira wanted to fall against the tree, embrace it. *We don't deserve to, but we'd love to know you somehow.* She reached out to stroke its bark, expecting it to disappear in an instant.

Except it didn't.

The tree dissolved again, but only where her hand was. A crack, growing. The crack became a gap, which spread large enough to stand in. To walk through.

Kira and Manny stared.

A fat brown chipmunk leapt past and scurried through the opening, with a tiny humming blur just behind. Its cream-streaked tail, and the blur, vanished.

*Follow that chipmunk.*

Well, alright, then.

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The darkness swallowed them, but their eyes adjusted and their pace quickened through a labyrinthine cave, tunnels at all angles. Golden light invited them down one path, where they spotted the bouncing tip of a little tail. And... Kira blinked. Was that a bee flying beside it? So they followed the chipmunk, and the bee, through the tree. Surrounded by tree, breathing in tree.

'It's probably fifth period now,' whispered Manny. Their steps faltered.

Kira nodded. 'Social Studies today. Mrs. Kirschbender hates it when we're late.'

Yet how could they not go on? On and on they walked, enveloped in mahogany glow, joining hands without realizing it.

What felt like ages later, though neither wore a watch, Manny said, 'Is it getting lighter?'

'God, I hope so. This is more like going through a mountain than a tree. We are still in the tree, right?'

Their dim surroundings brightened. Thick threads of rainbowed silver ran through the mahogany ahead, like veined marble.

Kira reached out and touched the side of the tunnel. Manny watched her, then tapped the other side with a fingertip.

They'd been too nervous to try it before, considering the dramatic effect Kira's last touch had. The wood was smooth, as if weathered by aeons to be splinter-free. She rested her cheek against its coolness and sighed. Her feet stopped hurting for a moment.

'Feels safe enough. Let's keep going,' Kira said.

'I wonder where that chipmunk went.'

'And its little buddy, the bee.'

'You saw that, too, huh?'

The tunnel narrowed, ceiling sloped. Soon they were pressed side-by-side, crouching as they trudged on.

Kira plopped down and grunted.

'My feet!'

Manny sat down next to her and stretched forward, wiggling his sneakers in circles. ‘Man, I can practically taste my gym socks. Sorry.’

‘S’okay. Um, what’re we doing, Manny?’

‘Trekking through a ginormous tree that never ends. Y’know, just another Friday afternoon. How long you think we’ve been here?’

Maybe we should turn ba—aaaahhh!

The wood beneath them undulated, collapsed downward. They shot forward, legs outstretched, on a water park slide. But there was no water, only the tree whooshing them forward like a sentient roller coaster.

‘Whaaaaaaaaa—?!’

Faster, faster, up and down, up down down, now flat on their backs, twisting and twirling.

‘Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh—hmmph—oof—gaaaaahh!’

The children flew—

Bright blue all around.

They splashed into a pond. The water lapped soft and welcoming.

‘Look!’ Kira turned back, pointing at the giant root flourishing up in a dramatically curly wave goodbye. Then it sank into the soil and disappeared.

Manny and Kira stared at each other, both their right hands hanging in the air, dripping water.

It had waved at them, so it was only polite to wave back, right?

They climbed onto the grass.

They were in a garden.

### ★ ★ ★ Two Years Earlier ★ ★ ★

Right before Annalucia Johnson died, she was on a mission for cake.

‘A cake of all cakes to make the heavenly angels sing Glory! And gain ten pounds,’ she explained to her old friend Jerome.

‘She like chocolate?’

‘She a girl?’

‘Vanilla? Hazelnut? Any allergies?’

‘Yes, yes, and no. Ooh, and that girl just loves her some strawberries.’

‘Chocolate and strawberries, magic combo,’ said Jerome, squinting into space from a high wooden stool at the cheese counter.

Behind him dangled his trademark white board. Today it read: *‘What do you call cheese you haven’t bought yet? NACHO CHEESE, suckas! (But please ask me for a sample of our delicious artisanal cheeses!)’*

He fixed his eyes on Annalucia. ‘Woman, you lookin positively giddy. What’s this about, anyhow? I know it ain’t her birthday.’

‘Something to celebrate. Something big. I’ll tell you what later, but the girl gets to hear first.’

He raised a brow. Oh, good lord. Rakish dimpled grin, handsome Black man. They were comfortable friends, their bond built solid like their waistlines over the years, but Jerome Dime could always make her blush like a girl of seventeen again. She bounced on her toes, impatient.

‘So what cakes you got in today? Oh, and ice cream! Gimme my hallelujah cake, plus a carton of

ice cream, please.’ Annalucia wanted a perfect cake, yes, but she also wanted to race back home to her foster daughter.

She didn’t like the way they’d left it.

‘Okay, okay. Trust I deliver you some sweet hallelujahs! How bout I fix you up a Jerome-special ice cream cake? Of your *dreams*.’

‘That’s what I’m talkin about.’

‘I been experimenting, AL. Makin magic in my baker’s corner. You remember those Fudgie the Whatsits we liked so much as kids, they never make no more?’

‘Oh lawd, with those chocolate crunchies, my favorite!’ She bounced on her toes again, like a little girl now, laughing at herself.

Jerome said, ‘I got a bowl full of homemade crunchies and an unfrosted cake in back, plus a carton of vanilla in the deep freezer ready to slice into. Just need a reason.’

Annalucia closed her eyes for a moment, remembering her momma. A single mother who’d shopped for half-off wilted veg, dry beans in bulk, going-stale bread, with the occasional treat for Annalucia alone. Annalucia had always believed her mother was born without a sweet tooth, until that last time three years back, after the move up North to that final nursing home. The elderly woman had bent forward, whispering girlishly, ‘Maybe we can try some bit of sweet milk chocolate for my birthday this year, could we, momma? You know I been good. Just some small bit, please, momma!’

She’d hidden it so well so long, saving up to buy one mini-sized Fudgie the Whatsit every year on young Annalucia’s birthday, cutting herself a sliver and pushing the rest in front of the girl’s shining eyes. Taking tiny bites and amiably complaining, ‘Oh, this is too, too sweet. They put too much sugar. But I gotta share some small bit of sweet with my brown sugar baby just one time a year,’ as they sat close to savor the cold, melting, crunchy-creamy chocolateyness of young Annalucia’s dreams.

She had genuinely thought her mother was forcing herself to eat dessert just to please her.

Annalucia said, ‘The reason is family. The reason is family, and the freedom to choose it. Thank you, Jerome, you’ll never know how perfect you are.’

Jerome’s face grew hot as he hustled behind his baking counter, knocking off a spatula. ‘Woman. Busy now. Tell Nate to keep an eye on the register.’

He deftly layered his chocolate hazelnut cake atop marble slabs of richly speckled vanilla bean ice cream. Generous lashings of homemade chocolate crunchies, sticky fudge sauce, and ripe red strawberry slices. He slathered the whole thing in chocolate buttercream frosting, pressed extra crunchies around the sides, and piped on an adorable puppy hugging a heart made of candied strawberry bits. He presented it to Annalucia with a courtly bow.

‘Fudgie... the Pupsit! How about that.’

Her eyes filled at what he’d piped in thin icing by the pup’s wagging tail. *The reason is family.*

‘Oh. Perfection.’

Annalucia glowed as she drove home, slow and steady, windows down to let the late summer breeze swirl around the flimsy cake box next to her. The rusty sedan’s air-conditioning was broken again, and she didn’t want Jerome’s little masterpiece to melt. She thought about her late mother.

She thought about her foster daughter.

Well... Her daughter-to-be, actually.

Annalucia’s quest for cake had been sparked by an epiphany. Which had been sparked by a fight. A hollering match with the nine-year-old that had driven Annalucia out to run angry errands so they

could ‘finish this discussion later.’ Behind the wheel, tears streaming down her cheeks, the foster mother had realized that the girl — this smart, curious, sweet, lonely orphan—this quietly ferocious girl who’d so skillfully planted today’s bomb under Annalucia’s otherwise mild temper was, in fact, the person she’d come to love most in the world.

This girl. This girl would be her daughter.

Annalucia thought about making up over their Fudgie the Pupsit cake. Maybe they’d get a real pup together one day. Why not?

She was still smiling when she noticed the speeding red SUV swerve onto the road behind her, not bothering to honk its horn; she lifted her hand to turn on the blinkers and ease over to let it pass, but not a millisecond had gone by before it tried to veer around her, clipping the corner of her car, sending it careening over the embankment, tumbling down a small hill.

The SUV sped off.

When the paramedics loaded Annalucia into the ambulance just three minutes later, they did not need to turn on the siren to rush her away from the accident site. No one noticed in the brush, several yards from the mangled sedan, a small, slowly melting cake lying upside-down.

## 2

### *The Gardener’s Spectacles*

Before Kira and Manny could take in the soaring verdant trees, or the floral, sweet, and earthy scents wafting about the crisp air, or the plump fruits and vegetables peeking through profusions of blossoms all around, or the silky grass cushioning their bare toes (they’d immediately kicked off their sodden sneakers and socks once out of the pond), or the azure sky streaked with fluffy snow-white marshmallows, they focused on a faraway dark shape zooming towards them.

They looked nervously behind at their tree—wait. Yes, still there.

It looked the same. Surely it would it bring them back to school? But was the tree standing here... and in the schoolyard at the same time? How could that possibly be?

And if it wasn’t, and it was there before and here now, well, how could *that* possibly be? Never mind, questions for another time. For that was a *bear* coming at them. Right now.

It was a very large bear, indeed.

Manny and Kira stared as the formidable brown bear trundled up to them in haste. It was quite a bit larger than they imagined a brown bear should be. They silently grasped each other’s hands again. It didn’t occur to them to run.

‘Oho, what a pleasant surprise! Or not. They had me expecting unexpectedness, so I’m hardly surprised. Nevertheless, yes, pleasantly surprised. Two human cubs. Welcome, and welcome.’

That wasn’t what Kira and Manny were preparing for, but it was surely the best of options. One might think that an enormous bear looming over one’s head with bear mouth open wide in jagged bear smile might perhaps be mildly terrifying to rather small humans, but, no, he seemed okay.

‘Thank you,’ said the children.

‘This place is beautiful,’ Kira added. ‘We’re... not sure how we ended up here. Or where here is. But it’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen. Is this your garden?’

‘Mine?’ roared the bear, if bears can be said to roar gently. ‘Dear me, nothing is mine. The Garden is the Garden’s. It is ours and it is its own. I suppose I am its steward. Caretaker, if you please. Gardener, perhaps? Yes, I am a gardener bear. My wife is a master builder bear. She is away rebuilding another garden, and I miss her dearly. But that is neither here nor there. But here, here, and there, we all welcome you heartily to our gilded garden! Welcome, and welcome!’

The bear spread wide his chunky paws.

Flowers bobbed resplendent heads and lush trees, green laced with gold, bowed grandly in their direction. Out of the pond leapt a hundred golden-red fish, fins spread wide, spinning in a choreographed fan dance before diving back into the sparkling water. Even the cyan blue water gleamed gold where the sunlight skipped along its surface. The birds and insects sang welcoming chords that made the grass under their bare feet hum, while rows of squirrels took bounding leaps, noses to tails, above the children’s heads like furry living garlands.

‘Whoa,’ whispered Manny to Kira. ‘Is this—did we die?’

‘And now, children, please follow me. And tell me your human names.’

They did, then politely inquired after the bear’s name. He cupped his muzzle with a giant paw and scratched.

‘Hmm. My name? I never thought about *that* before. If anyone needs me, I’m just there. They call me “You,” I suppose. My cub son calls me Poppa,’ he added, lumbering along as the children jogged in spurts to catch up with him.

‘Hrumph. But you can’t say Poppa. I am not your Poppa, no, indeed. You may call me... Old Bear? I cannot remember my cub name. Many, many moons past. I do remember that I am old. I am the oldest bear around. Yes, “Old Bear” will do.’

They trotted along, Manny transformed, beaming and waving at the animals who bowed, flapped, and squawked welcomes at them. Kira was gobsmacked by the lush flora, yet grew more apprehensive the farther away they drew from the Tree that brought them here. It had felt safe.

‘Here.’ Old Bear stopped by the entrance of a large cave. He spread his paws out wide again, with contentment and pride.

Have you ever drawn a bear cave? Was it gray, rocky, and dark inside? But this was a different kind of cave, you see. So paint tall wild grasses and bright yellow, blue, and orange blossoms around the entrance. Make your dreary edges of gray glint with rainbows. Shade the interior with a golden glow that beckons us in. For we’d all want to enter this particular cave.

Except for Kira, who maintained a healthy skepticism of strangers inviting you into their abodes. No matter how nice they seemed.

Her tacit acceptance of impossible things—a magic tree, fantastical garden, talking bear—now struck her as foolhardy. Had she really just been, well, mindlessly following a gigantic animal she’d just met? What, did she think that ‘stranger danger’ didn’t apply to bears? How long had they been walking? Could she retrace her steps back to the Tree?

How on earth would they get back home?

Kira felt angry, this time at herself.

‘Please stop!’ she said, as the bear turned to enter the cave, Manny at his heels. ‘Wait, um, Old Bear, sir, I’m not going in there until you tell us... anything! Where are we? This certainly isn’t Winsfield. It doesn’t even feel like we’re in America anymore. Where *is* this place?’

Kira spread her own paws out wide, hers in confusion and pique. Manny frowned, on the verge

of interrupting her rudeness. Then he moved to stand next to her and waited for the bear to answer.

‘Ah. I thought we might sit comfortably first. But I am fine to stand if your four little legs can endure it.’

Old Bear smiled kindly. Manny scowled. He was sensitive about his height. He planted his feet and crossed his arms. Kira did the same.

The bear said, ‘Where is this place, you say? Home. For us, anyway. Not for you, as you know.’

‘Home, within the Spirit Realm. Spirit and flesh are one here. There’s spirit and flesh in your Earth Realm, but you’ve torn them asunder. Humans don’t live here. Tales say that humans were here many, oh so many moon generations ago. Some even say humans once watched over us. Then behaved so treacherously that they no longer belonged at Home.’

‘We watch over ourselves now. Quite well, in my humble bear’s opinion. If I may boast, I stewarded my small forest corner so nicely that I was assigned this entire gilded garden and woods. A considerable responsibility, this garden is.’

Old Bear looked at his feet with a delighted smile. Somehow, his pride wasn’t off-putting.

‘But—who assigned it to you? If you’re in charge of all this, who’s in charge of you?’ Kira asked.

‘Hrmp. Interesting question... No one has asked me this most interesting question before.’

The bear shook his head, then his entire body. Heavy fur flew about as the earth quivered beneath them.

‘As I was saying, it has been assigned to me.’ Old Bear nodded, satisfied. ‘That’s right, it was assigned to Old Bear. And I’ve been expecting you. Though I must admit, I was not expecting humans so tiny. But we have much to discuss. Shall we sit now? I do enjoy sitting.’

Kira looked at Manny. Manny looked back.

They followed Old Bear into the cave. They weren’t alone.

★ ★ ★

## COMMENDED



**NADINE COWAN**

*My Favourite Place*

Nadine Cowan is a creative spirit, designer and author/illustrator from London and a descendant from the Windrush generation whose grandparents came to England from the Caribbean during the late fifties. She writes and illustrates children's picture books with black main protagonists in an effort to tackle the despairingly low figures of black children in children's literature from underrepresented voices and creators, in the hope that future generations will see themselves on and behind the pages of countless commercial stories.

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## MY FAVOURITE PLACE

### **Spread one**

Neriah Wanderlust and Mummy huddled in one of Neriah's favourite places, with her favourite toys, reading her favourite books and doing some of her favourite things. One of Neriah's most favourite things to do, was to listen to Mummy's stories about her adventures around the world. Mummy Wanderlust was a travel journalist with her very own TV show.

"Where is your favourite place Mummy?" asked Neriah as she searched for her favourite colour crayon.

Mummy thought for a moment and smiled, but before Mummy could answer Neriah sang out,

### **Spread two**

"I know! Is it Jamaica where Granny and Grandad are from? Where the sun greets you every morning and warms the air that carries the wings of the hummingbird?" Neriah excitedly flapped her arms up and down.

"Where you can go into your garden and pick the juiciest mangos" said Mummy with a big smile,

as though her feet were sinking in warm sand, and the familiar smell of fever grass, all spice, fresh ginger and sorrel grooved around her to the rhythm of Reggae.

"O that's where you'll find my favourite foods and music. Jamaica is a wonderful place, but it is not my favourite."

### **Spread three**

"I know! Is it Saint Vincent and the Grenadines where Nana and Grandpa are from? Where the parrots sing?" Asked Neriah

"Where the islands are like emeralds in the Caribbean Sea that sparkle under the hot

sun, and though they are small the breadfruit is plentiful, and the beauty is overflowing from Windward to Leeward and all the way up the volcano La Soufrière.” Mummy recounted

#### **Spread four**

Neriah stood tall and mighty then stretched her arms to the ceiling before she sprung into a dance and asked “Where Soca music plays as revellers sway in their costumes every carnival?”

“O Saint Vincent will forever have a place in my heart, but it’s not my favourite place” beamed mummy.

#### **Spread five**

“Hmmm I know. Is it Colombia? Where the great Andean Condor soars?” asked Neriah.

“The land of a thousand rhythms, where I rode the Cumbia beat through the old streets of Cartagena. Where the beautiful Palenqueras wear crowns of tropical fruits.” said Mummy.

Neriah poised her head high before placing one hand on her hip, the other gracefully adorned above her head and grinned.

Mummy reached out to grab one of the imaginary fruits from above Neriah’s head and began to peel it, then she shoved it in her mouth and declared,

“Nope, that’s not my favourite place!”

#### **Spread six**

“Hmmm..is...it...India? Where the peacock struts?” asked Neriah

“Where I backpacked the Golden Triangle from Delhi to Agra, then Jaipur and the air carries spices wide and far, the fine sarees shimmer with the choli...”

### **Spread seven**

“...and colourful powder explodes onto the streets during the festival of Holi?” chimed Neriah

Mummy smiled as the warm aroma of Incense, cinnamon, turmeric and cumin danced around her as though being carried by the beat of Bhangra, before playfully shaking her head.

“No, that’s not my favourite place either!”

### **Spread eight**

“Is it Ghana, where the Tawny Eagle prowls?” guessed Neriah

“Where the warm air felt like the embrace of our ancestors welcoming me home, the cocoa is rich and the percussion of the pestle could be heard pounding fresh cassava and green plantains as though it were Djembe drums” said Mummy as Neriah climbed into her lap.

“Where the royals wear Kente cloth and gold, and when you hear the Hip Life music it puts you in a trance because no matter where you are you can’t help but dance?”

Neriah was certain she had figured it out but once again Mummy said,

“No, that is not my favourite place!”

### **Spread nine**

“Is it Egypt?”

“No”

“Beijing?”

“No”

“New York?”

“No”

“Mexico?”

“No”

“Venice?”

“No”

“Antarctica?”

“Definitely not!”

### **Spread ten**

“London?”

“No”

“Is it the Fun Fair?”

“No”

### **Spread eleven**

“Up in Space?”

“No” laughed Mummy

### **Spread twelve**

“The Sea?”

“No”

### **Spread thirteen**

“Candy Land?” Neriah had run out of places.

“Where is that?” asked Mummy.

“It’s a place somewhere made of candy, where the streams... are made of melted chocolate, the ground is paved with hard boiled sweets and toffee...liquorice grows from the ground and the clouds are made of...of marshmell...no...cotton candy” Neriah’s eyelids felt heavy.

“Sounds like a dream, but that’s not my favourite place” chuckled Mummy.

“I....can’t....think...of ....anymore places” Neriah yawned as her head rested on

Mummy's chest. Mummy leant in to gently kiss it.

“Oh Neriah, whether we're in Jamaica, Saint Vincent, India, Ghana or up in space, being wherever you are is definitely ...my most favourite place!”

**Spread fourteen**

yawned Mummy.

*[illustration: Neriah and mummy are asleep on a candyfloss cloud, in what Neriah had previously described as Candy Land]*

## COMMENDED



### NICOLA BROOKS-WILLIAMSON

#### *The Little Witch from London*

London born, Nicola Brooks Williamson was brought up in Jamaica and Trinidad before returning to the UK. Her story is based on the mythologies of these islands – African folklore, expanded over years, especially by French influences. She writes about people like her, black culturally but with DNA and influences from across the globe. She is a part-time vet with a houseful of rescues and a mother to three boys, all of whom inspire her daily.

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# THE LITTLE WITCH FROM LONDON

## *The adventures of Sarah DuBois and her Shapeshifting Grandad*

### Chapter 1

#### *The House on the Roof*

Sarah looked at the dirty pavement. She knew she was not allowed to sit on it, but today she was too sad to care. She slid down the railings and sat, her knees tucked up under her chin, her arms wrapped around her knees.

Everyone hurried past, it was just another normal day in London. Grownups walked past, staying glued to their phones, and no one looked at her.

A solitary tear ran down her face, as she remembered her best friend at school had decided she didn't want to be friends anymore. Vicky was adventurous and funny, but Sarah was shy. Without Vicky she didn't know what she was going to do.

"Are you ok darling?"

Sarah looked up in alarm. She wasn't allowed to speak to strangers, and she certainly wasn't supposed to be sitting on the pavement by herself.

Sarah's copper-coloured eyes met kind, dark brown eyes sandwiched between a wrinkled forehead and a broad, flat nose.

If you peered closely at those eyes, right at the centre, you'd see an orange glow, like the flames of a fire. Sarah blinked, and the orange disappeared. Sarah continued to stare, a slightly bemused expression on her face.

"Do you remember me? It's Suki," said the lady. She held out her hand to help Sarah up.

Sarah relaxed as she recognised her Mum's friend and their neighbour who sometimes looked after her when Mum went to work. Her accent was different to Sarah's, it went up and down, almost like singing. Sarah remembered her saying she had come from a place where the sun shone every day.

Sarah nodded and found herself getting up and dusting herself off.

"Do you have somewhere to go darling?"

Sarah paused, because she had been about to say yes, and then she realised she had nowhere to be. Her friends didn't want to play with her anymore.

The lady shifted the weight of the bags she was carrying. "Were you going somewhere, Sarah?"

Sarah paused.

She looked at Vicky's house next door and then at her apartment. Her nose prickled, she sniffed, she felt like her head was filling up with tears, too many to hold.

Suki put her shopping down on the front steps and patted a spot next to her. Sarah hesitated. Some kids didn't care if they came home with their school uniform covered in mud. Sarah wasn't one of those kids.

Suki threw back her head and did a laugh-snort. The kind of laugh that makes other people smile and feel happy. Then she pulled a handkerchief from inside her baggy clothing and spread it on the steps. How had she known that Sarah didn't want to get her uniform dirty?

Sarah sat carefully on the small square of cloth. It was just the right size for her.

“Tell Suki all about it.”

Sarah was silent. Suki waited, her hands folded on her lap and her ankles crossed, her head tilted like an attentive bird. Sarah said one sentence and then another, and then words flooded out.

When she finally drew breath, she looked at Suki wide-eyed.

Suki’s grey eyebrows angled downwards and met in the middle as she frowned and mumbled to herself. “It’s just as I thought. I knew this would happen. I told them, but no one listens to me. I made a promise. I must keep it.”

Sarah stared at Suki in bewilderment. She seemed to be talking nonsense.

Suki stood up, scratched her head, and blinked rapidly. Then put her hands behind her back and paced in a circle. Sarah stared, ran her tongue over her braces, and wriggled her toes. She was beginning to feel cold.

Suki stopped pacing, and to Sarah’s surprise, asked, “would you like to help carry my shopping?”

Sarah would have preferred to go home. She was cold and hungry, but her mother had drummed good manners into her, so she nodded.

Without another word, Suki straightened up and handed the bags of shopping to Sarah. Then Suki charged up the stairs. Sarah had never seen an older person move that fast. Or one that well-rounded.

She had to run to keep up with her, almost losing her as they went up more stairs. How on earth could she go up the stairs that fast? It was almost like she was flying. And why wasn’t she using the elevator?

This was a part of the building that Sarah had never seen before.

She and her Mum lived on the second floor. Sarah had never seen a need to go beyond that. Everything in their building looked alike and very dull. Dark-grey stairs, grey plasticky handrails, and cream-coloured walls, matching those in their apartment.

Now the stairs got progressively narrower and darker. The walls crept closer to her, the stairs beneath her feet suddenly rough wood. Twig-like railings and handrails appeared to reach out to her in curiosity.

Instead of the familiar smell of cleaning products and cooking, there was an earthy, damp smell. It smelt like a forest after the rain has fallen. Her arms and legs felt prickly as if lots of little bugs were crawling along her skin, yet at the same time felt as if they were stuck in jelly. It was not a pleasant sensation. She looked up to see a large wooden door.

Sarah had never seen a door like this. It certainly was not a door you would expect in an apartment building. It was as if a tree had stretched and flattened itself. And where was the handle?

The door opened soundlessly. Sarah hadn’t seen Suki touch it. A sweet-smelling breeze stroked her face and for a second, she felt less frightened. The question she was about to ask, now forgotten.

She peered out into a dark, wooded area. Sarah could not believe her eyes. A minute ago, she’d been crying outside, and now she was surrounded by trees. The only sounds were her footsteps. She was suddenly scared. She knew Mum had expected her to go straight home.

There were no more steps, she was on the roof, but this didn’t look like any roof she had ever seen. She smelt moss, rain, and wet leaves and saw a wall of green. There was no noise from traffic, people, or nearby trains.

She looked up. She couldn’t see the sky. She took a cautious step forward and the door closed silently.

Where was Suki? She could not hear or see her. Her heart fluttered in her chest and throat, like a bird against a window, trying to escape.

“Come on, Sarah.” Suki waved.

Sarah let out a sigh of relief and heaved the shopping higher. The bags now felt like they were full of bricks. Large leaves slapped her face as she scurried after Suki, but she dared not lose sight of her.

She stopped abruptly, her eyes widened in amazement and she stared in disbelief.

In front of her, rising in between the trees, there was a house, a small house, but nonetheless a house, on the roof, in London. It was the prettiest thing she had ever seen.

## Chapter 2

### *Wanting to Go Home*

Sarah stared in amazement. The house had a pointy, brick-red roof, like a hat atop brown walls. A single window was framed with elaborately carved wooden shutters.

Was she dreaming?

The door opened as Suki approached. Again, Sarah did not see Suki touch the door.

She got the oddest impression that the house and Suki were happy to see each other. It might have been a gust of wind, but Sarah thought the building gave a tiny, happy wriggle like an excited puppy doing its best to keep still.

The door began to close. Sarah didn't want to be alone on the roof, and she hurriedly squeezed through the now small opening, pulling the shopping through awkwardly at the last second.

“Welcome to my little gingerbread cottage,” said Suki.

“Gingerbread, like the cookies?” asked Sarah, her eyes open wide, looking more closely at the walls.

“No,” replied Suki, “these walls are wooden. Gingerbread is also the name of a type of building that lasts for hundreds of years. We used to have many houses like this, but people knock them down now.”

“I don't know why anyone would knock this down. It's the prettiest house I have ever seen,” said Sarah. Suki looked pleased.

Still clutching the bags, Sarah looked around.

The ceiling was far above the dark wooden floor. A big table, its wooden surface dented and scratched, with scattered burnt black areas, was in the middle of the room. There was a large oven along one wall, a sink, a comfortable-looking chair and cushion, various kitchen chairs, and a large stone bowl next to a door.

She wondered where Suki slept and what was behind the door. Numerous questions popped into her head.

Why was there a house on the roof?

How did the doors open on their own?

Why was the door open?

Mum had told her to always lock the door before going out. She must be dreaming.

“Put the bags on the table, Sarah.”

Sarah did as she was told.

“It’s not much, but it will be more comfortable than the pavement.” Suki continued to unpack. Sarah’s tummy gave a loud rumble. She flushed and put her hand to her middle as the rumbling persisted.

She wanted to go home. She was hungry. She remembered Mum would still be at work. Sometimes she would play outside with Vicky when Mum was late, but Vicky was cross with her.

This wasn’t a dream. A tear slowly made its way down her face.

“I’ll take you home as soon as your mum is back,” said Suki.

Suki bustled around, and before she knew it, Sarah was in front of the warm oven, snuggled in a comfy chair, with a blanket, a glass of warm milk, and cookies. I’ll go home in a minute was her last thought as she fell asleep.

Suki looked at the cushion which had dropped to the floor. She pursed her lips and considered it for a while. She paced in a circle, humming to herself before coming to a decision and firmly tucking the cushion behind Sarah’s head.

Almost immediately, Sarah smiled to herself as she slept, her braces glinting in the fading light, pumpkin-coloured curls haphazard against the cushion, her hands folded beneath a freckled cheek. Happy visions now danced through her mind.

“Tu es comme ta grand-mère,” murmured Suki as the last of the light faded from the room. She walked towards the large stone bowl. It was time to get ready for the night.

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A whooshing noise and bright light made Sarah wake suddenly. She sat up and looked around. Where had the noise come from? Where had the light gone?

The darkness and a silence were unlike anything Sarah had ever seen or imagined.

At home, even with the curtains drawn, streetlights and flashing shop signs still shone through. Outside there was always sounds of cars, sirens, and foxes going through bins. Inside the apartment, she’d hear the boiler, laptop, or creaking pipes, and she always had a nightlight on in her room.

Here there was nothing. No sound. No light. No evidence of the city. She hated not being able to see around her. Her eyes wide and dark, she shrank back into the chair, imagining terrible things around her. Trees made strange shapes in the window.

And where was Suki?

Did something move? Was that a sound? She tried to make herself smaller and listened, squeezing the cushion tightly.

She could hear her heartbeat and the noise she made as she breathed, harsh in the silence. She sounded like Darth Vader. She tried to breathe out quietly.

Oh no, she needed the toilet. Sarah pressed into the chair, the only safe place in a sea of darkness. Maybe she could hold it until she got home. She crossed and uncrossed her legs, then wriggled them, but it was no good. She couldn’t wait.

Perhaps the bathroom was behind the door she had seen earlier.

She felt along the edges of the chair, and one by one carefully placed her feet on the ground. Then, she held onto the chair and listened.

After a while, she took a careful step. Moving in the darkness she felt she could drop off an edge at any time, into endless who-knows-what. As she was inside, that was unlikely, but sometimes our

worries invent things. She teetered backwards and forwards, hands outstretched, patting emptiness as she tried to remember the layout of the room. She carefully slid her feet from one spot to the other, not daring to lift them and lose her place in the unknown darkness.

Maybe this was what walking on a tightrope, high above the ground would feel like felt. Sarah closed her eyes and imagined she was doing just that.

“Ouch.” Her arm jerked at the unexpected heat. “Ouch,” she yelled again as her elbow hit the wall. She gritted her teeth. Nothing was where she expected it to be. She’d been sure the oven was further along. She flapped her hand and put her fingers in her mouth to cool them. The silence descended once again. She closed her eyes once more and, arms out wide, slid to another spot.

She cried out as she stubbed her toe on something hard.

She felt the edges of what appeared to be a giant bowl. She bent lower, then drew back sharply at the strange smell coming from it.

Was it a dead animal? Yuck. Then, she remembered the bowl had been next to a door.

She tiptoed her fingers sideways and pushed. To her relief, there was movement. She had found the door.

A tiny window, high up, let moonlight into a small bathroom. The moonlight now shone through the open doorway, highlighting the thick-rimmed bowl. Sarah peered curiously into it, then jumped back sharply with a squeal, clutching her hands to her chest.

There was something dry, wrinkled, and brown in there. She backed into the bathroom, away from the bowl. She closed the door, glad of the faint light.

As she washed her hands afterwards lots of thoughts filled her head.

Where was Suki? Could she find her way home? Would Mum be home and looking for her?

Suddenly she heard a noise. She froze, her nostrils flared, and her eyes darkened again. Her heartbeat was thunderous in the silence. She put her ear to the door.

A voice called. “Sarah, are you in there?”

“Su-ki?” Her voice was shaky.

“Who else would it be,” replied Suki. Sarah’s knees went wobbly with relief.

She came out to hear noises and see a light in the kitchen. She edged round the large bowl carefully, it was empty now, how odd, maybe Suki had cleaned it out. Suki was shuffling cards at the table, playing a game by herself. She asked Sarah to sit.

Sarah felt a bit nervous, was Suki going to tell her off? But instead, Suki said, “You feel sad, as if no one cares about you and you want to run away, but that is not the answer, your Mummy really loves you and I’ll tell you a little secret. You are a very special, powerful little girl.”

Suki swept all the cards into a neat pile and got up from the table. “I recognised you the first time I saw you. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

What did Suki mean about apples and trees? And how did she know Sarah wanted to run away? Sarah had changed her mind though, she did not want to run away anymore, she wanted her Mum.

She wanted to go home.

## Chapter 3

### *Home*

The front door opened suddenly. It was as if the house also thought it was time for Sarah to go home.

“Susan is nearly home. We had better hurry,” said Suki as she moved towards the open door.

How did Suki know where Mum was?

The wind rustled the leaves, and an owl hooted. Sarah looked through the doorway. The trees towered over the cottage, twisted, and menacing, their shadows dancing silhouettes. There was the same mossy, damp smell she’d noticed earlier, but now it was so strong she could taste it as well as smell it. A fog had descended, and the air was thick and white.

Suki strode off confidently. Recalling how fast Suki could move, although she was scared, Sarah hurried after her.

The cold pinched painfully at her skin, her school cardigan too thin to protect her.

She heard a rippling noise, like wind chimes, and looked sharply in that direction. The wind blew harder, and their branches bent lower, their leaves swinging to-and-fro in Sarah’s face.

“Come on, Sarah,” called Suki.

“Come on, Sarah,” echoed a soft voice from where Sarah had seen the leaves move. Her heart stopped. There was a brief glimpse of a kid in a large, floppy sunhat. She squinted. It looked like a child wearing a mask with enormous feet. Perhaps they were playing dress up. Why were they on the roof? And at night? She blinked and the kid disappeared.

“Suki, there’s someone behind that tree,” she screamed. Racing away from whatever she’d seen, she ran straight into Suki, treading on Suki’s large dress. Suki looked in that direction and grabbed Sarah’s hand firmly.

“It’s just a shadow. Hurry along and look straight ahead,” ordered Suki.

Sarah held Suki’s hand tightly. She stumbled over a stone. When she looked up, they were just outside the large wooden door. It opened on its own, revealing narrow stairs. Suki went down just as rapidly as she’d come up. Sarah’s legs pumped up and down furiously to keep up with her. In no time at all, they were at Sarah’s front door.

Sarah reached deep into her pocket for her key. As her fingers touched the cold metal, the door opened on its own. Sarah’s mouth gaped. How did Suki do that?

As they walked in, the door closed behind them with a click.

Sarah looked around. Everything was exactly as she’d left it. Somehow, she had expected it to have changed.

Wait, had mum’s half-empty coffee mug moved on the countertop between the kitchen and the living room? No, it was just where Mum had left it. Sarah pursed her lips. Something felt different, or maybe it was just that she felt different.

Suki plumped up a cushion and settled herself comfortably into an armchair. Sarah’s shoulders slumped, and she let out a quiet sigh. She really wanted Suki to leave so she could go to bed. Then her mum would never know what had happened.

There was the sound of a key in the lock. Susan entered. She yawned widely as she closed the door. She turned, then jumped. “Sarah, you scared me. Why aren’t you in bed? And why are you still in your uniform?”

She put her handbag down and then caught sight of Suki in the armchair.

She went pale. "What are you doing here? Did something happen? Sarah, are you ok?"

Suki nodded pleasantly, "Susan, nice to see you again. Everything is fine." Suki turned to Sarah. "You heard what your Mum said, go and get ready for bed. The grown-ups are going to have a little chat."

Sarah's eyes narrowed under lowered eyebrows. Her mouth set in a straight line. She wasn't a baby. She opened her mouth to say so and Suki said, "Sarah, you look tired."

Sarah yawned widely. She hadn't felt that sleepy a second ago.

"Bath and bed, young lady," said Susan firmly.

Sarah didn't argue as she was suddenly very sleepy. Instead, she had a bath and put on her pyjamas. Mum didn't seem pleased to see Suki. Was she in trouble? She tried to stay awake but fell asleep soon after gathering her duvet tightly around her.

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Sarah's rumbling tummy woke her the next morning and she remembered she hadn't had dinner the night before. She peered out of her bedroom. Mum was in the kitchen getting breakfast.

Sarah got ready for school. She didn't want to go back to school. Vicky wasn't her friend anymore. She sniffed.

She put on her white shirt, grey skirt, and black cardigan before looking in the mirror. Frizzy hair, braces, and her uniform always seemed too big. She hated how she looked, and her uniform was just dreary. Being the only girl in the class with braces didn't help.

She didn't see that she was a beautiful girl, with lovely curls and a kind heart. Sometimes you have days like that, days when you can't see what's really in the mirror.

She dragged her feet and sat at the table.

What was Mum going to say about last night?

Mum put hot baked beans on soft toast with the crusts cut off. Just the way she liked it. The dark orange beans in their thick sauce split over the sides. Sarah took a bite. Yum.

She didn't seem to be in trouble. Maybe Suki hadn't told her Mum she had stayed at her house. Mum gave her a smile and Sarah felt a bit better. She cleared her plate quickly.

"Do you remember when Suki used to babysit you?"

Sarah's eyes widened. "Yes," she said and nodded.

"Well, Suki said it was nice seeing you again. She said you were a very polite young lady and helped carry her shopping. That was a nice thing to do. She'd like to visit again. She seems to think you liked talking to her."

Mum paused and stared at Sarah closely.

"Sure," Sarah shrugged. Did Mum know about the house on the roof? Suki was not an ordinary neighbour. Did Mum know that?

Now what you might have realised by now was that Sarah was shy but, she was also very curious. She liked to have an answer for everything and would investigate until she solved the puzzle. Her mother sometimes despaired of that trait as it had led Sarah astray more than once. Like putting black pepper up her nose to see if it would make her sneeze. It did.

Trying to see under the ice in a pond and falling in.

Or leaving the fridge open to see if it would cool the house in summer, and all their food we.

Still, none of this had cured Sarah of her curiosity, and she had lots of questions she wanted to ask Suki. First, she wanted to know how Suki did that trick of opening doors without hands. That would come in handy if she lost her key.

“Time to go. I’ll be late for work. The bus will be here soon.”

Sarah had almost forgotten she was going to school. Her face fell. She slowly followed Mum to the door and down the stairs. She walked slowly to the school bus with Mum, counting the cracks in the pavement as she went, anything to slow down her arrival.

## Chapter 4

### *Back to School*

The bus pulled up, the school service sign in the window glowing a spooky yellow green. Sarah gripped the rail and pulled herself up the high step. Her mustard-yellow rucksack, too large for her tiny frame, did its best to pull her backwards.

The doors on the bus hissed closed.

Vicky was at the back of the bus with a group of girls. Sarah hesitated and looked at them. They leaned towards each other, forming a seemingly impenetrable barrier.

She slumped into a seat at the front, her shoulders hunched in the black cardigan that Mum insisted she button to the top.

She brushed her long curls off her face and looked out the window. Cars, tightly packed, crept along beside them. In the car next to her, a kid pressed his face to the window and stuck his tongue out. Sarah turned away.

Her eye caught Vicky’s. She began to smile but stopped as her friend turned away and spoke to the girls at the back of the bus.

Vicky’s hair, the same colour as Sarah’s, fell in waves to one side as she tilted her head. Sarah couldn’t even remember what they’d quarrelled about. She didn’t know why Vicky was being mean all the time.

She remembered the first time Vicky had come up to her.

“My mummy says all people with red hair look like us, but you don’t.” Vicky had held her hair next to Sarah’s, the colour identical. Sarah had never met anyone with hair the same colour as hers, and they both had freckles. The girls had grinned at each other, and although Vicky was a whole year older than Sarah, they were in the same class, and from that moment on had been friends. That was a long time ago. Sarah was nearly ten now, and Vicky had suddenly changed in the last few months. She had got much taller, and her freckles had disappeared in the cooler weather.

She used to be nice to the teachers. Now, she would huff and roll her eyes when they spoke to her. Since some girls had laughed when she’d answered, ‘oh my godddd,’ that was her new catchphrase.

The brakes screeched as the driver stopped the bus, and the doors hissed and squeaked once more as they opened. Kids ran across the tarmac playground, scattering like ants as the bell rang. Sarah’s tummy churned, and she pressed her hand against it. She felt her breakfast in her throat and swallowed several times.

The other kids shoved past, most already in the building. Sarah counted the numerous pairs of black shoes as she walked slowly, swallowing repeatedly. She jumped as a teacher rested a hand on her shoulder.

“Are you all right, Sarah?”

Sarah looked up to see her favourite teacher, the art teacher. She forced the corners of her mouth to move upwards, keeping her lips pressed together. School had been tolerable when Sarah had Vicky to talk to, but now it was horrid. She felt scared and lost most of the time, except in art class, where the teacher was always kind.

Sarah blinked, her chest getting tighter and tighter, her nose burning and head aching as she held back tears. “I’m fine,” came out as a small squeak. So, she nodded furiously and strode off down the corridor.

The smell of disinfectant went up her nose as she sniffled, the shiny floor clean at the beginning of the day. She focused on her reflection in the floor as she walked head down towards the classroom.

Sarah felt a familiar pressure building up in her chest as she tried not to cry.

Then Suki’s words echoed in her head. Power? What power? The only feeling she had was one of being the most unpopular girl in the class. At least art class was next. Today they could choose to draw or paint pottery.

She would paint a cup for Mum to take to the hospital where she worked as a nurse. Mum didn’t smile as much as she used to, perhaps a pretty mug with her name might help. Sarah closed her eyes and imagined it in her head.

“Sarah, you’re blocking the door.” Someone behind pushed her out the way and she stumbled forward as kids surged into the classroom.

At the front of the class the art teacher called for order as the kids rushed to the tables where everything was neatly laid out. Sarah’s face fell when she couldn’t see a seat at the pottery table. She looked up as someone called out to her.

“Sarah, there’s a space next to me,” repeated Asha.

Sarah didn’t know her that well because Asha was always reading a book and didn’t travel on the school bus. So, she was a bit surprised, but very happy when Asha called her over.

Sarah had seen her being dropped off by her Mum or her big sisters. Sarah had wished she had sisters when she saw the girls laughing at the school gates. They often had the same hairdo as Asha, a single long black plait, and sometimes wore pretty saris.

She took a step towards the pottery table. Vicky, towering over her, elbowed her out the way and sat next to Asha. Sarah stood uselessly at the now full table. She wished she could loom over Vicky instead of the other way around.

“You don’t mind, do you, Sarah?” Vicky’s eyes widened, her lips twisted to one side, and her eyebrows raised. There was silence as the other kids looked on. Asha lowered her eyes and started sorting the paintbrushes into different sizes.

Sarah could feel herself getting cross. She had had enough of being walked over and being treated like her feelings didn’t matter, but she was too scared to say so. She clenched her fists tightly as she stomped off to the drawing table.

The chatter increased again.

At the drawing table, she uncurled the fists she had made and lowered her head. She squeezed her eyelids shut so tears wouldn’t spill. She’d love to be brave enough to wipe the smirk off Vicky’s face.

Vicky treated her like her feelings didn't matter. Sarah picked a coloured pencil and pressed it hard into the paper. Pumpkin-coloured lines formed hair. Then she selected a pea-green colour and filled in the face. An image of Vicky filled the page. She grinned to herself as she imagined Vicky with a bad tummy ache.

Her cheeks reddened as the teacher approached. She crushed the drawing and put it in the bin.

On clean paper, she began sketching the person next to her as instructed. The drawing table turned out to be fun, and everyone was friendly, and no one laughed at her braces.

Silver squares shone against white teeth as Sarah smiled widely, forgetting to hide her braces. She hated her braces, no one her age had them. The dentist had spoken to her like she was a baby although she was nearly ten. These braces are for very grown-up kids, he'd said before turning and whispering to Mum that her mouth was too crowded and her jaw too small. Whatever that meant. He promised she wouldn't have to wear them for long, but Sarah didn't want to wear them for even a minute. Everyone stared at them, and there was a long list of things she wasn't allowed.

Mum had been so angry when she had got chewing gum stuck in them. That had not been a good day.

She shook her head and concentrated on her clean sheet of paper. The kids howled with laughter as they compared their drawings. She felt much happier.

Later, in the cafeteria she sat next to the kids from the drawing group. Rustles, clinks, and slurps got louder as the queue shortened and the room filled with hungry kids. Plastic trays and packed lunches appeared as they flopped onto the long benches.

Sarah waved to Asha and moved up to make space.

They compared trays. They both had tomato-and-cheese pizza and fries. The pizza was not the warm, breaded crust and melted cheese that stretched as you bit into it, sort of pizza. Their school pizza was like cardboard, topped with red goo and rubbery cheese, but the only other choice was a thin burger and floppy salad that Sarah did not like the look of.

"Why are you tearing off the crust? That's the only decent bit. Thank goodness we got French fries today." Asha popped a ketchup-coated fry into her mouth.

"It gets stuck in my braces." Sarah frowned, her shoulders nearly touching her ears.

Asha nodded and said, "there are things I can't eat as well because I'm vegetarian."

Sarah smiled, reached out, and joined Asha in finishing the fries.

"Is Vicky coming to sit with you?" Asha wrinkled her nose and pursed her lips.

"I don't think so," replied Sarah, her smile vanishing.

"I've seen her be mean to you. I thought she was your friend?"

Sarah shrugged. She didn't know what to say.

"She's sometimes horrid to me too. I told my sisters. They told me to ignore her and make friends with other people and she'll probably stop. She was ok today, so maybe they were right."

Sarah shrugged again. She wished she had a quick answer for everything like Vicky did or at least a sister to talk to. Asha didn't seem to notice Sarah's shyness, and as they entered the playground together, soon they were talking about all sorts, from whether eggs were too smelly for a packed lunch to where sold the best stationery.

The bell surprised her. The lunch break seemed shorter than usual. The headteacher came out and told them all to stay in the playground. Kids huddled together in groups on the black tarmac, with the more active ones heading back to the swings and slides. Asha and Sarah looked at each other. What

was going on?

Sarah clapped her hands over her ears. She had exceptional hearing. Although it made loud noises painful, listening to adult's conversation was that bit easier, and Sarah was a curious kid.

Flashing blue lights appeared, and the blaring noise stopped as an ambulance parked outside the school. All the kids began asking questions at the same time. Two paramedics, wearing neon yellow hi-vis jackets, ran through with a stretcher.

They returned carrying Vicky, who was screaming and holding her tummy. Her face was the bright, vivid green of mushy peas.

Just like the picture she'd drawn, but that was impossible. Sarah thought of Suki's words as she watched the ambulance drive away.

This wasn't her fault, was it?

The kids talked about it all afternoon. Nothing that exciting had ever happened at school. Sarah tried to concentrate on her lessons but kept wondering if Vicky was ok and if her drawing had somehow caused this.

## Chapter 5

### *The Stranger*

Finally, the last bell went. Sarah was thoughtful all the way home. Even though Vicky wasn't nice to her, it was strange being on the bus without her. As the bus pulled up at her stop, the doors opened with a hiss. She climbed down, shifting uncomfortably under the weight of her rucksack.

She ran straight into someone coming down the stairs.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you." She said politely because she was a kind girl and was sorry she had bumped into someone.

"That's ok, Sarah. It's nice to see you again. You've grown a lot since I last saw you."

Sarah stopped in surprise at hearing her name and looked at the voice. It came from a man wearing a hat, like a cowboy hat but not as wide. The hat was tilted down in the front and up in the back. It was hard to see his face. She didn't think she knew him, so how did he know her name? Was he from the post office, the supermarket, or maybe he worked with her mother?

She couldn't remember, but the longer they stood on the steps, the more she thought she'd met him before. His skin was a rich brown with a reddish undertone, like the cherry tree that grew opposite their house. She tilted her head to one side. With the lines on his face, he did remind her of tree bark. He smelled of the outdoors, like lots of trees.

Her curiosity meant she was doing two things she shouldn't. Speaking to strangers and staring, quite rudely. After a minute, the man raised his hat to her and bobbed his head, "I must be off. I'll pop in another time to say hello to you when your mum is home." When he raised his hat, she saw he had copper-coloured eyes like hers.

At the same time, she heard a woof. She squealed in delight when she saw a yellow Labrador behind him. She loved animals, but Mum said they weren't allowed animals in their apartment, and even if they were, the apartment was too small for a dog.

"Hello, what's your name?" She held out her hand for the dog to sniff. She would never pet a dog

without first introducing herself.

“Her name is Bonnie, and she’s pleased to meet you.” Sarah petted the dog and stroked its silky ears. Its tongue lolled out to one side, and it seemed to smile. Its muzzle turning white, it looked like an old dog.

He raised his hat to her, “I can see you’re busy, I’ll pop in another time to say hello.” Before she could reply he was gone. She was rather glad. She had already disobeyed her Mum a lot lately, and she knew she really should not talk to strangers, but she was sorry the dog had gone.

She put her key in the entrance door and turned around. There was no sign of them. She bent forward and looked left and right and wondered how they’d vanished so quickly.

She hurried into the flat, her tummy rumbling. She dumped her rucksack on the floor and forgot about the man as she opened the fridge.

Mum was a nurse at the hospital and was on late shifts this week. It was just the two of them. Sarah was happy enough on her own, or with Vicky when they had been friends, but occasionally she wished she had a big family, like Vicky did. Vicky lived in a house next door. She had two brothers, a dad, and a mum. Vicky didn’t like her brothers though, she said they were horrible and teased her a lot.

She switched the TV off and did her homework quickly. She was good like that, no one had to tell her to do it. She wondered if Vicky was home. She opened the window and stuck her head out to look next door.

Was that a dog on the pavement? It looked like Bonnie. She stuck her head out further and saw the man in the hat walking next to Suki. He said her name. Were they talking about her? Listening to someone’s conversation is called eavesdropping and isn’t the right thing to do, but when someone says your name in a conversation, it is nearly impossible not to listen.

“Sarah seems a very nice girl,” said the man.

“Yes, and very kind, my shopping was quite heavy, and she carried it all the way home for me,” replied Suki.

Sarah beamed and should have shut the window at this point.

“You showed her your home? Was that wise? Did the forest children cause a problem? They can be a little mischievous, and they like others to play with,” he said.

Suki shook her head. “She was so sad, and we had a lovely chat. It seemed a shame to leave her there. I wasn’t thinking. I even said her name in front of them, and one of them called to her. I told her it was a shadow. Being secretive doesn’t suit my personality.”

Sarah was listening so hard it’s a wonder she didn’t fall out the window. What did they mean by forest children?

“I think it is time we were all more honest with her. She’s changing and needs to know where she comes from. I think it’s time I visited.”

Sarah’s head was awhirl with questions.

Suki shook her head and did that funny walking in a circle thing Sarah had seen her do. “Patrick DuBois, you know Susan doesn’t want her to know. You said you’d respect her wishes.”

Dubois? That was her name. She had never met anyone else with the surname DuBois. And what did her mother not want her to know?

The man gave a deep sigh. The leaves blew off the pavement, and the nearby trees bent their branches and a blast of cold air rushed into the apartment.

Sarah looked up and down the road and at the park opposite in amazement.

“Well, if she ever needs me, you must tell me. Keep in touch with her.”

Then he looked up, directly at her. Sarah froze.

“Or she can always leave a note for me in the silk-cotton tree. It’s just there in Highgate Woods.” He pointed to the park opposite their block of apartments. “Not many people know it’s there, and even fewer can find it. But don’t worry, you’ll be able to Sarah.”

Suki looked up, her mouth a perfect O.

Sarah slammed the window and slid down the wall to the floor, her heart thumping, and her freckles obvious against bright red cheeks. She put her hands on her heated cheeks. They must think her the rudest girl on the planet, listening to their conversation like that.

## Chapter 6

### *The Silk Cotton Tree*

The next day was Saturday, and Sarah being a very curious little girl, too curious, some might say, started thinking about what the man had said.

She looked up a silk-cotton tree on the laptop. It was a strange-looking tree. The bark resembled wrinkled, grey elephant skin with thorns growing out of it. The tree only grew in warm places like the Caribbean and India. Maybe the man had been joking, but she wanted to know for sure.

“Mum, can I play outside?”

Mum wiped her hands on a dish towel. “Are you going to play with Vicky?”

Sarah hung her head, and told Mum that Vicky was poorly, and an ambulance had taken her away. Susan gasped. “I must go and ask her Mum how she’s doing. Why didn’t you tell me? I’ll go right now.”

Sarah continued to look at the floor. Mum would find out it had all been her fault.

To her surprise Mum hugged her tightly and told her she must be so worried. “Stay here, I’ll be right back.”

Mum dashed out the door. Sarah ran to the window and watched her knock next door. She waited anxiously as Mum made her way back.

Mum hugged her and kissed the top of her head. “You can stop worrying. Vicky is fine. She had appendicitis, and she needed an operation.”

Sarah’s eyes widened.

Mum continued, “and she’ll be off school for a little while.”

“Why did she get it?”

Mum shrugged, “it’s just one of those things.”

Sarah was sure it was her fault. She moped in the chair. Mum cleaned.

Sarah got up and propped her elbows on the windowsill and chin on her hands as she stared out the window, her mood reflecting the grey skies.

Highgate Woods, the man had said. Sarah gazed at the edge of the woods and nearby playground. She remembered visiting those places with her grandmother, Mama Glow. It was spelt Maman de l’eau, but her grandmother said everyone had always called her Glow. Sarah thought it was the best nickname ever because her grandmother was a happy, beautiful Her grandmother liked being called

that, she said it reminded her of where she had come from. Sarah couldn't remember where, but it was somewhere hot, where people spoke French.

She would comb her grandmother's thick, dark, wavy hair daily before decorating it with pretty combs. Then she would sit by her feet and listen to stories about places Mama Glow had been too, and magical tales of the water spirits who protected and healed the river animals.

Mum didn't like the stories. "Stop filling her head with nonsense," she'd snap.

Mama Glow had been easy to talk to, she never got angry or seemed sad or tired, and she didn't spend weekends doing chores. Then one day, she was gone. She hadn't even told Sarah goodbye. After a while, Mum had packed up Mama Glow's things, and Mama Glow went on the list of 'Things-That-Must-Not-Be-Spoken-Of.'

Sometimes when she saw other people's grandmothers, she missed Mama Glow and felt sad. Vicky called her grandmother Irish Nana. Lucky Asha had two grandmothers and called them Ajee and Nani.

The clouds suddenly disappeared, revealing a clear blue sky. The sun made the grass greener, and the autumn leaves brighter. Piles of red, brown, and yellow leaves waited to be kicked into the air.

"Mum, can we go to the park?"

Susan looked up from where she was kneeling, cleaning out the cupboard under the sink.

"Why?"

"We could go on the swings," replied Sarah.

Susan sat back on her heels. "Or you could go to the corner shop. I need some milk for my tea. You can buy some sweets as well. Just a tiny amount, remember what the dentist said."

Sarah nodded and hopped off the chair quickly. Mum never let her have sweets. She put the money carefully into her purse, hung it over her shoulder and across her body. Once outside, she looked both ways and crossed the road.

The playground was just ahead and the woods behind that. She watched as children screamed in excitement on the swings, legs flying straight out in front, silhouetted against the blue, the sun low in the Autumn sky. Mama Glow would've gone to the park. It was a lot less fun without her. Sarah lingered at the edge of the playground watching the other children play. She missed Vicky, although Vicky had not always been nice to her.

She lingered a while before making her way to the store.

She selected skimmed milk from the chiller cabinet, then studied the pick-and-mix sweet selection, eventually choosing chocolate, lemon sherbet and a candy cane. She would have to suck all the sweets to stop pieces from getting under her braces, but that just made them last longer. She looked longingly at the forbidden chewy jellybeans and strawberry laces and reluctantly left them.

On the way home, as she melted the chocolate on her tongue, Sarah wondered about the tree the man had mentioned. It would only be a short diversion. Sometimes Sarah was too curious for her own good.

The man had said Sarah could find it, but the tree was nowhere to be found, and the sun was a lot lower in the sky than when she'd set out.

Sarah folded her arms in frustration, and then the strangest thought popped into her head. She'd close her eyes and let her footsteps guide her.

She paused. She felt a bit silly. Nothing would happen, it was just a weird thought.

But Sarah decided to try anyway. She closed her eyes and thought of the tree she'd seen on the

laptop.

It worked! She opened her eyes to see the largest tree imaginable, its gnarled roots taller than a grown-up. How was this possible?

Sarah peered at the cave-like spaces between the roots. She could fit her entire bedroom in here.

She looked up to see ferocious thorns along the tree trunk. She touched the tree and felt the same prickly feeling she'd felt near the door to the roof. She quickly stepped back.

In the fading light, pink flowers suddenly opened. One dropped at Sarah's feet. It was too pretty to ignore, so she picked it up.

She wondered what it smelt like. She imagined a rose or cotton-candy. She inhaled deeply and immediately dropped the flower and put her hands to her mouth as the chocolate came back up.

The smell was the same as the lumpy, yellow mess in a forgotten cup of milk last summer. She closed her eyes and slumped against a giant root. She wished she'd stayed home or gone on the swings.

She opened her eyes. To her surprise, she was in the now silent playpark, the swings empty, still silhouettes, no longer friendly-looking, their shadows stretching long and thin before them like a giant's bony fingers.

A lady froze, a litter-picker in one hand and a bag in the other. She peered at Sarah in the dim light. "I didn't see you come in. We're closed now."

Sarah looked around in confusion. "Where did the tree go?"

"What tree?" The lady was looking at Sarah with a worried expression on her face.

"The silk-cotton tree."

The lady looked at Sarah with more interest now. "I've seen one of those in the Caribbean. It was spectacular. You're a clever girl to have heard of it, but it's too cold to grow that here. There're some interesting trees in Kew gardens if you like that sort of thing." The lady smiled and said, "When you see the real thing, you won't forget. Be careful. They say bad things happen to people who harm that tree."

The hairs on Sarah's arms stood up, and her skin broke out in goosebumps. The lady stopped smiling and stared at Sarah's wide eyes. "Hey, I was only joking. Are you alright?"

Sarah didn't answer and ran away terrified. She raced all the way home, slamming the door behind her. She bent over out of breath, her hands on her knees.

Susan jumped as the door slammed. "What on earth is the matter? Are you ok? I was beginning to get worried." Susan wiped her hands on a kitchen towel and came towards Sarah, her eyes wide and her eyebrows raised.

"There was a scary tree, it looked like a huge grey elephant, and I felt to throw up," Sarah blurted out.

"Really, Sarah, you saw a tree that looked like an elephant? Did you drink a fizzy drink at the store?"

"No." Sarah handed her the shopping, "and I only ate one sweet."

"Where was this tree?" Susan asked as she put the milk in the fridge.

Sarah hesitated. Susan folded her arms and started tapping her foot. Never a good sign. Sarah had just been about to say in the woods when she remembered she was supposed to go straight to the shop and back. Instead, she pointed out the front window. Susan looked outside the window.

"The only tree I can see is the cherry tree, and that isn't big or grey."

Sarah peered over her mother's shoulder. "It must've been the light."

“You know you don’t like the dark. That’s why I told you to hurry back.” Mum hugged her tightly and kissed the top of her head. “Don’t dawdle on the way to the shops next time. You frightened both of us, and I’ve been dying for a cup of tea.”

Sarah hugged Mum back. That made her feel better. She made up her mind to listen to her mother in the future.

## Chapter 7

### *A New Friend*

Sunday came and Sarah moped around. She sat at their little table that was just big enough for two and pushed her breakfast around her plate. Lots of thoughts swirled around in her head.

All her recent adventures involved disobeying Mum, and Mum wouldn’t believe her anyway. She wished her grandmother were still here.

“Sarah, you haven’t eaten.”

“I’m not hungry,” replied Sarah. “I miss talking to Mama Glow.” She hadn’t meant to say that. The words in her head just slipped out.

Susan went a funny colour, and a sort of squeak came out. She coughed, drank some water, and cleared her throat before speaking. “Shall we go to the café for ice-cream?”

“Really?” What was Mum thinking? When Mum smiled and nodded, Sarah raced to her room to get ready before Mum could change her mind.

They walked to the café. It was called Java and Gelato and was one of Sarah’s favourite places with its colourful red-and-white checkered tablecloths and giant menus. They laughed a lot, as people do when they have ice-cream for breakfast. They swung linked hands as they headed home.

Sarah smile disappeared when she saw Vicky’s mum heading out. The two mums stopped and chatted.

“Vicky’s doing very well. She’s been so bored they’re letting her come back to school for half-days. Isn’t that lovely? We’ll take her there and back of course, so you’ll have to miss seeing her on the bus a little while longer Sarah.”

The mums turned and smiled at her expectantly.

She let go of Susan’s hand, nodded, and smiled weakly. The ice-cream felt like a lump in her throat. She wondered if she could pretend to be sick and miss school. That never worked with Mum though. Probably because she was a nurse.

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Later that evening, as she lay in bed, she thought and thought, then thought some more. In the end, the only plan she came up with was to be nice to Vicky. Maybe Vicky would be nice back.

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She repeated that idea all the way to school, and as she climbed down from the bus, she told herself

to be brave.

She heard Vicky before she saw her. Surrounded by kids, her height and hair marked her out.

“I nearly died. I had to have surgery. The doctors said I was the bravest person they’d ever seen.” The kids oohed and aahed as Vicky lifted her school shirt and showed them her scar.

Sarah took a deep breath and went up to Vicky. “It’s nice to see you, and I’m glad you are better.” She smiled, keeping her lips together so Vicky wouldn’t tease her about her braces.

“Oh, were you talking to me?” Vicky bent down low and cupped her ear. “How short are you? Your braces make you talk funny. It’s so weird only your teeth have grown, but you haven’t grown, in like what, two years? Oh my godddd.” Vicky rolled her eyes as she straightened up.

All the girls around laughed and looked at Sarah. She wanted to cry, but then they’d tease her even more. So, she just walked on. She walked through the corridors with her head down, looking at the sea of black school shoes and scuff marks on the floor. In the classroom, she sat next to Asha, far away from Vicky. Kids at the table chattered away, but Sarah stared at the blue carpet on the classroom floor and didn’t join in.

Asha pushed a piece of paper into Sarah’s hand. She unfolded the crumpled paper. It was a smiley face, signed with a heart, and an X. Sarah looked up and saw Asha smiling at her. It made her feel a little bit better. Vicky frowned and glared at the two girls.

Vicky wanted Sarah to feel bad, and Asha was spoiling her fun. Sarah ignored Vicky and resisted an urge to stick her tongue out at her.

Vicky left early, so the afternoon was a bit better. Still, Sarah was glad when the last lesson was over. She sat at the front of the bus, away from the other kids. At her stop, she clambered down the steps, her mustard-yellow rucksack swaying clumsily on her back. The bus doors hissed closed.

As Sarah walked towards her apartment building, she heard shouts from the basement. A door was flung open, and a cardboard box thrown onto the pavement. Sarah jumped to the side to avoid it.

“That cat has peed on my clothes for the last time,” said a voice.

Sarah giggled.

“Fine, I never wanted it. You brought it home,” replied another voice.

The door slammed. Sarah stepped around the box. She turned back abruptly when she heard a meow.

Sarah gasped, had they put a cat in the box? Was it hurt? She peered inside, and a pair of large green eyes appeared. She couldn’t just leave it there. As she bent to pick up the box, her mustard-yellow rucksack, too large for her, tipped forward, going over her head and toppling her over. She landed with a splat on the muddy pavement. She struggled to her feet and brushed off her uniform.

She lifted the box again. After a few efforts, she finally held the box firmly.

Unable to see over the top of it, she slowly climbed the stairs to the apartment entrance, one wobbly footstep at a time.

She swayed as someone hit the box. The cat yowled in fright, its piercing cry like a baby’s. Sarah lowered the box to see some boys from the estate laughing as their friend hit the side of the box again.

“Go away,” she yelled, her arms aching.

“You going to make me shorty?”

His friends laughed as he confronted Sarah. One of them snapped a branch off a nearby tree and threw it to him. He deftly caught it. His eyes narrowed, and his mouth twisted to one side as they encouraged him to hit the side of the box again. Sarah didn’t dare say anymore. There were a lot of

them and only one of her.

She backed away angrily, her small hands struggling to hold the box. She put it down and inserted her key. The boys seemed bored now and even slightly amused by this tiny, freckled girl with bristling curls glaring at them.

As Sarah retrieved the box, the boy poked the loose top. The stick narrowly missed the cat's eye, and it hissed and struck out. The boy yelled in fright. His friends laughed loudly at him, calling him names. He punched the box and stalked off.

The cat yowled in fright again. Sarah was furious. Her heart raced, and her eyes narrowed, her hands clenched into cold fists. Those boys were horrid. They'd tried to hurt a helpless animal and the tree. She could see the gash where they had ripped the branch off. She was particularly cross at the boy who'd poked the cat.

She wished someone would hurt him. See how he liked that. She slammed the door and inside the apartment, hurriedly opened the box. A horrid smell wafted out, and the cat refused to come out. She bent down and looked inside.

"Don't be embarrassed. It was scary. I'd have pooped myself too."

The cat mewed and ventured to the edge of the box. Sarah covered her nose and opened the window slightly. Just then, there was a roar of loud laughter outside. Sarah jumped, and the cat retreated to the back of the box, ears back and tail twitching.

Sarah peered out to see what the commotion was. The boy who'd poked the cat was waving the branch at the others in a play sword fight. They went to pull more branches down. Sarah was so angry. The boys screamed as the twigs grew sharp thorns. The boy who'd poked the cat scratched himself as he waved the now thorny branch.

He hopped up and down, yelling angrily, blood dripping from his hand. "Who did that?"

They all disappeared into the distance as he chased them.

The cat leapt onto the windowsill, looked out, and rubbed its glossy, black head against her. Then it jumped down, meowed loudly, and wound itself in and out of her legs.

It was black all over except for white feet, and long, white whiskers. Sarah giggled as its whiskers tickled her. It seemed to have got over its earlier fright. Maybe it was hungry. What had Mum left in the fridge for dinner? Great, it was chicken. She put some on a saucer, and the cat gobbled it up.

She rubbed its head briefly. It butted her hand gently, then resumed eating. She left it to finish and found some gloves under the sink. She held her breath as she cleaned up the cat poop. She flushed it down the toilet and hoped the smell would be gone by the time Mum returned from work. She folded the cardboard box and put it in the recycle bin.

Then she sat down and tried to think of a name.

At school, they'd just learnt about a girl called Anne Frank. The little girl and her family had been badly treated because they were different. Anne Frank had been very brave

## COMMENDED



## REHANNAH MIAN

### *Mia and the Curse of Camelot*

Rehannah Mian is a former television producer, who now works with children – strengthening their confidence and imagination through theatrical fairytale experiences. She created her *Magical Storybook: English Nanny Bedtime Stories* podcast in January 2020, and has had 500k downloads since. Rehannah uploaded audio chapters of *Mia and the Curse of Camelot* to the podcast in January 2021 and it has had 80k downloads so far. Parents globally have told her that their children are entranced.

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# MIA AND THE CURSE OF CAMELOT

## 1

*STICKNEY PYGOTT*

*Somewhere there's a tree, with a bookcase inside.  
It will take you to the land where the forgotten people hide.*

Mia yawned and rubbed her eyes as she gazed out of her bedroom window. The mist was clearing and the sun was rising slowly behind the oak tree on the playing field. The golden rays painted its trunk a deep chestnut, while its old twisted branches formed a dramatic silhouette against the orange sky. This was the fifth Saturday in a row that she had got out of bed early, desperately hoping that *this* would be the day when she would see the magic tree glowing again. She waited until the white clouds arrived, revealing the first wispy pale blue of the morning, before accepting that today was probably *not* going to be that day. The clock by the bed said 6.45am, and Mia was just considering going back to sleep when something made her take one last look out of the window. And there it was. Brilliant white shards of light were exploding from the oak tree's bark.

She punched the air with excitement, grabbed her backpack, and tore down the stairs. There was no time for her to tie her trainers properly as the tree's magic only lasted a few minutes, so she left them trailing behind her as she ran out of the house and towards the playing field.

Luckily, Mr Oliver, who was walking his dog, Cairo, didn't notice her, otherwise he would have, as usual, held her up to remark on *how quiet it was*, and, *how much better it was in his day when there was not so much traffic about*.

'I wish that I could go back to the old days,' he would mutter before shuffling away.

Mia liked Mr Oliver, and usually liked talking to him but today she was on a mission that was far too important to interrupt. By the time she reached the tree it had stopped glowing.

Oh no! She thought as she squinted through the hole in its bark. Through the darkness she could just about make out the shape of the bookcase that was carved inside the hollow.

'Yes!' she said joyfully, relieved that the magic was still there.

She gently pushed on the trunk, and with a low creaking noise the hole began to expand. Within seconds it was wide enough for Mia to step inside. She went straight over to the ancient books, as she always did. They each had the name of someone written down the spine. I haven't heard of any of these people, she thought, before picking one out that had a bright gold cover. She held it up and read the name SIR MORIEN. Inside the cover were the words, *Brave Knight of Camelot*, and below them was a portrait of a dark skinned man, dressed in full battle armour. It reminded Mia of one of her favourite novels, *King Arthur and the knights of Camelot*, about a boy who became king, helped by the loyal Knights of the Round Table. The most exciting parts for Mia were always the explosive battles between Arthur's magician, Merlin, and the evil witch, Morgana. Whenever Morgana would try and take over Camelot, Merlin would be there to make sure that she failed, and it would always involve a

lot of dark magic. But there was never a Sir Morien in the story, she thought, staring at the picture, or *any* knight that had black skin and hair like hers.

Mia thought that this was a fantastic find, and decided that she wanted to find out more about him. She flipped the pages, and as usual, they were blank, but she soon found the magic words that she was looking for, hidden away on the back page. And she read them out loud.

*'Magic oak tree, hear this rhyme,  
take me travelling back in time,  
where brave knights, and dragons, and creatures of old  
do battle for honour... and barrels of gold.'*

Immediately the white light re-appeared, dazzling Mia. The tree then began to tremble as its roots spiralled up from the ground, forming a magical staircase that disappeared into the dark chimney above. The light dimmed, and Mia slowly began to climb the stairs, cautiously at first, but then sprinting to the top with excitement. She popped her head out of the trunk, and smiled. She admired the sleepy, picturesque town below, with its winding narrow streets and crooked houses. It was still early but a few people were awake. While she sat and tied her shoe laces she noticed Cairo sitting waiting patiently outside the newsagents. Mr Oliver must have been inside buying his paper. It would no doubt be a long wait for Cairo, thought Mia. Mr Oliver did like to stand and chat.

'You have the best view in town,' she eventually said, leaning over the edge of the tree, and looking down.

Two large eyes looked back at her and blinked.

'Yes, it's quite magnificent, isn't it?' replied the oak tree, shaking its leaves awake. 'Good morning, Mia.'

'Good morning, Stickney,' she replied, patting a branch gently. 'It's good to see you again.'

Stickney Pygott smiled. It was not often that humans noticed him, and he enjoyed the rare occasions when they did. He had lived in this field for nearly eight hundred years, and was now the last living member of the Pygott oak family. Stickney could remember when the forests covered England, and he missed them terribly. But he did enjoy people watching, and he felt proud that he had seen a lot of important people over the centuries, He dearly wished that he could share more memories with the humans, but not many of them took the time to talk to him. Mia was different though, he knew that from the day she walked into his field and started a conversation with him.

'Well I suppose we'd better get going while its still quiet,' he said. 'Hold on now.' Before Mia could respond, the oak tree crouched down, and with a rumble, leapt up into the air, so forcefully that he left a big gaping hole in the ground. He rocketed towards the sky, soaring over the town with two of his largest branches spread out like wings. Mia held on tightly as his long trailing roots began to whip from side to side, propelling them higher, and showering mud and worms onto the town below.

They sailed for miles on the currents, riding patches of cold bumpy air like a rollercoaster, and greeting flocks of startled geese with a wave.

'Woooooo!' shouted Mia, excitedly stretching her arms above her head as they went.

She felt Stickney tap her on the back.

‘Get your brolyo ready!’ he called up, pointing to a solitary white cloud up ahead. ‘Brolyo? What’s a Brolyo?’ she thought.

A moment later they flew into the cloud and glided under a spectacular waterfall that soaked her through.

‘Ugh! That’s what you meant.’ she shouted down. ‘Careful! I don’t have an umbrella! I’m drenched.’

Stickney paddled through the water, and Mia watched in awe as the foam at the bottom of the cascade produced fluffy white clouds that drifted off into the sky. Then came a rumbling, splashing sound. The foamy water was turning into rapids, and soon they were at the top of a second waterfall. Mia called out in alarm, but *fwoosh!* Over the edge they plunged, and down they fell. She felt the force of the flow pulling her

from Stickney, and grabbed onto a clump of his leaves to stop herself being washed away.

‘It’s okay,’ he reassured her, wrapping another branch around her as he steadied himself. ‘you’re quite safe.’

Before she knew it they were at the bottom of the waterfall, and falling out of the cloud. ‘That was quite a ride!’ shouted Mia when she had recovered. She looked around

and noticed that the sky looked different. It was more red and grey than blue. The air smelt different as well - more sulphurous and hot. Mia knew that something had changed, and it scared her. She closed her eyes, wondering if she would come out of this alive. Suddenly, a thunderous roar filled the air, and a huge ball of flames flew across her head, followed by a blanket of green scales, and a gigantic thrashing tail.

‘Ouch!’ cried Stickney as the fire burnt his leaves.

Mia screamed and curled herself into a ball as a colossal dragon circled them. It had a terrifying ridge of thorns from its head to its tail, and its gaping mouth was letting out an ear-splitting cry.

‘It’s going to eat us!’ she cried, but immediately fell silent when she smelt the dragon’s meaty, charcoal breath next to her head. It sniffed her with its cavernous nostrils, and when it was satisfied it snorted a stream of warm snotty air in her face, and flew off into the distance. Mia sat rigid with fear for what seemed like a lifetime, not quite believing what had just happened to her. She was relieved when she finally felt the tree descending. She looked down, hoping to see it landing in the playing field back home, but her hopes were shattered when she saw that they were, instead, heading towards a dark and bleak looking castle.

## 2

### *THE MORBID MUSEUM*

*Deep down in the dungeon our ancestors dwell  
in a dark tiled hall where in battle they fell.*

Stickney Pygott and Mia flew lower, casting a shadow across the castle’s dark, dramatic towers and thick stone walls. They landed on the front lawn, and the oak tree lowered one of his branches to the

floor so that Mia could climb down. She looked up at the castle. It towered over her, looking creepy and threatening up on its high mound. Mia's attention was caught by a rustling sound, and she turned to see Stickney shaking his leaves angrily as he picked off the scorched ones with his long, twig-like fingers. She heard him mutter something about mountain dragons having no manners at all.

'Where... are we?' she asked, more than a little unnerved.

'Camelot of course!' he answered, grumpily. 'This is where you asked to come wasn't it? Where there are knights... and *dragons*.'

Mia's mood changed instantly as she became excited by the thought of meeting King Arthur and Merlin.

'Does this mean I'll get to meet Sir Morien as well?' she asked. But Stickney was too busy moaning to take any notice.

Mia ran round the outside of the castle, eager to find the characters in her book but there was no sign of anyone. The drawbridge was raised, and the moat was dried up and full of weeds. There were not even any guards patrolling. Camelot was silent - eerily silent, as though it had been abandoned.

She walked up the mound to get a good look at the surroundings, wondering what to do next. Behind the castle was a steep, jagged mountain range, while in every other direction, there was a thick, spooky forest. Neither way looked particularly inviting. Mia decided that she should get Stickney Pygott to take her back home, but when she got back to the place where she had left him, she saw him stomping off towards the forest.

'Where are you going?' she cried, running after him.

For a big old oak tree, Stickney Pygott could certainly move quickly. Mia struggled to keep up with him.

Eventually she did, as he mumbled, 'Look at my leaves. It's always the same with these mountain dragons.'

Then he walked into the trees on the edge of the forest, booted a few thistles out of the way with his foot, and shuffled his bottom into the clear soil. With a low rumbling sound he drilled his roots deep down into the earth and became very still. Mia watched as his face vanished into the bark.

'Wake up!' she shouted, knocking on his trunk. 'I want to go home.'

But there was no response. Stickney was pretending to be an ordinary, non-magical oak tree, and he sat in silence, leaving Mia feeling alone and very scared.

Now, oak trees are very good at picking up warnings, and if Stickney Pygott had not been sulking, he might have noticed the shadowy hooded figure that was standing by the castle and staring at Mia. And if he had not been sulking he might have been able to warn her to run. But as he was sulking, no such warning came for Mia, and when she turned round and saw the dark mass rising up in front of her, she froze with terror.

The shape hovered silently above the ground, then it began to spin, slowly at first, and then faster and faster until the black whirlwind catapulted swirling black balls of vapour into the air. Each ball then magically transformed into a shrieking black crow, which flew towards her.

She ran but the crows were getting closer with every flap of their wings. Diving into the long weeds of the moat, she managed to escape down a large fox burrow, seconds before their snapping beaks reached her. With her heart pounding, Mia looked out and saw the birds circle the moat three times before finally giving up and flying off over the mountains.

After resting, she peered into the burrow, and was surprised to see that it was in fact a carved

sandstone tunnel. It was too dark to see all the way down but luckily she had a torch in her bag. She had carried one ever since her scout leader had said, *'You never know when you might need one!'* It turned out that he was right, although she imagined that he had not foreseen her running from a flock of malevolent crows when he had said it! She switched it on and made her way down the gloomy passage.

It took her underneath the castle where she passed through storage areas filled with food and barrels of wine. This gave her hope that she was heading towards the kitchens, or other servants quarters where she might find help, but as she went on, the walls became damper and the air began to smell mouldier, and Mia could tell that the tunnel was instead taking her deeper underground. At one point the torchlight flickered, and she clutched it tightly, praying that the battery would last.

Eventually, the tunnel ended and she found herself standing at the entrance to a large hall. It appeared to be carved out of the same sandy rock as the tunnel, with twelve great pillars supporting the roof. It might have looked like a dungeon if it were not for the black and white tiles on the floor. Mia hesitated for a moment and shone her torch against every wall and stone column to check that no one was hiding in the shadows, before making her way inside.

She was unsettled to find that the room was some sort of mausoleum or museum, filled with old statues and tombs.

It looks like a burial chamber! she thought, shivering, while wrapping her free arm tightly around her body and trying not to drop the torch.

Mia had seen statues in museums before but she had never seen any as strange as these. There must have been a hundred of them; kings, queens, servants, and knights, either on the floor, or on their own plinths. Among them were dragons, wizards, and even gnomes. Each had been carved to look as though they were characters on a battlefield. Some had their arms up, shielding their faces, while others looked like they were running. The stone dragons, which had been placed on high pedestals, seemed to be attacking the humans, while armed gnomes lined the walkways. Mia examined all of their grey faces and shuddered. They looked so real.

She continued walking, and came across a knight who was rearing up on his horse. He was swinging a perfectly still mace above his head, and had been positioned to look as though he was attacking a cowering king.

However, it was the statue of a man in long robes that interested her the most. His magnificent knee length beard was carved with such detail that it fascinated her, and so she took a moment to study the shapes that formed it. He was wearing a hat like a wizard's, or a magician's, and his mouth was wide open, as if he was chanting a spell. She searched to see if there were any names on the statues or tombs to see who they were but there were none, so she decided to look for any other doorways into the castle, all the time trying to keep her thoughts away from what may or may not have been hiding down there.

She soon found one - a heavy looking wooden door that had been barely visible in the dim light. But when she turned the rusty metal handle, it broke off in her hand. Mia tried desperately to push it open with her shoulders but it was locked. She shone her torch through its barred window at the top and saw that there was another dark passage on the other side, but the torchlight was not powerful enough to reveal where it led, so she gave up and turned to face the hall once more. But as she did, she froze with fear.

Although she tried to convince herself that she could not see shadows moving around the room,

and that it was just the darkness playing tricks on her eyes, she knew that it was not true. And then, from nowhere, the sound of a hundred ghostly whispers filled the room.

### 3

#### *THE GLOOMY LETTER*

*A long time ago a witch travelled this land,  
cursing her foes with a wave of her hand.*

‘Go away!’ Mia screamed as she whipped the torchlight around the edges of the hall, frantically trying to find the exit tunnel. A hollow sobbing sound joined the whispers that echoed around the room. She placed her hands over her ears to block them out, convinced that she was going crazy, as one moment they appeared in front of her, and the next, behind. When the sounds suddenly stopped, Mia felt something behind her. Trembling, she slowly looked over her shoulder, half expecting the statues to be moving in on her, but to her relief, there was nothing. The statues were still in their original positions. She let out the breath that she had been holding on to, but drew it in again a moment later when the sobbing noise appeared again. Only this time, it was further away.

‘That’s it! I’m getting out of here,’ she panicked, darting towards the exit.

She had only taken a few steps into the tunnel when something made her stop - the guilt that someone might be trapped down there and in need of help. She reluctantly poked her head into the hall once more.

‘Hello?’ she called out, making sure that she stayed close enough to the tunnel to escape if she needed to.

‘Is...is anyone there?’

There was no answer. The sobbing continued. She crept forward, moving towards it. As she got nearer, she heard a faint dripping sound. It got louder as she reached the back of the hall. Voices began to appear in Mia’s head.

*What if you are being tricked? They hissed.*

*What if there’s a ghost waiting for you? What if the tunnel disappears, leaving you trapped down here forever?*

Oh stop it!’ ordered Mia, trying not to lose her courage.

But on they went, becoming harder and harder to ignore. They eventually disappeared when she realised that the sobbing seemed to be coming from the statue of the wizard. Approaching it, she was surprised to see that it was now cloaked in an eerie orange light, and that a mysterious pool of water was forming around its feet.

Stepping behind the statue, she saw the most amazing sight. Hovering in mid air, and somehow illuminated, was an old fashioned letter that seemed to be being held open by invisible hands. Mia stared at it. Yes, it was *definitely* sobbing. Floating above the letter was a small dark raincloud, pouring down and soaking it through. She stepped closer to read the words that were written on it. Although

the tiny raindrops were forming a mist around the parchment, she could just about make them out. It read:

*“Merlin,*

*We beg for your help. The witch, Morgana has taken the castle and Camelot. She has turned King Arthur and the court to stone. She now sits in the throne room, above those she has cursed.”*

Mia turned and looked at the statues.

‘Cursed?’ she panicked - it slowly dawning on her what the statues were.

She tilted her head towards the ceiling of the hall, swallowing nervously as she realised that she was in the dungeon of the most terrifying witch that she had ever read about. She continued reading.

“We, the knights of King Arthur’s Round Table, fought to stop her, but our swords and weapons were no match for her dragons of war, and dark magic.”

The further Mia read, the more the letter began to wail, and the more it began to wail, the faster the cloud above it rained. Soon, her clothes were soaking wet.

‘I am the only one of the order who escaped, but I am now alone and unable to fight her on my own. I need your help, Merlin. I pray that this letter finds you. I await your return to Camelot.’

The signature was from a familiar name. ‘SIR MORIEN!’ she exclaimed.

A feeling of dread washed over her, and she went back to look at the face of the wizard again.

‘Merlin!’ she cried. ‘Oh no!’

There he was, cursed! And now an exhibit in Morgana’s morbid museum. ‘There’s no way you can help now.’

As soon as Mia said these words, the raincloud turned the darkest grey and began to flash with lightening. She looked around to see whether Sir Morien was among the statues of the knights but she did not see him. A thunderstorm was now powering through the hall, and filling it with water.

She grabbed the soggy letter from the air, shouting to Merlin, ‘Don’t worry. I will find Sir Morien!’

Then she sprinted towards the tunnel. The gloomy raincloud followed her.

## 4

### *ODD JOB*

*In the forest you’ll find a warm gentle breeze  
that whistles and dances through the magical trees.*

At last the darkness of the tunnel gave way to daylight, and with relief, Mia scrambled out. She was shocked to find that she was no longer in front of the castle where she had gone in, but instead, in the middle of a forest.

She paused to wring the water from her clothes, wondering whether she had made a mistake and accidentally come down a second tunnel in the darkness. But she knew deep down that this was the

same one, and that it had weirdly changed direction.

She wanted to ask Stickney what to do but there was no sign of him. She was not even sure whether she was in the same part of the forest that she had left him in, and she started to panic that she was lost, and stuck in Camelot forever.

A warm breeze crossed her face and made her feel a bit better. Seeing a golden shard of sunlight piercing through the canopy of the trees, Mia stood under it and dried off her damp clothes. A movement next to her caught her eye, and she was surprised to see that the gloomy little cloud was still hovering above the damp letter in her hand. The fluffy mass had stopped raining, and was now pale grey, with a little glimmer of sunshine poking through the top of it.

Mia laid Sir Morien's the letter on the ground to dry, and smiled when the cloud went and sat beside it like a faithful companion. It then began to droop and look sad.

'Do you belong to Sir Morien?' she asked. 'Don't worry. I'll help you find him.'

The cloud instantly look more cheerful, and whizzed around excitedly, making Mia laugh. As soon as she was dry, she picked up the letter, and then chose a random direction to set off in. She soon regretted her decision. There were no easy paths for her to follow. The forest floor was covered in sharp brambles and fallen trees that she had to climb over. After a while she came across a clearing that sloped down towards a river, and she stopped to bathe her scratched arms, and to fill her water bottle.

She watched as the fast flowing water carried fallen leaves downstream and deposited them on the riverbank in front of her. A jagged red one glistened in the sunlight, catching her eye, and she reached into the water to fish it out. It looked like it had been painted with red glitter, making Mia think that there might be other children nearby. This filled her with hope.

'Come on!' she shouted to the cloud, which was playing in the river, soaking up the spray of the water. 'We've got to go.'

The cloud flew over to join her, and they began to make their way upstream. Mia would occasionally glance back over her shoulder to watch the cloud becoming whiter and fluffier as it bobbed along. After about half an hour, she noticed that it was starting to look pink. In fact, the entire light in the forest was changing. It was becoming redder. When she looked up she saw that the leaves on the trees were no longer vibrant autumnal oranges and yellows, but instead were unnatural-looking glittery golds and reds, just like the leaf she had found in the river.

Then, something dropped from the sky and landed by her feet with a *splutt!* Mia looked down and saw a large blob of red sparkling paint on the floor. A moment later a second blob joined it. She looked into the canopy of the tree and saw a man high up on a ladder. His head was hidden among the branches, and all that Mia could see were two scrawny legs sticking out from the bottom of his dark red tunic. He had on a pair of long, knee-length brown socks - one of which had fallen down around his pointed cloth shoe - and there was red glittery paint dripping from his arm and elbow.

'Is he... painting the leaves?' Mia whispered to the cloud.

The cloud floated up to the top of the tree then floated back down again. It nodded.

'That is so weird!' she said, 'Is he crazy?'

Another *splodge* of paint fell from above. Mia quickly stepped back to dodge it. 'Careful!' she shouted up.

The man jumped and bashed his head on a branch, letting out a cry of pain. 'O-Oh!... G-Good day!' he shouted down, rubbing his head. 'What a pleasant surprise.'

He began climbing down the ladder, and Mia saw that he had a scruffy white beard and hair, and that he had thick spectacles perched on either side of his nose.

‘I don’t get to see many people any more,’ he said, pleasantly. Everyone I know has been turned to st...’

He paused halfway down, and stared suspiciously at Mia’s clothes. ‘Goodness! Who might you be?’ he asked with a puzzled look on his face. ‘Hello. Err, I’m Mia,’ she replied, not wanting to have to explain to a medieval person that she had travelled through time.

The man suddenly noticed the letter in Mia’s hand, and the cloud floating above it. ‘H-how did you find that?’ he shuddered. ‘D-did the witch send you?’

‘I found it in a room of statues,’ Mia explained. ‘It belongs to Sir Morien, one of King Arthur’s knights. Do you know him?’

‘Sir Morien?’ he said.

The man’s face brightened at the mention of the knight’s name.

‘Yes, I know him well,’ he replied, tossing his paintbrush into a pot dangling from a branch, and jumping the last few rungs to the ground.

‘But you won’t find him around here. He fled during the battle of the inter-worlds.’

The smile disappeared from the man’s face. He looked behind him to check that no-one was listening, and then lowered his voice.

‘After the witch defeated the knights and turned her enemies into statues, Sir Morien ran away and never came back. There is only Morgana and me here now.’

Mia gulped. ‘And, who are you?’

The man bowed and his smile returned.

‘Oh, excuse me, Miss. My name is Job, but most people call me *Odd* Job because there’s nothing I can’t turn my hand to... at least, I think that’s why they call me that,’ he added thoughtfully. ‘I’m the castle caretaker...well, I was before the battle.’

He slowly wiped the paint from his fingers with a cloth before continuing.

‘The castle used to be so beautiful inside. The walls were painted golds and reds, and the windows were draped with silk fabrics. And there wasn’t a day went by when the great hall wasn’t filled with people and laughter... but when the witch came I was forced to abandon my duties and wait on her like a slave.’

‘Can you tell me about the battle of the inter worlds?’ asked Mia.

Odd Job sat down on a tree stump and beckoned her to come closer.

# THE PROMISE PRIZE

These entrants' work stood out for mention, alongside the winners and commended entrants.

ANNE ELICAÑO-SHIELDS

FARAI MAJARU

HABON JAMA

MAI NOMAN

MARIAM HAKIM

MELISSA ABRAHAM

NAZIMA PATHAN

PAMELA KANDEKORE

# ILLUSTRATION ENTRIES

## 1ST PRIZE WINNER



## SHIRLEY HOTTIER

Shirley is a French Edinburgh-based freelance illustrator and urban designer. She has a passion for promoting diversity as a way to celebrate her multiple cultures, through the warm, lively scenes and characters she crafts. With a dash of humour, she designs her illustrations as captures of the small moments that make life beautiful. She specialises in digital art, incorporating a rich palette of vivid and bold colours, soft sketches and textures.

[www.shirleyhottier.com](http://www.shirleyhottier.com)

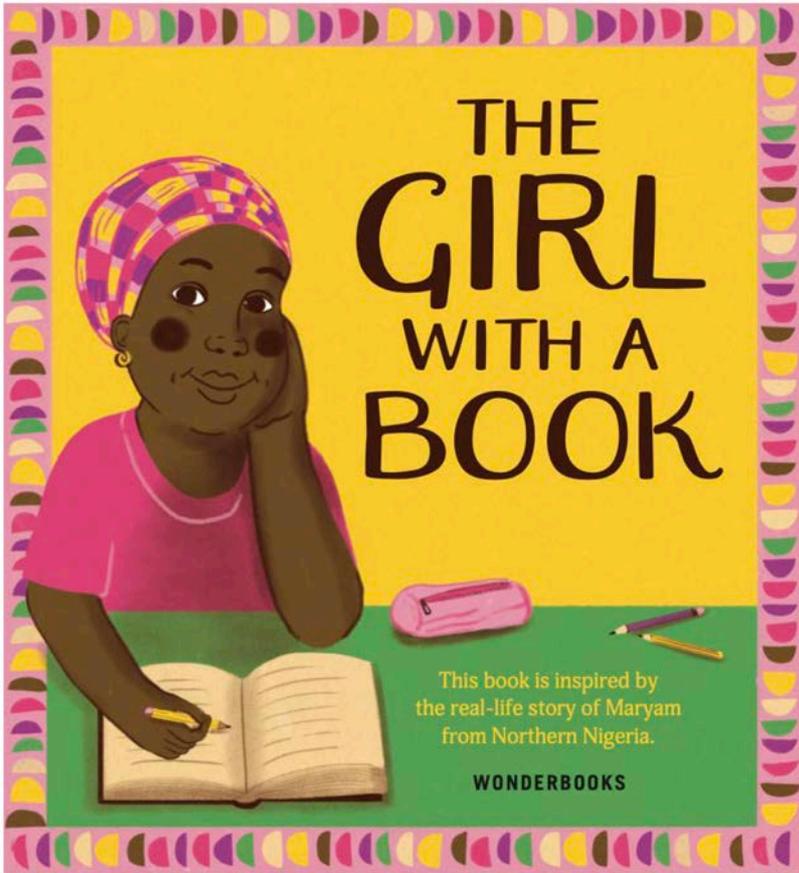
[www.instagram.com/shirley\\_hottier](http://www.instagram.com/shirley_hottier)

Contact details:

[hello@shirleyhottier.com](mailto:hello@shirleyhottier.com)

The judges said:

‘Shirley’s illustrations have a great sense of fun and energy. She combines colours effortlessly and her bold style leaps from the page. Her work has a beautiful, retro feel, along with joyful themes and characters. We can see her work being used in a variety of ways editorially, in books and in advertising. We know she’ll continue to produce amazing work.’













## 2ND PRIZE WINNER



## SAMAREH AZADI

Samareh Azadi was born and grew up in Iran and this has been a source of inspiration throughout her work. She is inspired by the geometrical shapes, textures, and patterns in Iranian art. As a Baha'i woman in Iran, Samareh experienced discrimination which has formed her feelings and fields of interest in creating picture books. Samareh has recently completed a Masters in Children's Book Illustration at Cambridge School of Art.

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[www.instagram.com/samareh.azadi/](http://www.instagram.com/samareh.azadi/)

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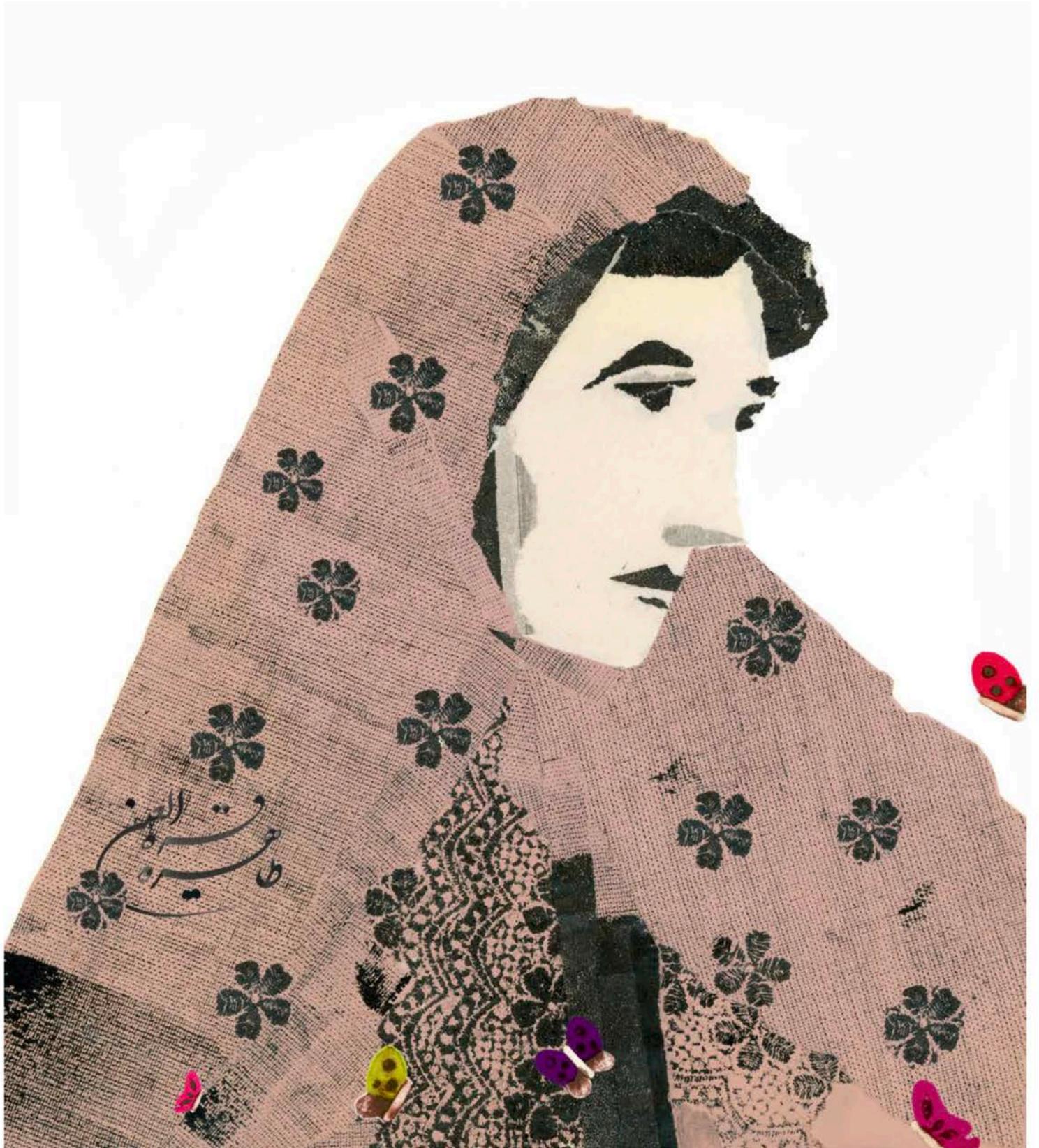
The judges said:

'Samareh's work has such a distinct style. Her restrained colour palette, her careful and considered use of detail, as well as her use of gorgeous printmaking techniques, adds a lovely texture and tactile quality to her work. We found Samareh's characters enchanting and endearing. We can't wait to see more of her work.'









## HIGHLY COMMENDED



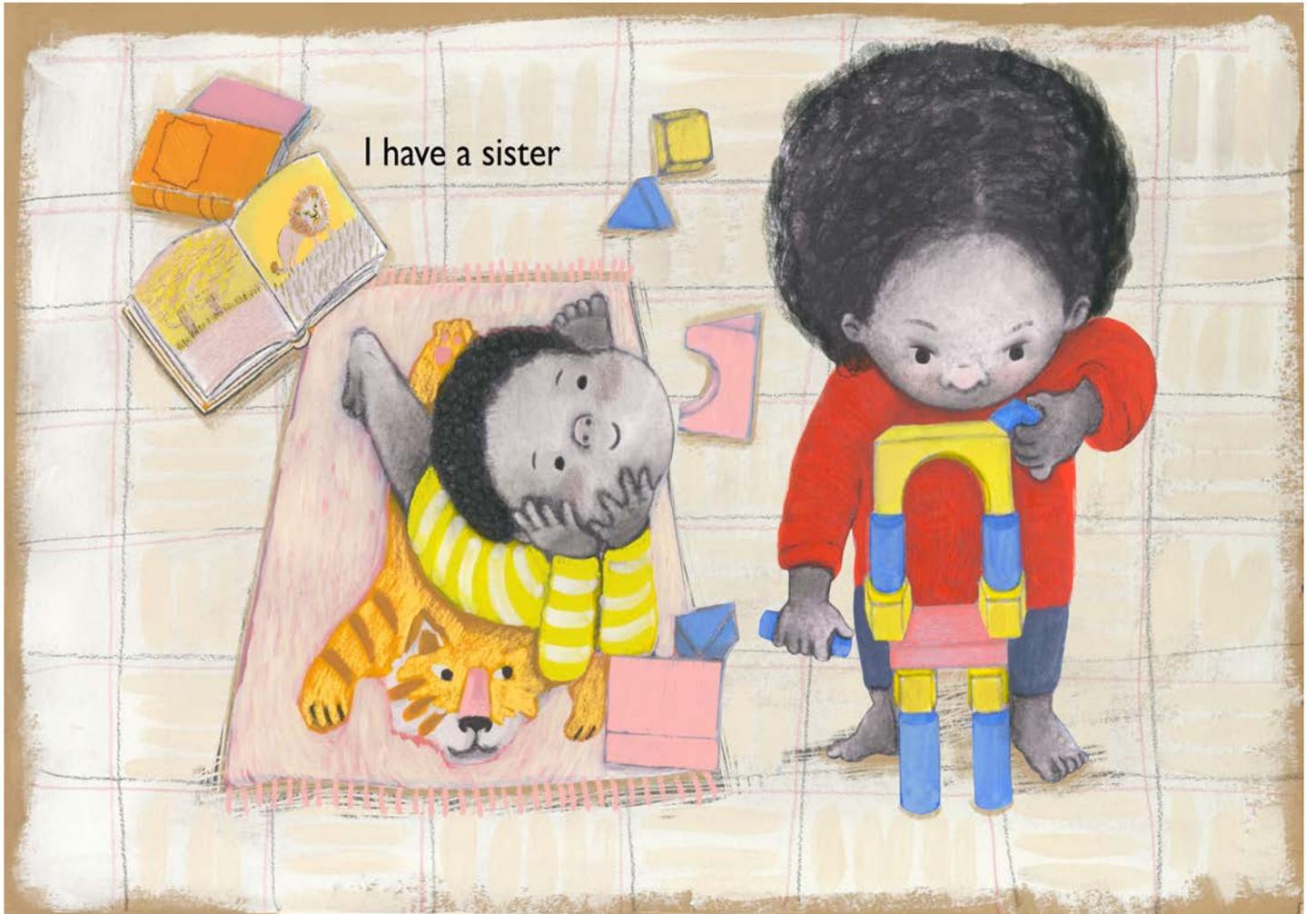
**ANGELA VIVES**

After many years of working in the advertising industry as a film editor, Angela completed an MA in Children's Book Illustration at Cambridge School of Art. Now she is doing what she is best at - watching the world and drawing stories. Angela loves working on stories that are about exploring the world. She works mainly with gouache and pencils. In 2019, Angela was a featured artist and shortlisted for the Cheltenham Illustration Award. In 2020, she was longlisted for the World Illustration Award and the PictureHooks Winter Competition winner.

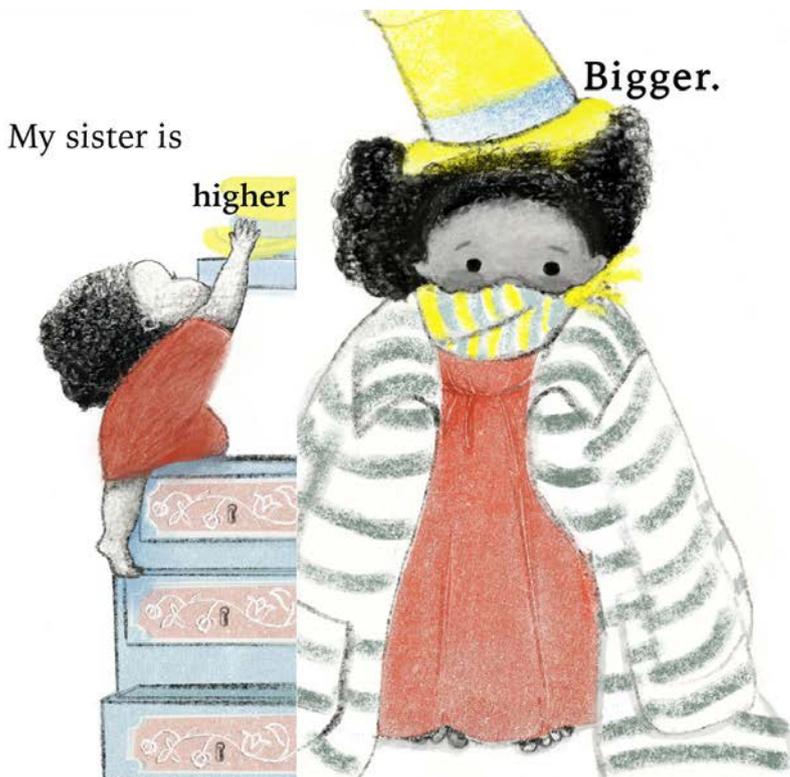
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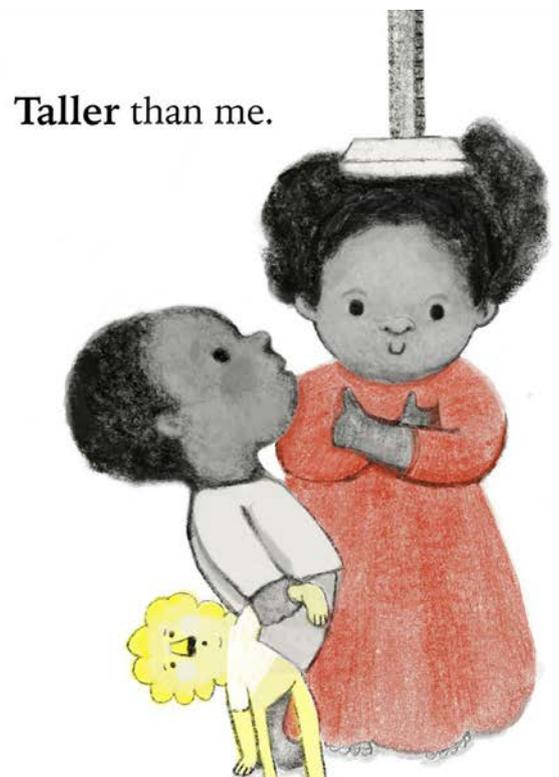
I have a sister



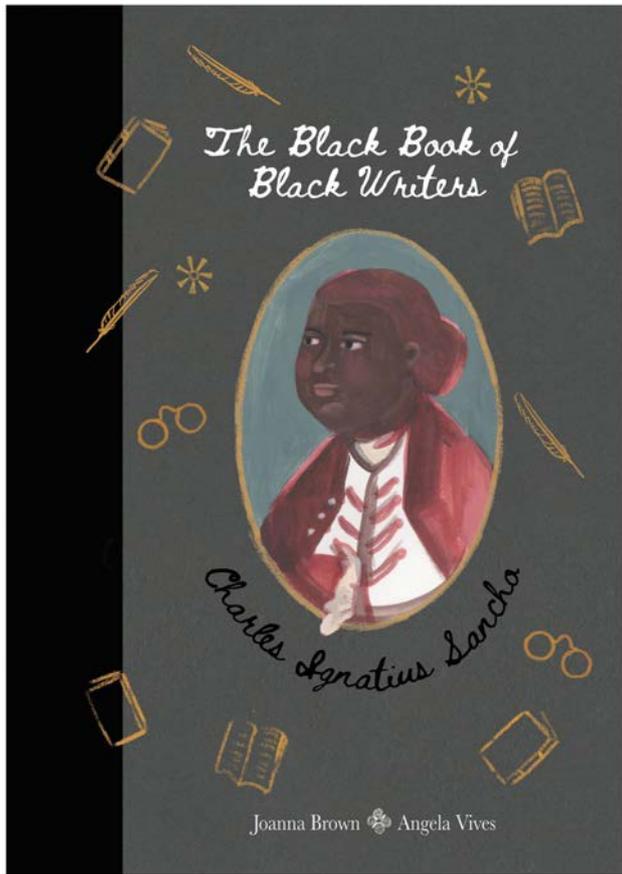
My sister is

higher

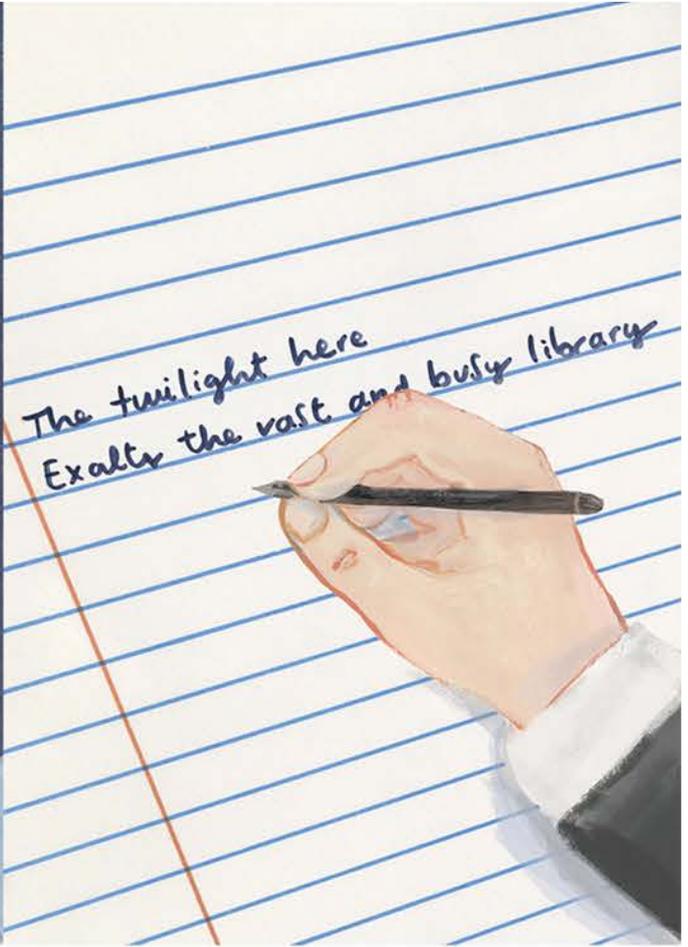
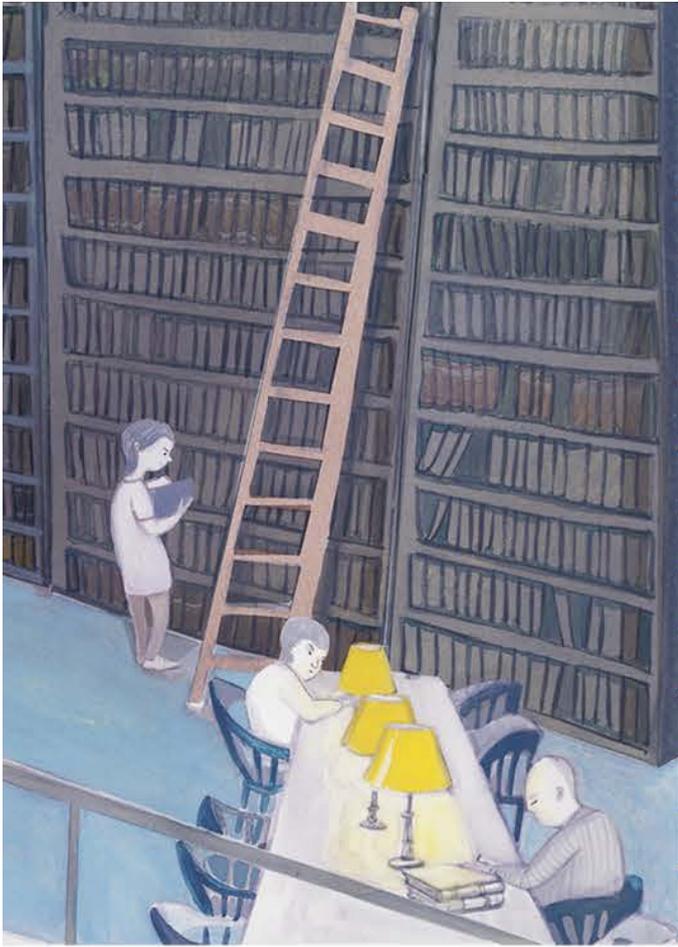
Bigger.



Taller than me.











## HIGHLY COMMENDED



**INDIA JOSEPH**

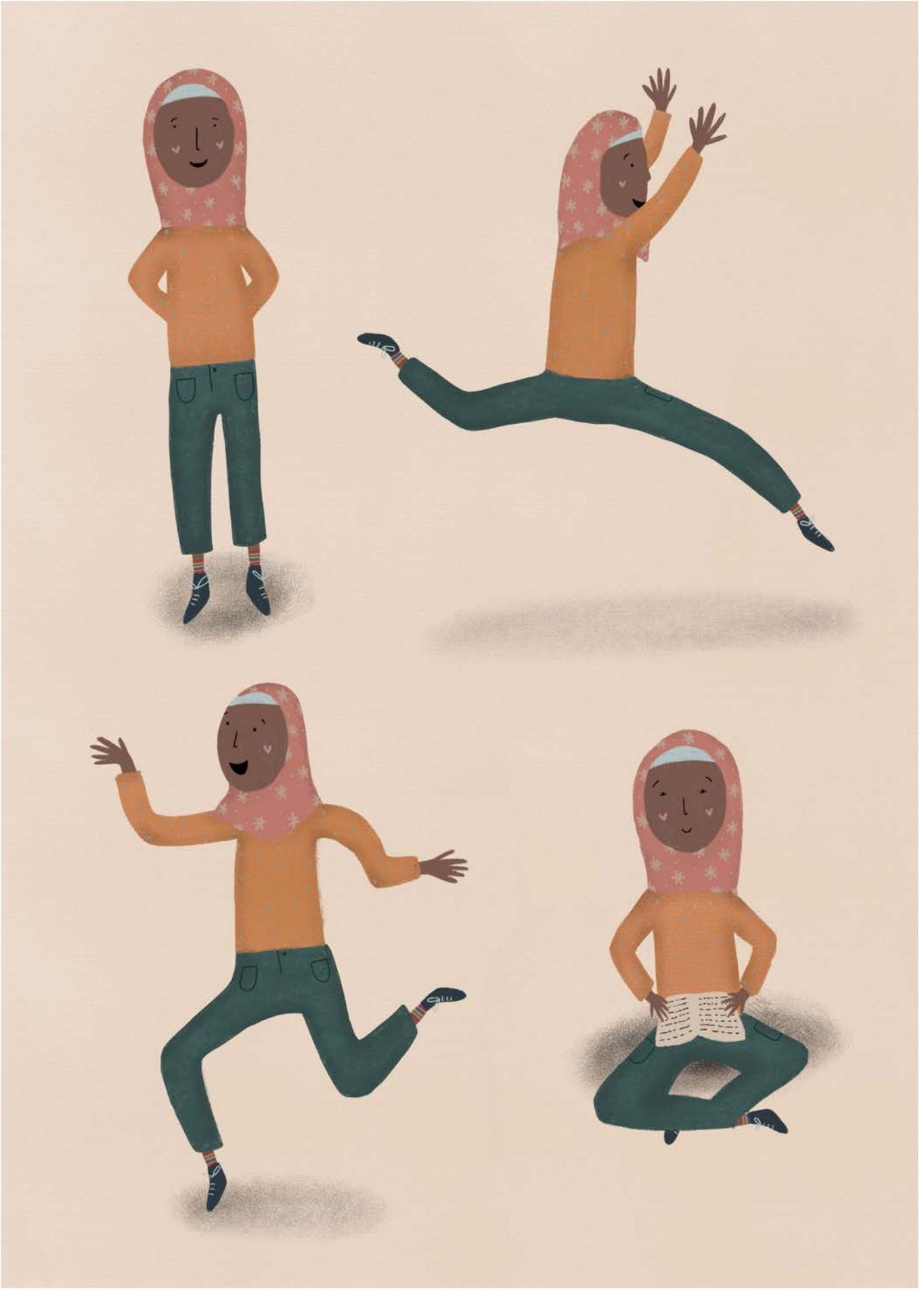
India Joseph is a 25 year old Mancunian, freelance illustrator, NHS worker and mum to daughter, Sunny. She runs her online small shop from home, selling art prints and original painting commissions. India is hugely inspired by nature and earthy colour palettes. Something that is really important to her is representing BAME people/characters in her illustrations. More of India's work can be seen on Instagram @moonandmothstudio or online at [www.moonandmothstudio.com](http://www.moonandmothstudio.com)

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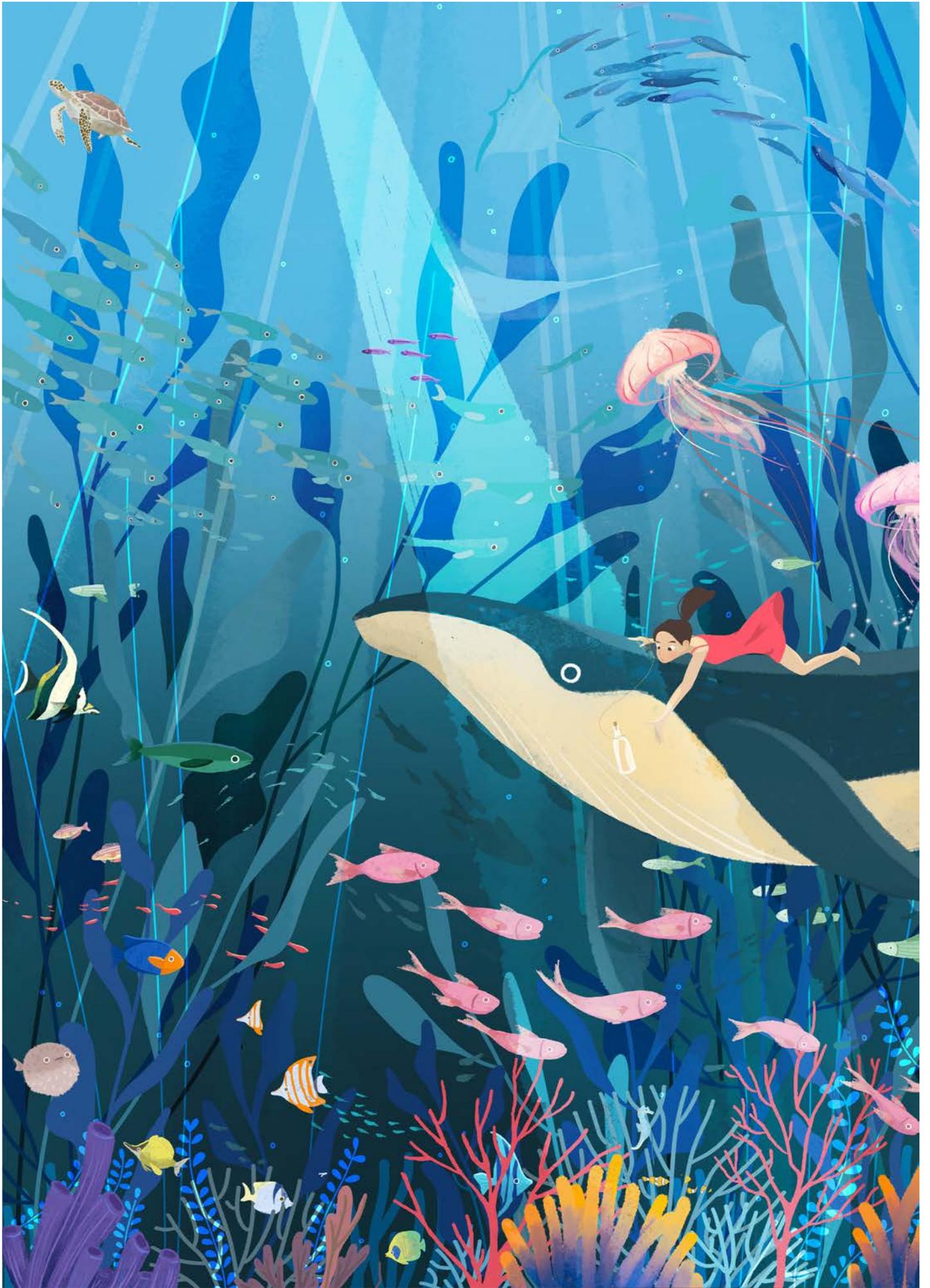
## HIGHLY COMMENDED



**JANET TAM**

Janet Tam is an architecture student from Newcastle University. She always enjoyed painting as a hobby and has developed a strong sense of colour and composition at a young age. She eventually ventured to digital illustrations after seeing some of her favourite illustrators on Instagram, where she discovered a new area in children's book publishing. Through participating in various design competitions, she is slowly but steadily developing her skills of storytelling in a more expressive manner, diverging from the lifelike oil on canvas she used to specialise in.

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## HIGHLY COMMENDED



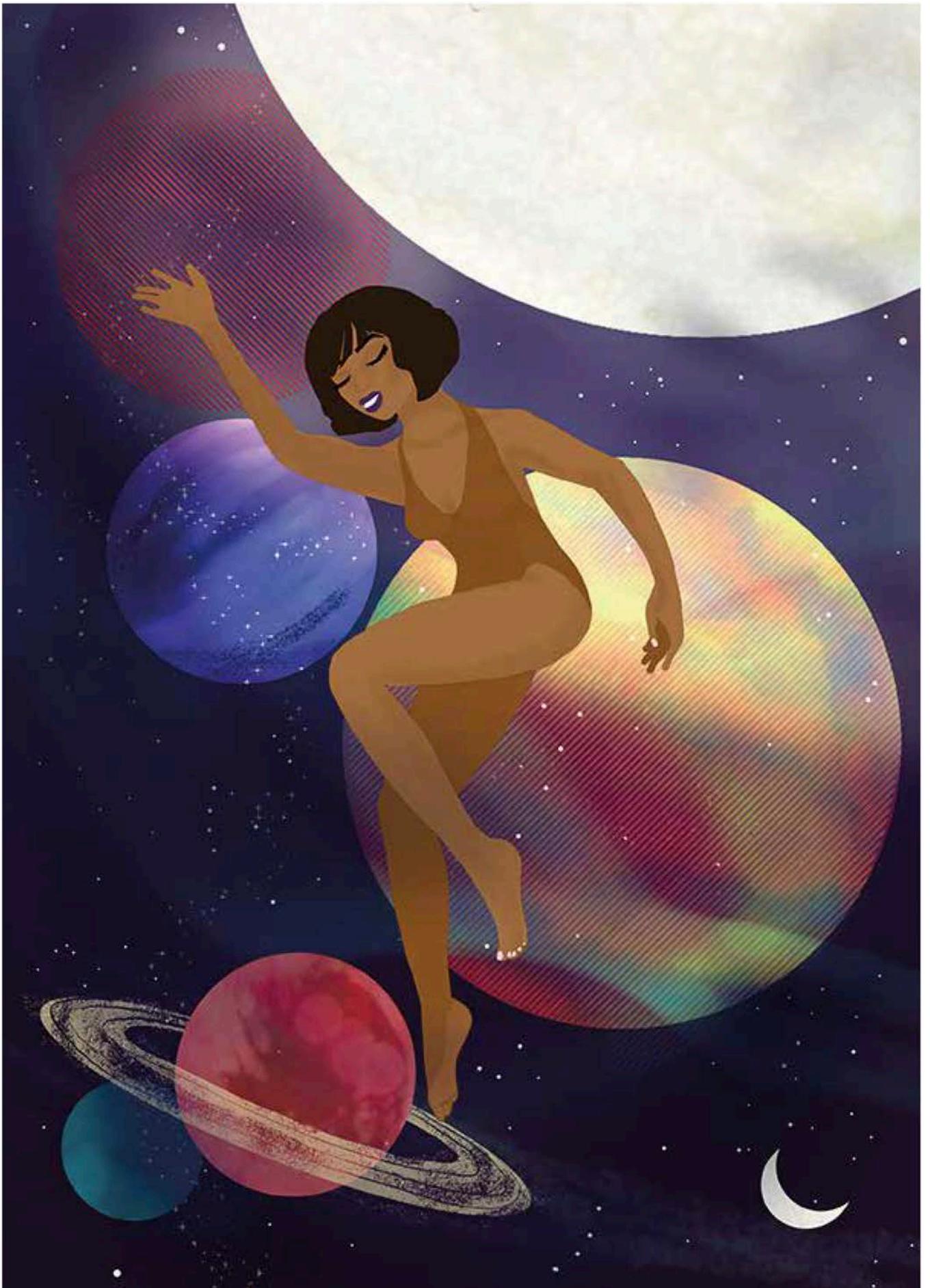
## NADINE WALKER

Nadine is a multi-disciplined artist and educator whose main practice is Illustration. Her work features both overt and subtle tones of female empowerment. At its core, her work is underpinned by themes connected to identity, storytelling with incidental moments of satire. Her first book entitled *Illustrated Jamaican Proverbs: Vol 1* was self-published in the summer of 2016.

<https://nadinewalker.london/>

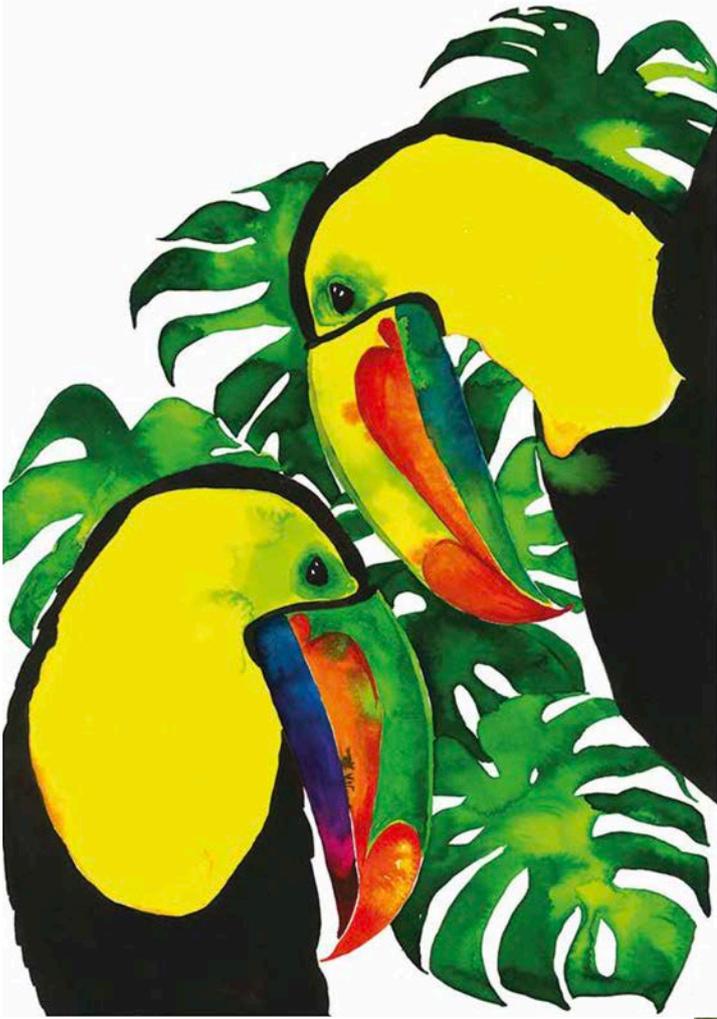
[www.instagram.com/nadinewalker.london/](http://www.instagram.com/nadinewalker.london/)

Contact details:  
[nadinewalker@live.com](mailto:nadinewalker@live.com)









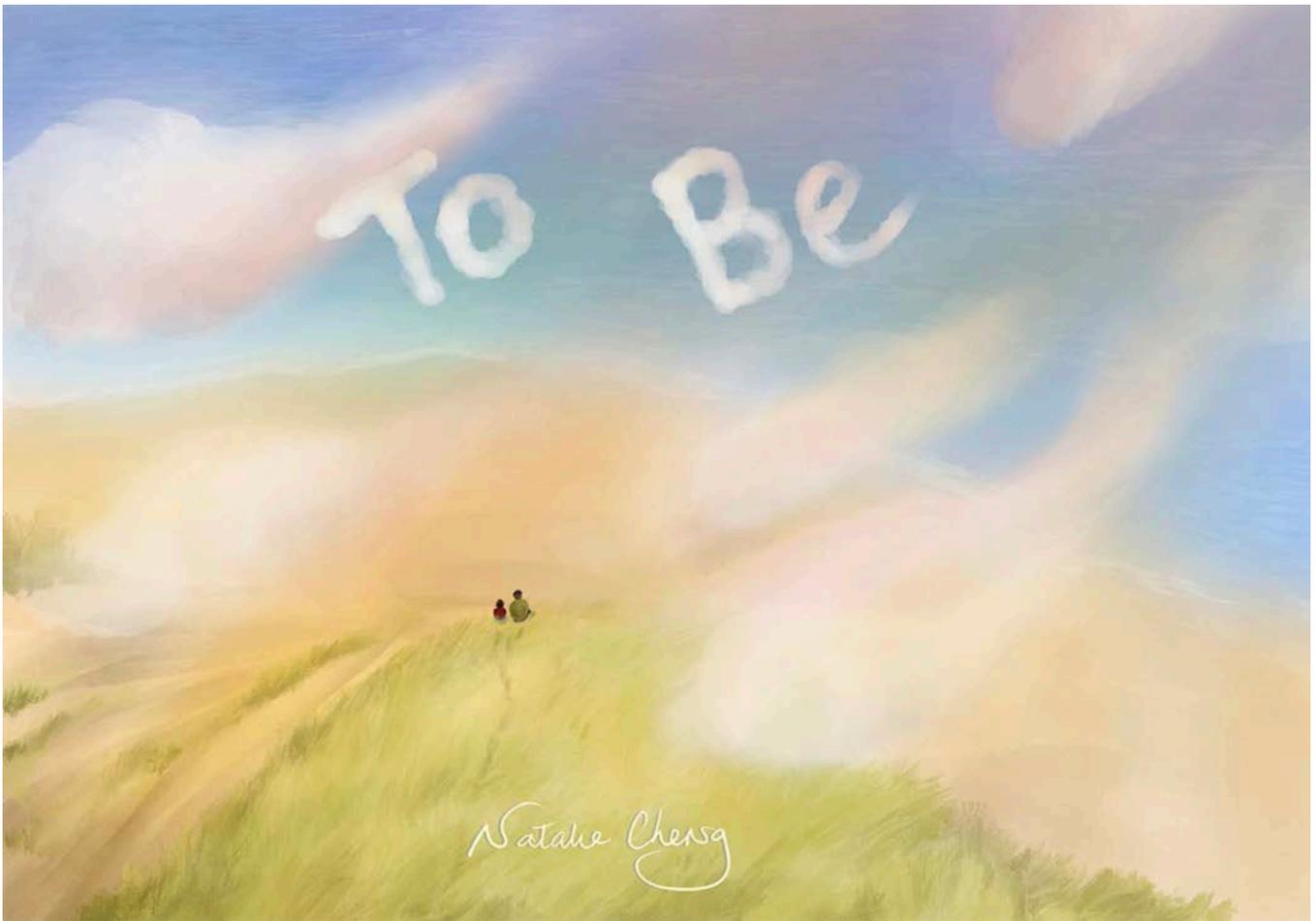
## HIGHLY COMMENDED



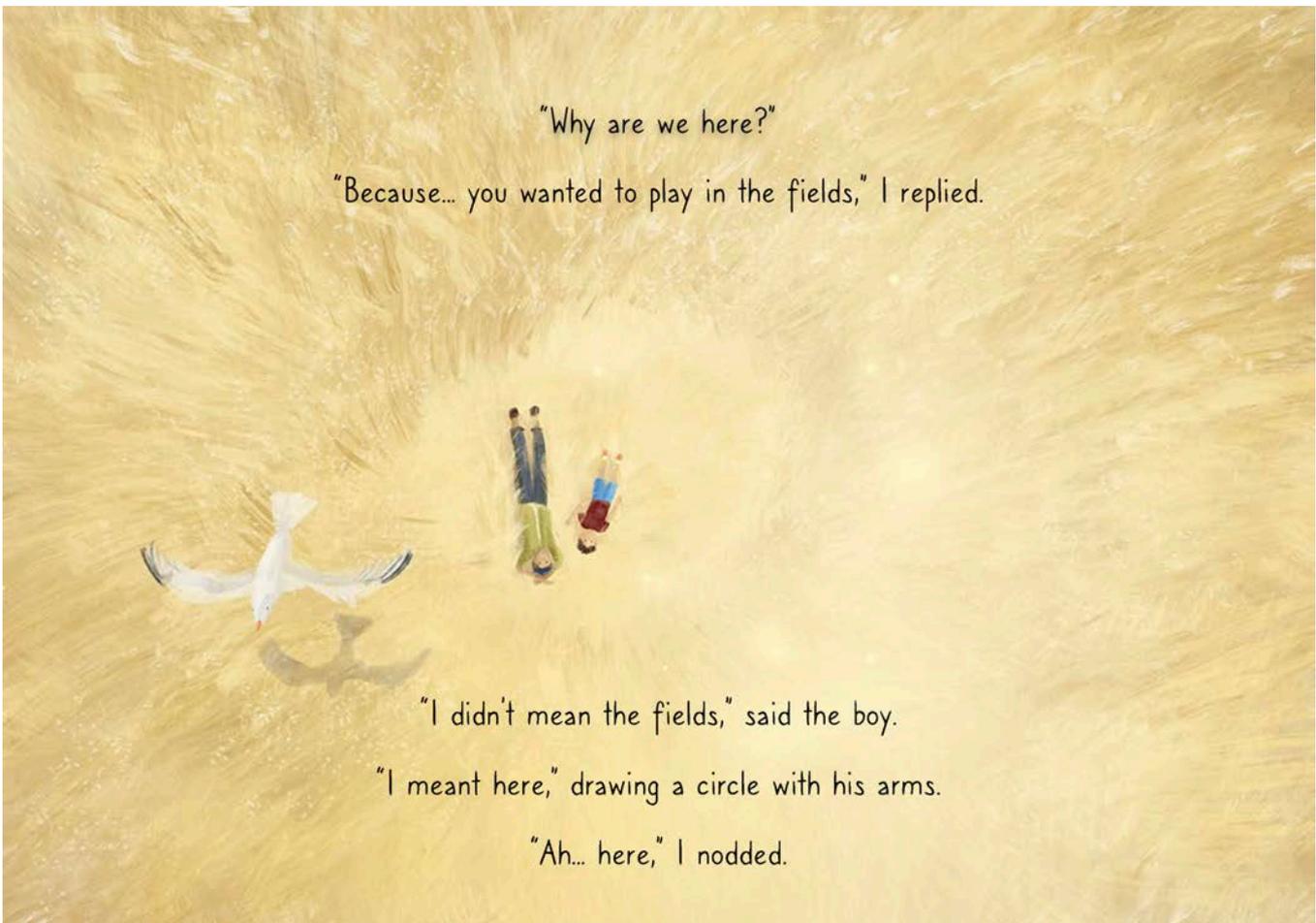
**NATALIE CHENG**

Natalie Cheng is an author-illustrator based in London. Having spent her childhood in Hong Kong, she has always sought to venture out to wilder places. She loves to ponder about the universe, from its beauty to its mysteries. Be it in the form of pictures, stories or music, Cheng shares her musings in a style that bares open her sentimentality and whimsicality. She looks up to storytellers like Oliver Jeffers, Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein, who leave their readers with a larger vision of life. Here you'll find extracts from her picture book, *To Be*. Cheng has also written and illustrated the picture books, *Stardust* and *Jacobi*.

Contact details:  
[ncheng.studio@gmail.com](mailto:ncheng.studio@gmail.com)



Natalie Cheng



"Why are we here?"

"Because... you wanted to play in the fields," I replied.

"I didn't mean the fields," said the boy.

"I meant here," drawing a circle with his arms.

"Ah... here," I nodded.

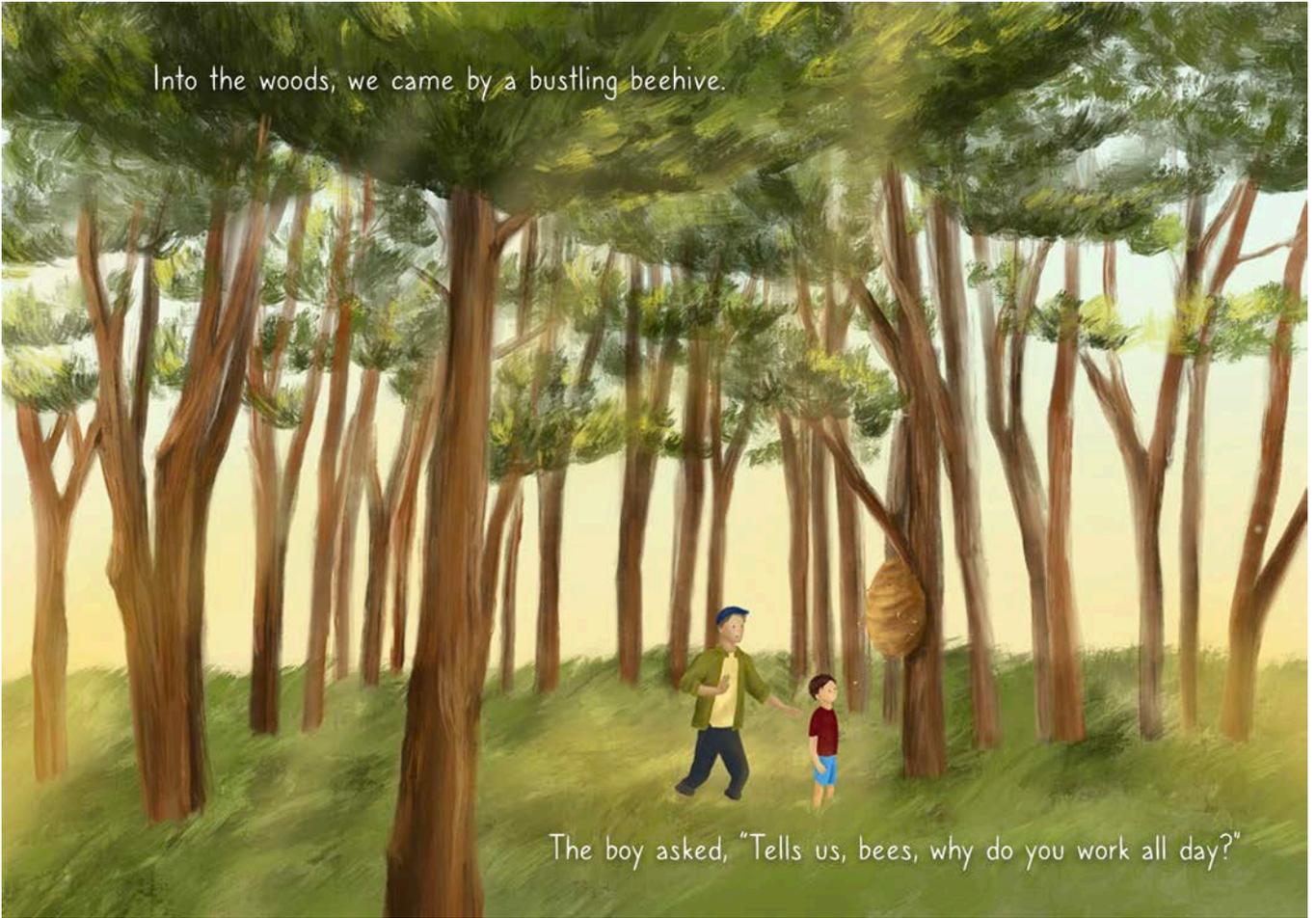


The wolf replied, "To talk to Luna, the one I love."

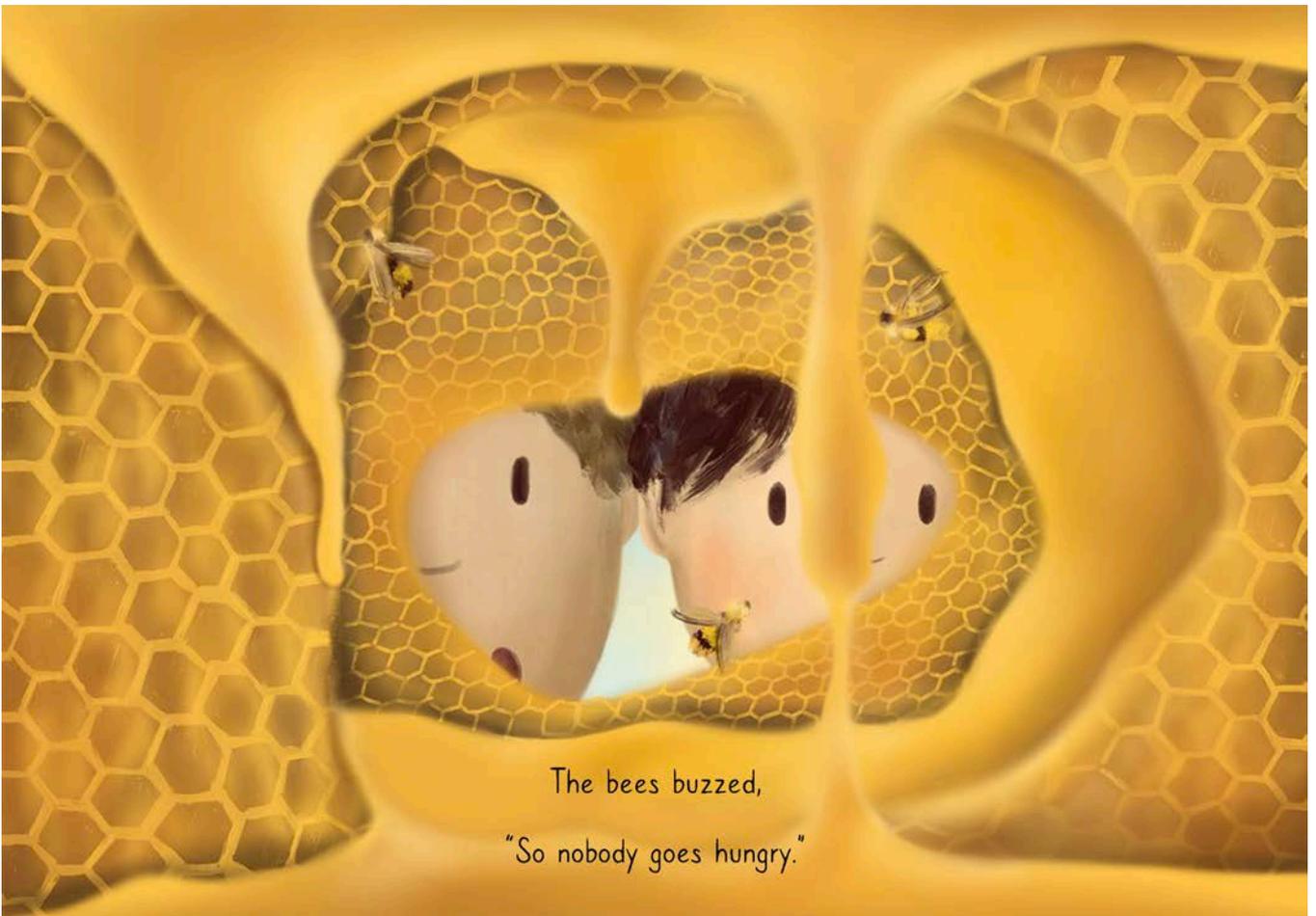


"To bloom and grow!"

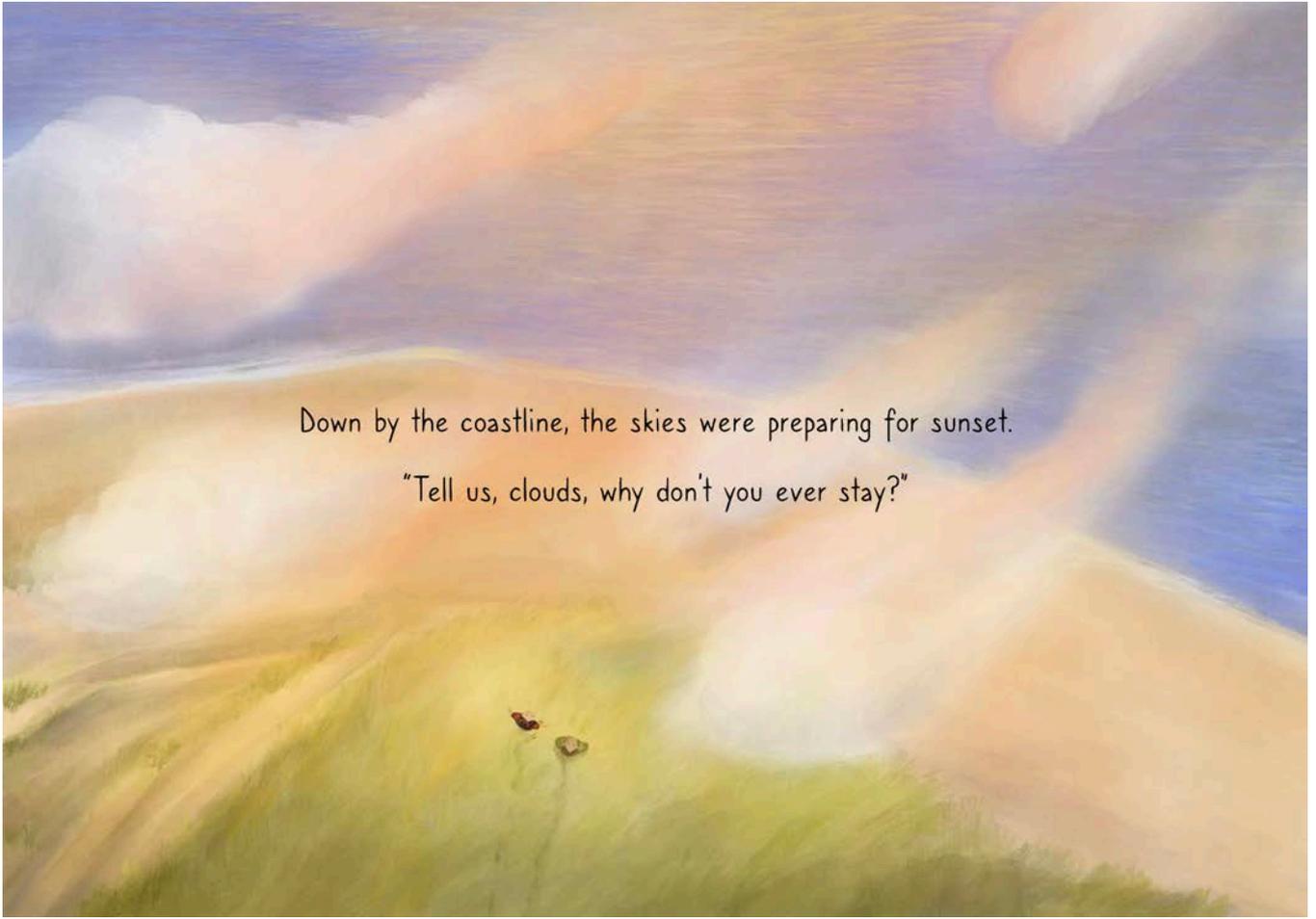
Into the woods, we came by a bustling beehive.



The boy asked, "Tells us, bees, why do you work all day?"



The bees buzzed,  
"So nobody goes hungry."



## HIGHLY COMMENDED



**ZHI LING LEE**

Zhi Ling Lee is an illustrator from Malaysia who now calls London home. Her aesthetic is driven by her love of richly-textured illustrations with a strong narrative component. With a background in software engineering, Zhi Ling brings a unique perspective to her creative projects – a duality wherein whimsical and playful illustrations are anchored on thoughtful concepts and solid design principles. An avid reader since childhood, she is excited to explore the realm of children’s literature as a visual storyteller.

She is represented by the Bright Agency.

<https://curiouszhi.com/>

[www.instagram.com/curiouszhi/](http://www.instagram.com/curiouszhi/)

Contact details:  
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## Chapter 1

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet.

Phasellus vestibulum varius mauri sit amet dictum.

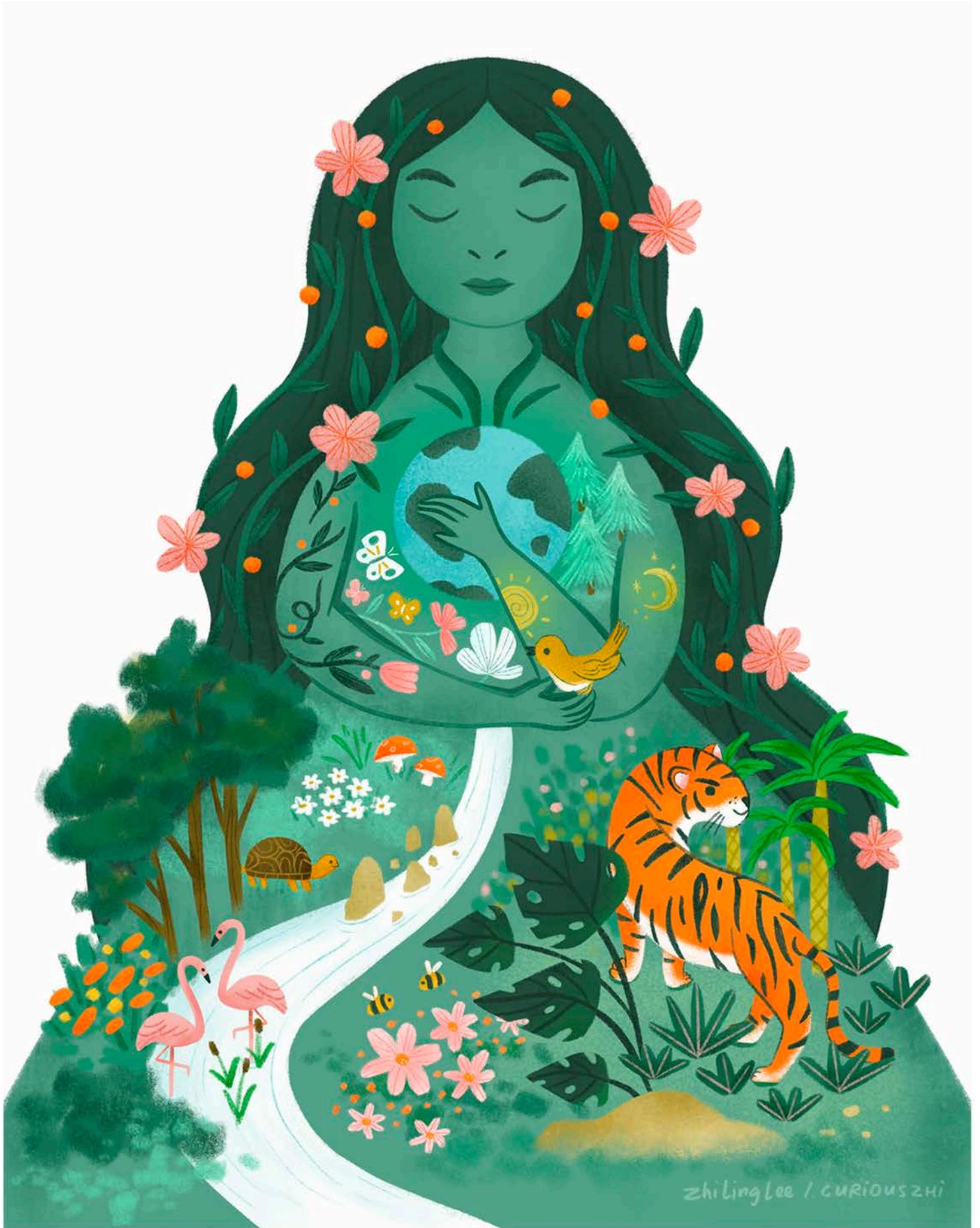
Interdum et malesuada fames ac ante ipsum primis in faucibus.

Fusce vel convallis metus. Mauris id ultricies ex. Quisque eros metus, accumsan in quam.











## COMMENDED



**AFUA BEDIAKO**

Afua is a Black British (Ghanaian) artist/illustrator from North London. Most of the art work she creates is digital. From a young age, drawing has always been a huge passion of hers, with her art style having a large emphasis on being illustrative, colourful, magical and playful. She uses her childhood, movies and books she has read and her heritage as her biggest inspirations. She has been shortlisted in both the text and illustration categories of the FAB Prize.

[www.afuasdrawingcorner.com](http://www.afuasdrawingcorner.com)

[www.instagram.com/afuasdrawingcorner/](http://www.instagram.com/afuasdrawingcorner/)

Contact details:  
[afuadraws@outlook.com](mailto:afuadraws@outlook.com)









## COMMENDED



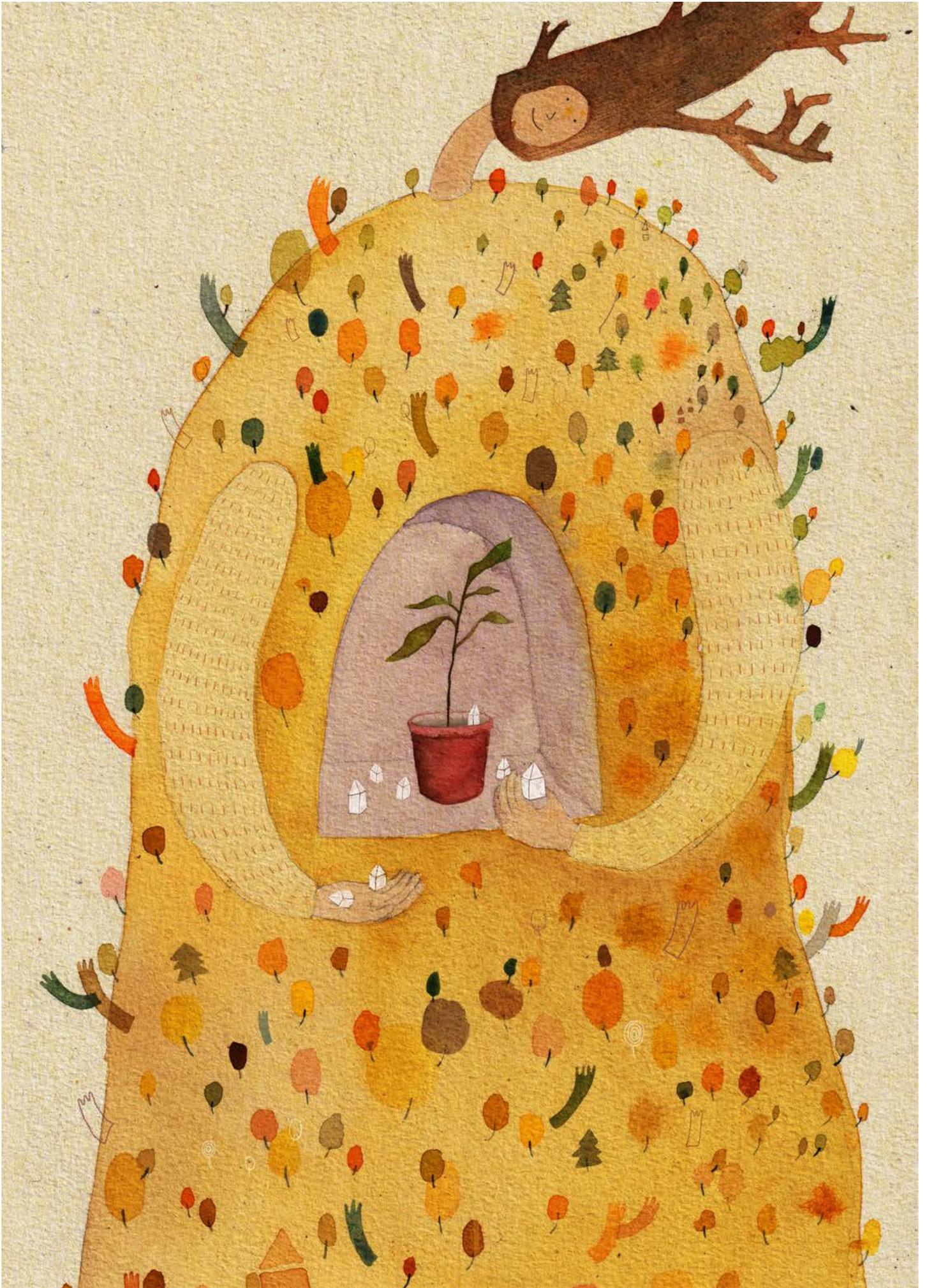
**EDWINA KUNG**

Edwina was born in Hong Kong and is based in Nottingham, UK. Her work mainly focuses on body memories and how we respond to our surroundings to create a meaningful relationship with places. Her illustrations are inspired by personal experiences, collective memories, urban landscapes and sound drawings. She mainly works with watercolour and mixed media.

[www.edwinakung.com](http://www.edwinakung.com)

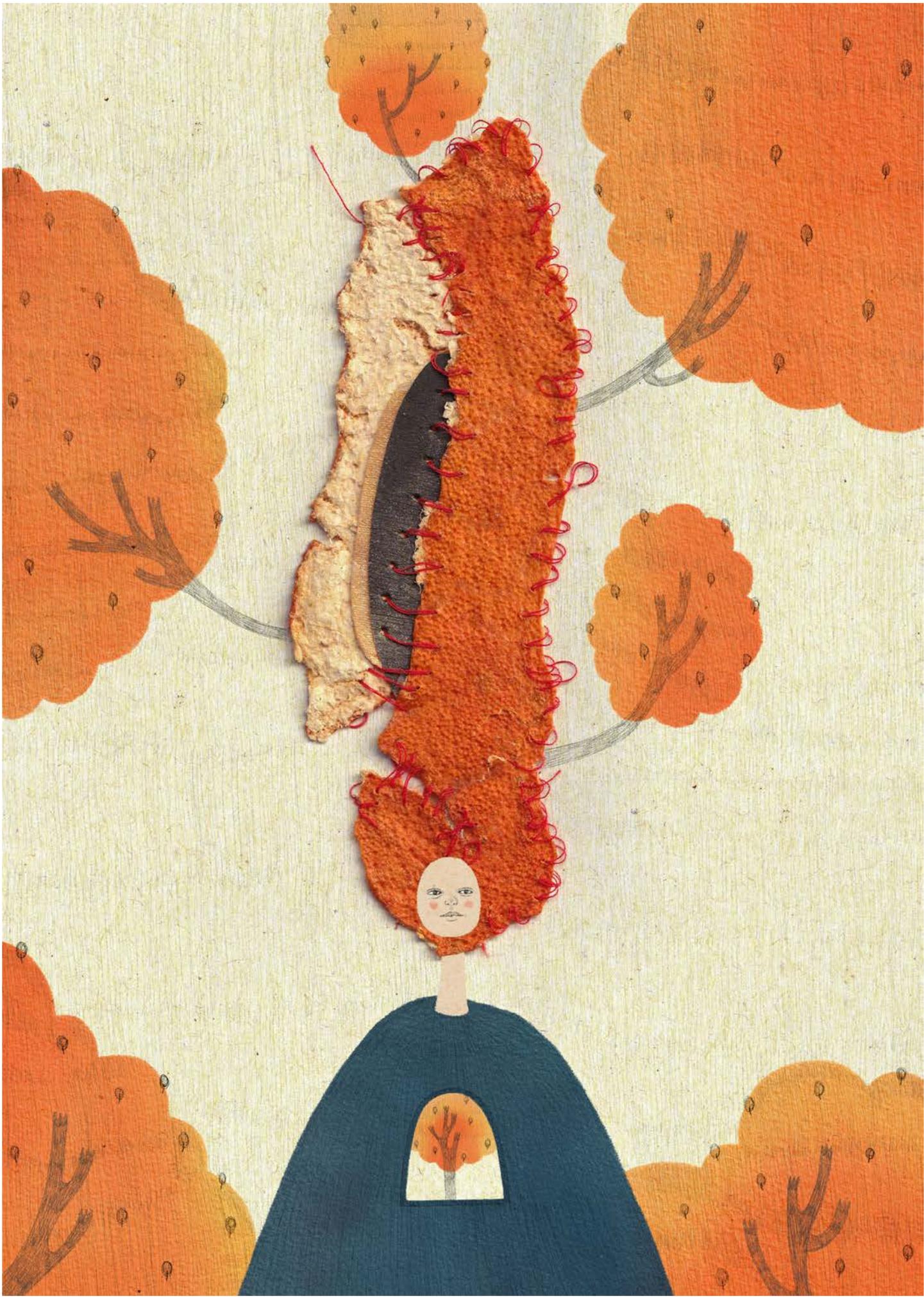
[www.instagram.com/edwinakung/](http://www.instagram.com/edwinakung/)

Contact details:  
[edwinakung@gmail.com](mailto:edwinakung@gmail.com)











## COMMENDED



## SARA DI FAGANDINI

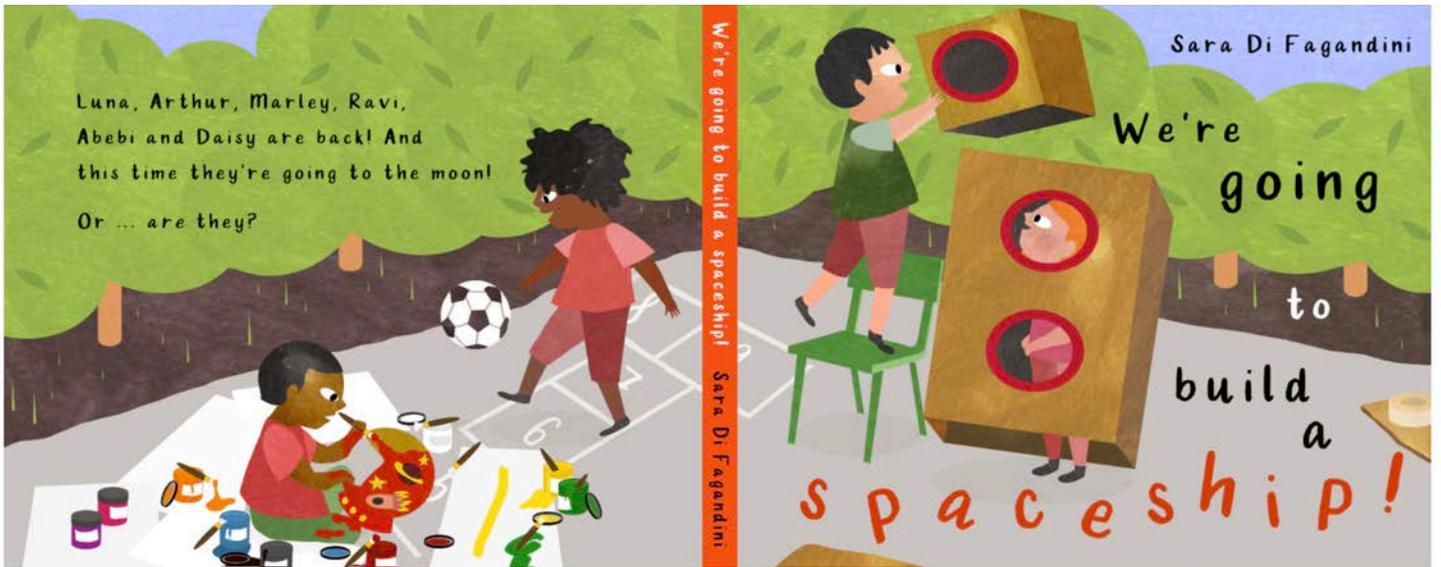
Sara is a Malaysian and Irish author/illustrator based in London. In 2020 she graduated with Merit from the MA in Children's Book Illustration at Cambridge School of Art, where she developed a method of creating images using digital collage. She loves the tonal challenges of working in black-and-white, but also enjoys creating colour spreads for picture books.

She creates stories and images for a range of age groups, from picture books through to YA, and earlier this year was delighted to be selected for the inaugural Writing for Children programme with HarperCollins Author Academy. Her agent is Chloe Seager at the Madeleine Milburn Literary, TV and Film Agency.

[www.saradifagandini.co.uk](http://www.saradifagandini.co.uk)

[www.instagram.com/sara\\_di\\_fagandini/](http://www.instagram.com/sara_di_fagandini/)

Contact details:  
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"Where to next?" Smij asked Badge.



# IS YOUR TEACHER A MONSTEROLOGIST?

(By Zora Jessup. Drawings by Gordon Danso.)

Hello everyone! When we were trying to find Atticus, our teacher, Ms. Sutton, had us both completely fooled! We thought she was the kidnapper, but really she was on our side all along. It made us wonder how many other monsterologists there are out there working as teachers, so we thought we'd write a list to help you work out if your teacher is a monsterologist, too!

## SCARY, STRICT EXPRESSION!

Gordon thinks that Ms. Sutton's so grumpy and strict with us all the time because if she wasn't we might guess who she really is.

## SECRET SOCIETY OF MONSTEROLOGISTS BADGE

This special badge shows that you are a monsterologist. Mum and Dad both have one, too.

## DARK CLOTHES

Ms. Sutton always wears dark clothes, probably so she can blend in and easily hide if she needs to.

## WEIRD LOOKING BACKPACKS, SCARVES, HATS AND OTHER ACCESSORIES

Ms. Sutton's monster, Greggles, pretends to be her backpack when she's at school.

## BIG, UGLY SHOES

Monsterologists have to wear sturdy shoes so they can chase after (and occasionally run away from) monsters



1452

LEONARDO IS BORN IN ANCHIANO, TWO MILES FROM VINCI.

1466

LEONARDO MOVES TO FLORENCE TO WORK AS AN APPRENTICE IN THE WORKSHOP OF ANDREA DEL VERROCCHIO.

VERROCCHIO WAS A HARD MASTER! BUT HE WAS SO IMPRESSED BY HIS YOUNG APPRENTICE THAT AFTER SEEING LEONARDO'S WORK HE NEVER PAINTED AGAIN.



## COMMENDED

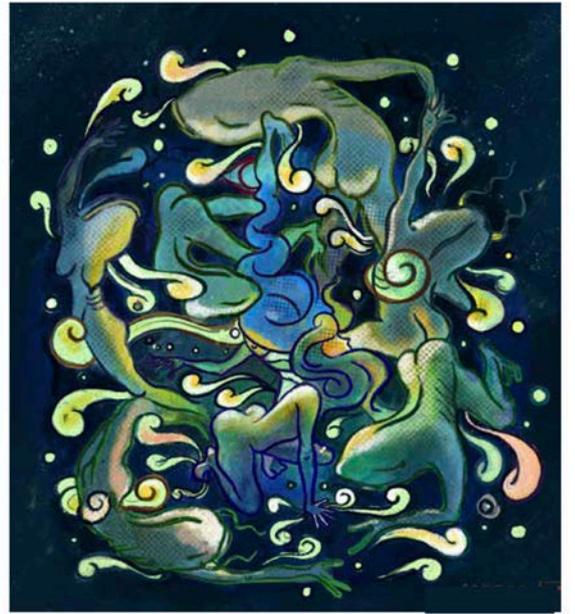


**Soumya Basnet**

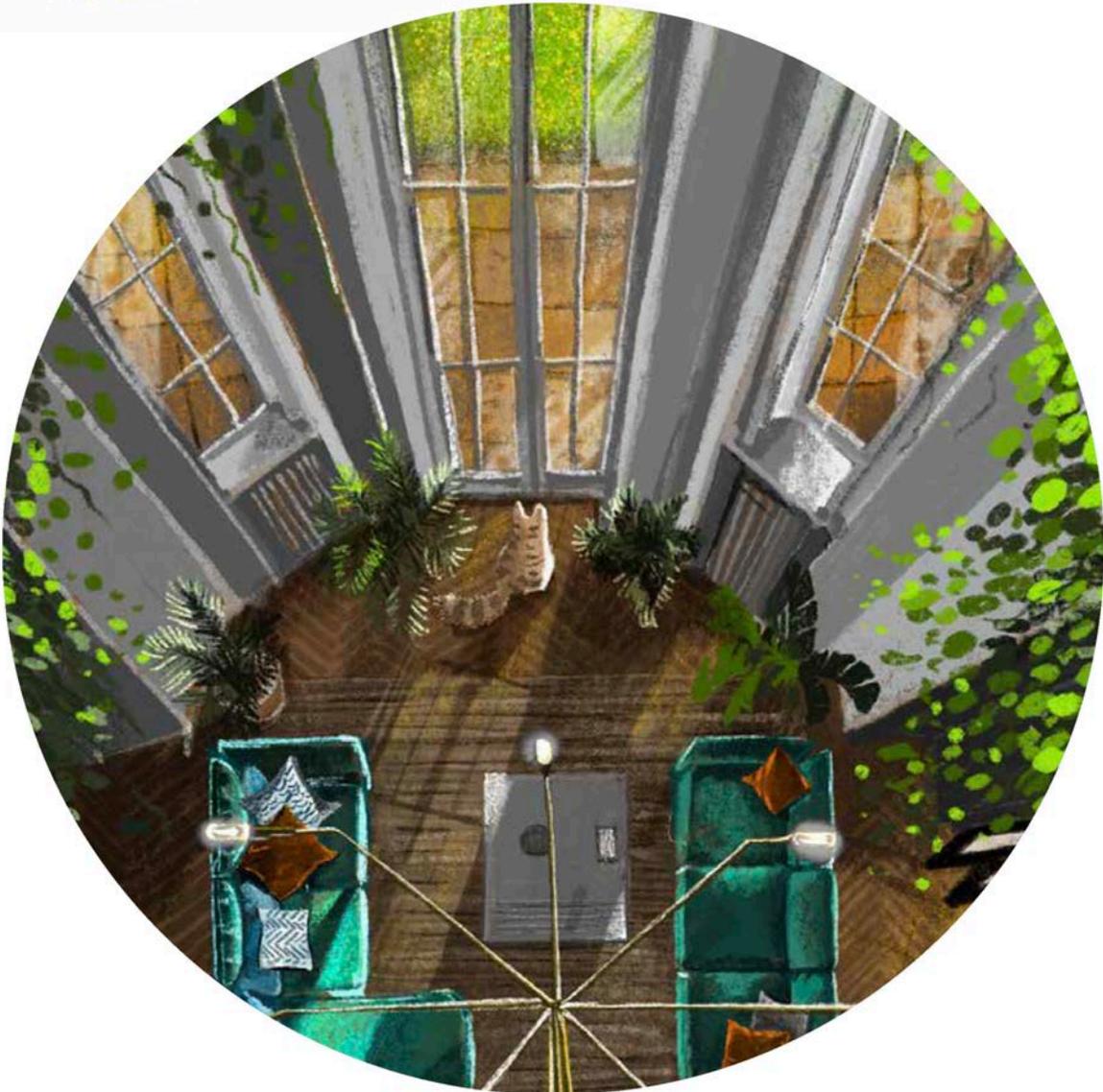
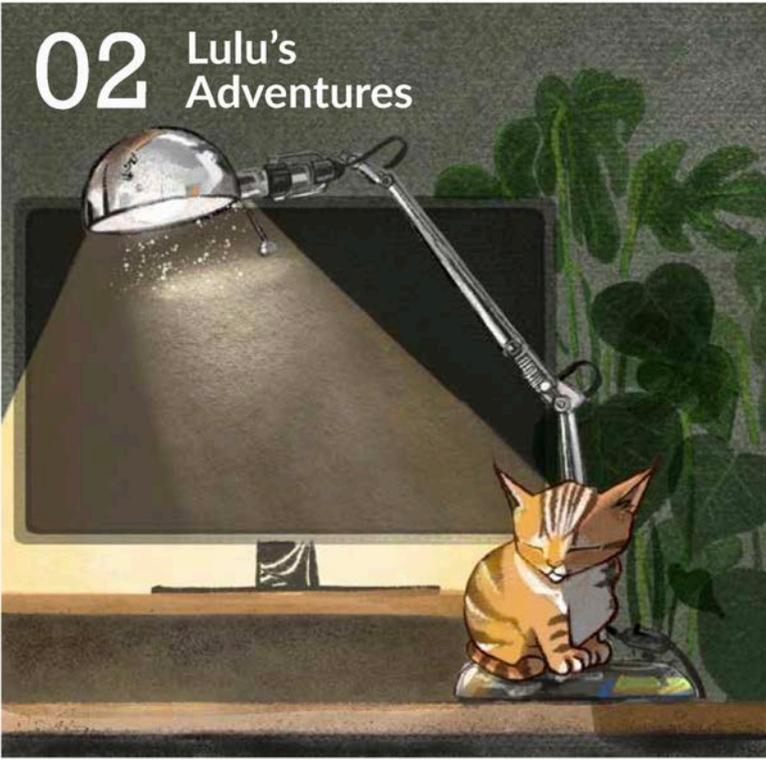
Soumya is a designer and illustrator based in West Yorkshire, creating bright playful illustrations using watercolour and ink. The illustrations are inspired by nature and narrate warm joyful stories of childhood, animals and travels. Every artwork is treated as a window of escape for the viewers, hoping to remind them of beautiful memories from the past or inspire them to create new ones in the future. A realisation of how joy is in simple moments and actions, something that perhaps is overlooked these days.

<https://soumyabasnet.com/>

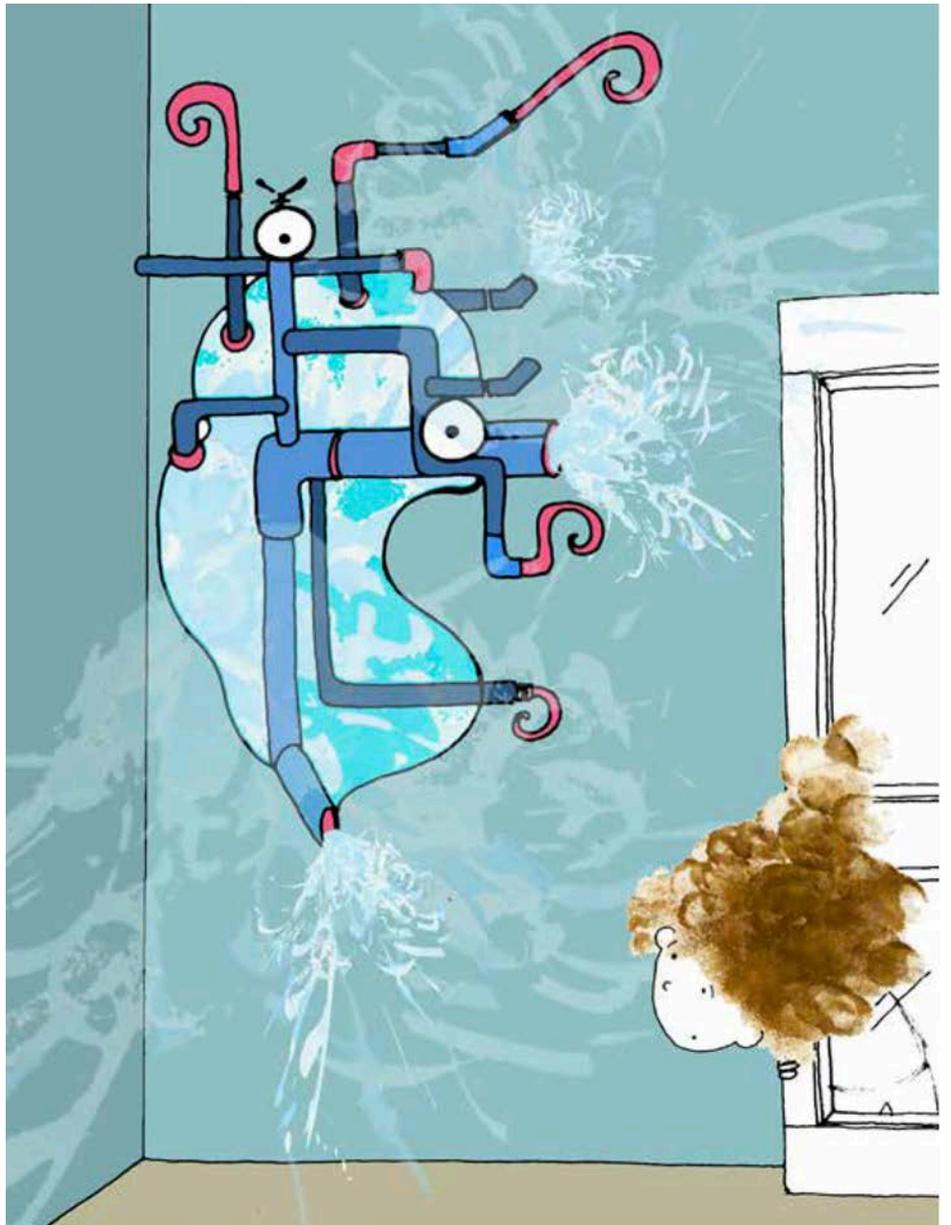
Contact details:  
[soumyabasnet6@gmail.com](mailto:soumyabasnet6@gmail.com)

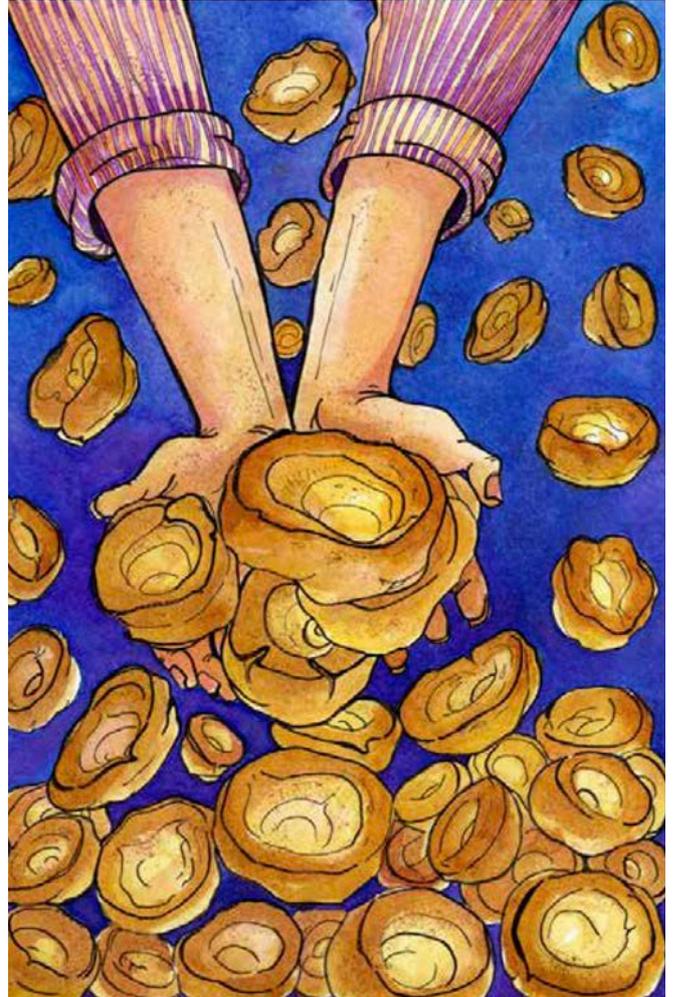


# 02 Lulu's Adventures



D R I P . D R O P . . .





## COMMENDED



## TZU LO CHIU

Tzu Lo Chiu is an illustrator based in Edinburgh and Taiwan. The style of her work is warm and touching. Through her works, people can always receive a happy message. Her inspirations are based on her life. Most of her works take a critical view of relationships, social and cultural issues. She hopes she can raise public awareness of the issues that are worth discussing in our lives.

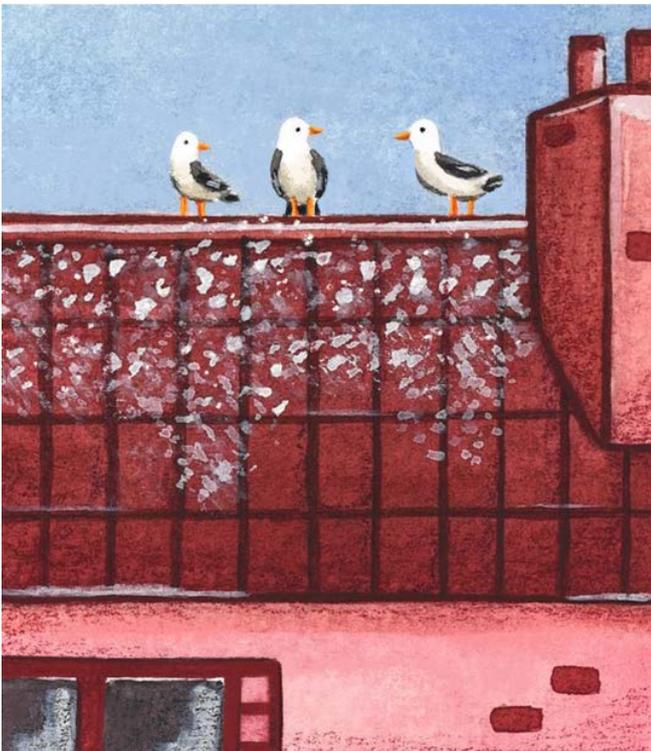
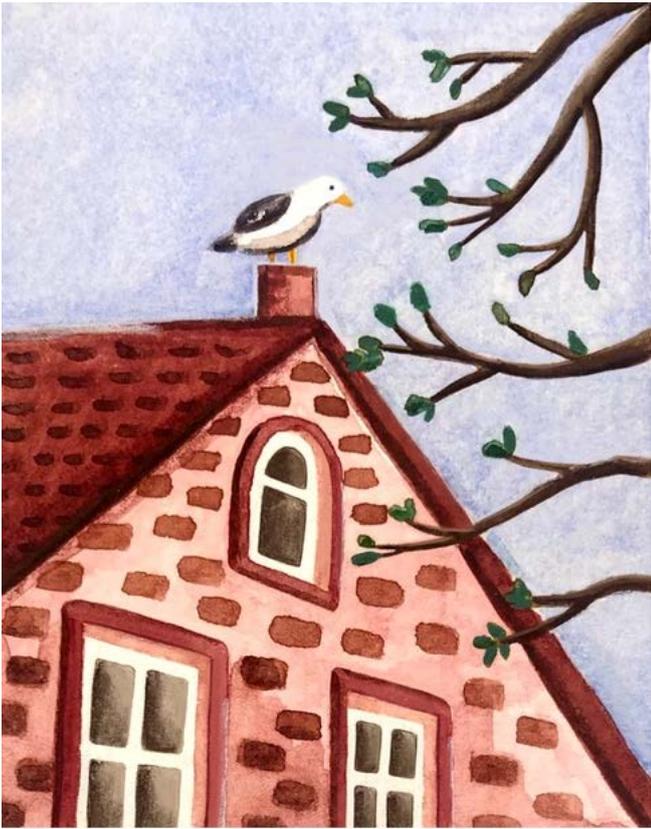
<https://www.rachiu.art/>

[www.instagram.com/rachiu\\_art/](http://www.instagram.com/rachiu_art/)

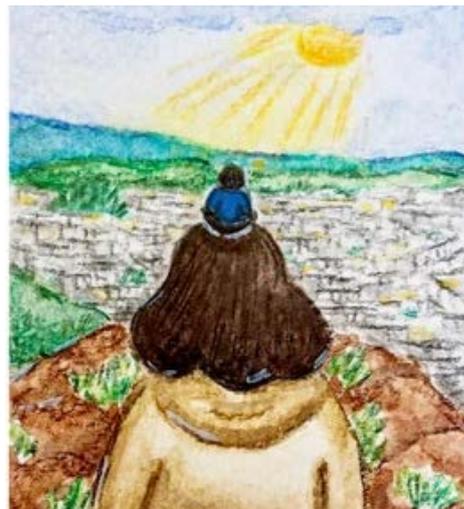
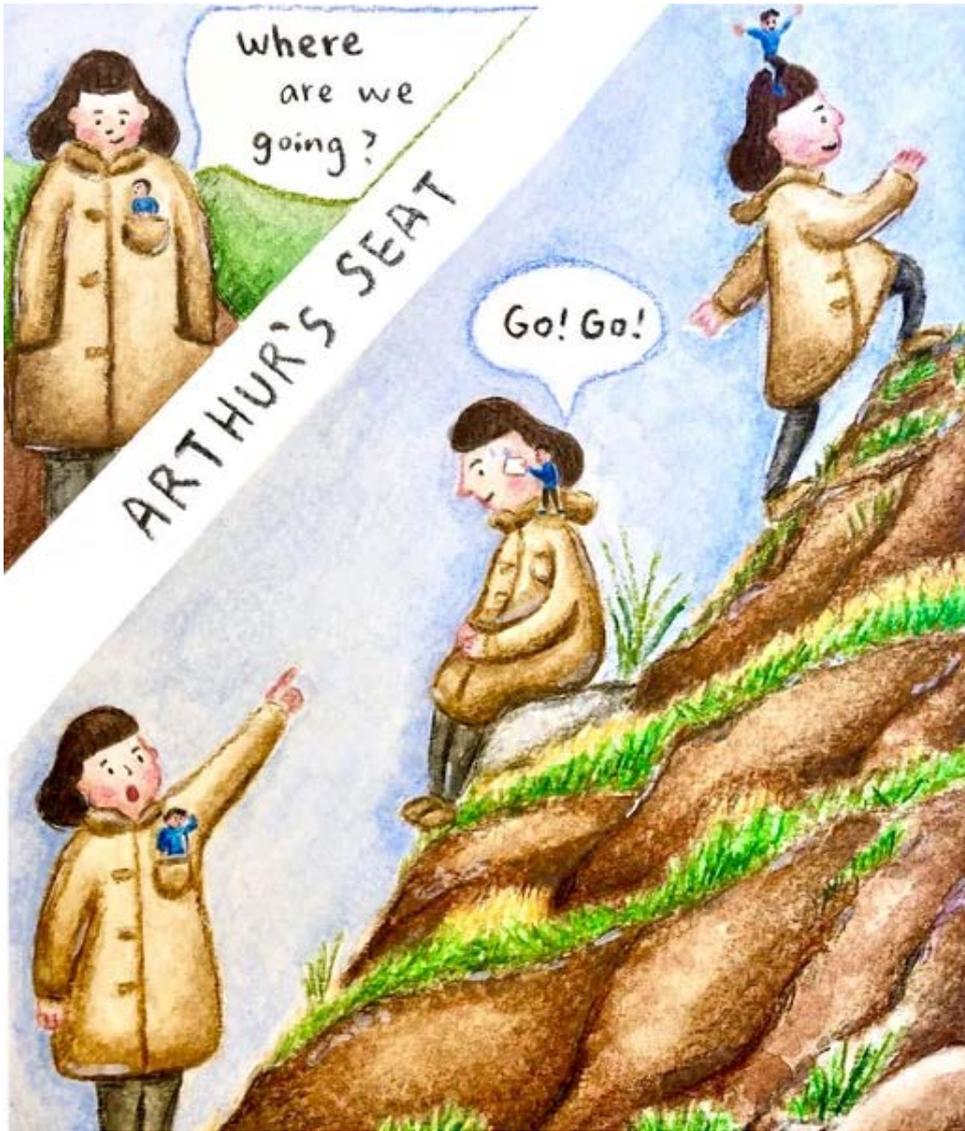
Contact details:  
[rachiuart@gmail.com](mailto:rachiuart@gmail.com)













# THE PROMISE PRIZE

These entrants' work stood out for mention, alongside the winners and commended entrants.

ANEESA CASSIMJEE

JAE KUTIN

JANINA ROSINA

KIRANDEEP CHAHAL

NADINE COWAN

PELENA COSME

ZAHARA RAJA

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ANDLYN.