

# The Beauty of the Moment



tanaz bhathena

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*To the real Manchershaw Ek-Dus—  
expert swordsman and late great-grandfather.*

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*To my parents—  
For believing in me and my ~~im~~possible dreams.*

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*To Aditi, Priya, Purva, Shachi, and Sweta—  
For your friendship and the laughter  
and the monkeying around.*

## Susan



**My mother talks about love in extremes. A Bollywood sort of romance, with a hero and heroine, villainous parents, and a coterie of smart-mouthed siblings. That these love stories, repeated film after film, are strikingly similar to her own is pure coincidence.**

“Do you know I ran away to get married?” Amma declared once, to a group of my awestruck cousins in India over a Skype call. “My poor parents nearly had a heart attack!”

With the air for drama that storytellers and convincing liars have perfected, she opened her brown eyes wide, tossed her long black braid behind her, and played with the edge of her cotton sari, increasing the tension in the moment. Seconds later, she segued into the climax that led to her perfect Ever After as a doctor’s wife in the Arabian Gulf.

“First India. Then Saudi Arabia. And now you are in Canada,” one of my father’s sisters said, her smile not quite hiding the envy in her eyes.

Amma smiled in response. Her hand went to the minnu that my father had fastened around her neck on their wedding day—a delicate gold pendant in the shape of a leaf, seven gold beads forming a cross at its center. It was a necklace she never took off—one that told the world that she was married. Loved.

She did not tell my aunts about the hours she spends waiting next to her laptop, signed in to Skype, for the call that my father makes once each afternoon from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The call that he sometimes forgets about completely. She did not tell them about the anger, the fights, the despair—the gray, messy side of her love that gets turned off by the very mention of my father, that still blames me for the distance between them.

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What people back home know about Canada: It’s cold and terrible for highly qualified immigrants, especially doctors like my father. *Haven’t you read the stories? Men and women with four degrees each, bagging groceries at the supermarket or working as cashiers at gas stations?* Amma always says.

What people back home do not know: Appa never really tried for a job here.

We arrived in Mississauga at the beginning of April as permanent residents. Within two whirlwind months, Appa moved us into a new condo, enrolled me in a new school, registered me for driving lessons, *and* bought us a new car. By the first week of June, he was gone, flying back to Jeddah five days before he needed to report back for work at the clinic.

“You know your father,” Amma said, when I asked her why he didn’t stay longer. “Busy, busy, busy. But he has promised to sort things out at the clinic within the next two or three months. He will be with us again before we know it.”

Initially, apart from Appa not being here, I didn’t mind the move to Canada so much—especially since my father’s cousin, Bridgita Auntie, who lives an hour away from us, came over to visit a few times in the summer with her family. Also, after months of slogging at school in Jeddah, I was enjoying myself, almost feeling like I was on an extended vacation.

As August rolls to an end, though, I grow restless again, nervous about starting my final year of high school in a different country. Amma becomes tense as well—especially when my father postpones his arrival from late August to the end of September.

I sense it in the careless way she adds spices to her sambhar, the tone of her voice now, in early September, at the time of her usual Skype call with Appa.

“Hi there, Rensil is on the other line. He’ll be right with you.”

The voice is gentle and sweet, the video at my father’s end disabled.

“And who might you be?” My mother’s voice is equally sweet. Deadly.

“Aruna!” my father’s voice booms, seconds before his face appears on the screen. It brings warmth to Amma’s otherwise frosty expression and a smile to her pursed lips.

“Rensil, who was—”

“That was Mrs. Kutty, my new neighbor. Mrs. Kutty, please come here and say hi.”

Another person peeps into the screen. Mrs. Kutty waves, her skin softened with age and wrinkles, her silver hair shimmering

in the overhead light. "I'm sorry, dear. I didn't know how to turn on the video."

"That's okay." Amma's skin, several shades lighter than mine, turns pink. "I didn't recognize the voice, so . . ."

There's a knowing look on Mrs. Kutty's face, an understanding familiar to women who have grown used to their men leaving them behind in other countries. For work. For children. For other, unspoken reasons. If Amma sees the look, she doesn't acknowledge it. She turns into the mother I knew before our move. The impeccable hostess and social butterfly. Dr. Rensil Thomas's wife. Even though she's dressed in an old flowered nightgown and no makeup, I can feel the glamour dripping off her.

"I am not meant for weather like this." Amma launches into her usual complaints after Mrs. Kutty leaves. "I nearly froze to death waiting at the bus stop yesterday morning."

An exaggeration. It wasn't that cold and she had her coat on.

"It's a matter of adjustment, dear." Appa uses what I think of as his Doctor Voice. Careful, melodic, soothing. "I will come there as well soon enough."

"You said that when you left." Eighteen years of marriage have immunized Amma against the Doctor Voice. "I don't see why it's taking you so long to move here. Suzy had another driving lesson yesterday—"

I slip into my bedroom and shut the door quietly, cutting her off midsentence. I decide to Skype my best friend, Alisha Babu, in Jeddah, sighing with relief when she answers after a few seconds.

"Hey, what's up?" Alisha's had a haircut since we talked last week, her formerly long black curls cut into a messy chin-length bob and held off her forehead with a thick blue headband. The tightness in my chest unravels on seeing her familiar wide-spaced brown eyes,

round face, and broad grin. For a minute, I almost believe that I never left Saudi Arabia, that she's still only a few buildings away from me on Sitteen Street.

"How was the driving lesson?" Alisha asks before I can reply. "You never answered the text I sent you yesterday!"

A cardinal sin as far as my best friend is concerned, even though there are days when Alisha herself doesn't reply to my messages, citing excuses such as schoolwork, head-girl duties and *general busyness*. (Her words, not mine.)

"I'm sorry, I forgot. And the driving lesson was terrible." I tug the elastic out of my ponytail, feeling it pull out a few long strands of my black hair with it. "As usual."

"Come on. You said that the last time as well. What was this now—your fourth lesson?"

"Fifth."

"Then it probably wasn't as bad as you think. And it's not like it was a *real* test."

No, it wasn't. A real test, that is.

In April, shortly after we arrived, Appa and I headed to the nearest DriveTest Centre with our passports and landing papers to begin the process of getting our driver's licenses. Appa was able to immediately take a road test and obtain a full driver's license thanks to his Saudi license and international driving experience. However, the rules for me are different. As a new driver with a G1 license, I need to wait a full year before taking my road test and making it to the next level of Ontario's graduated licensing program: the G2. A G2 license isn't permanent (I will need to take *another* road test before it expires), but it will allow me to drive independently on all roads, including highways, with few restrictions.

And this was where my driving instructor Joseph Kuruvilla



(a.k.a. The Tyrant) came in. Not only did Joseph convince my parents to enroll me in his driving school, but he also explained how finishing a government-approved driving course with a certified instructor will allow me to attempt the road test after only eight months—in December—instead of waiting for a whole year. The idea seemed great at the time.

Five lessons with Joseph, however, have managed to change my initial enthusiasm into dread. His voice, sharp even when saying hello, echoes through my head now: *Don't steer so hard! Reverse! Reverse! Use the brakes, will you! Why is it taking you so long to catch on to the most basic instructions!*

The last comment—made yesterday after I botched my fifth attempt at parallel parking in a row—had stung the most.

“What if I fail the road test, Alisha?” I ask now. “What if I can’t get my license?”

Alisha laughs. “Don’t be silly. You’re not going to *fail*, Suzy. You never fail at anything!”

When I say nothing in response, the grin on her face fades. “Holy falooda! You’re serious.”

*Fish. Fudge. Falooda.* On a normal day, Alisha’s swear word replacements make me laugh. Today, the back of my throat burns and I have an awful feeling that I’ll burst into tears.

“Listen, you had a bad lesson, okay?” she says gently. “That could happen to anyone. Worst case scenario, if you do fail your test, you can give it again, right?”

Right.

Except, at my house, failure isn’t an option. When I was little, my mother drilled the word *excellence* into my brain, pinning the letters one by one on an old corkboard in our house in Jeddah.

And excellence was what I had delivered year after year, by acing every subject, by ranking first in my classes at Qala Academy, no matter what curveballs the teachers threw at us during exams. My parents haven't even planned for the possibility of me failing my road test; they've taken it for granted that I will get my license in December.

"Once you pass the test, maybe your mother will get over her silly fear of driving as well," Appa joked once—a comment that made Amma roll her eyes.

I am too embarrassed to tell him about the nerves that hit me whenever I get into the driver's seat of my instructor's twenty-five-hundred-pound Toyota. About the clammy sensation that seeps up my back and down my shoulders and arms whenever Joseph shouts at me, making me freeze behind the wheel.

"Can we change the subject?" I ask now, unwilling to answer Alisha's question.

She shoots me a concerned look and then complies. "Hey. Do you know what happened with Verghese Madam yesterday?"

A funny story about my old physics teacher in Jeddah follows and soon I'm cracking up at Alisha's exaggerated imitation of Verghese throwing a temper tantrum when she caught two girls talking in class that morning.

"I thought she was going to send them to the headmistress." Alisha's hands make accompanying gestures, her nostrils flaring exactly the way Verghese Madam's did. "But she fumed a bit, said a few more things, and went on with the lesson."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I miss old Verghese." I don't mean this literally. Verghese Madam had a tendency to call me "Soo-sun," a pronunciation that made my name sound like

*soo-soo*, the Hindi word for urine. But I do miss being in class with Alisha and the feeling of holding back a laugh until my stomach aches.

“Right. You really miss the taunts about how a single lost mark in a board exam makes you a total failure at life. Besides, forget about that.” Alisha’s mouth spreads in a wide, evil grin. “You’re in *Canada* now.”

I roll my eyes. “Not this again!”

“I’m serious! Suze, you’re so lucky. You can do whatever you want there. You can go to *art school*. What options do we have here in Jeddah or even India once we graduate? My parents are already talking about enrolling me in an engineering college in Trivandrum and having me talk to suitable Jacobite boys from Kerala. The types who’ll judge everything from my ‘slim figure’ to my ‘shiny black hair.’”

She rolls her eyes, while I laugh at the reference to the horrible matrimonial website Alisha’s parents want her to create a profile on the year she turns eighteen.

“*You*, on the other hand, can play the field,” Alisha says. “See greener pastures. Boys, Suzy! All those boys!”

“Um, hello? Have you forgotten how *my* parents want me to marry someone from our community as well? And art school? Seriously, Alisha?”

“First off, you’ve never even *talked* to your parents about art school. Who knows? They might actually say yes! And who’s talking about marriage? It’s just dating!”

But it’s never just dating—not with my family, at least. While Amma and Appa are less conservative than Alisha’s parents, I highly doubt they’ll give me free rein when it comes to matters of the heart. Whenever the topic of boys comes up, they always talk

about it in matrimonial terms—key phrases including *good Malayali Christian boy* and *degree in medicine or engineering*, with bonus points for *North American or European citizenship*. Alisha seems to have forgotten this or maybe she no longer cares.

“It’s my first day of school tomorrow. I’ll be lucky if I can find my way around, let alone find myself a boyfriend,” I tell her.

“Then get yourself a boyfriend who can show you around!”

Alisha’s obsession about me getting a boyfriend isn’t a surprise. Neither of us has been out on a date before. That we lived in Saudi Arabia (where dating was forbidden by the law) was secondary; our parents wouldn’t have allowed it. Also, we were too shy to approach anyone back then, in spite of having crushes on them.

“This way, I can live vicariously through you.” Alisha has a look on her face that’s so dreamy, it’s comical. My fingers itch to sketch her as she is now: starry-eyed, with hearts popping all over her head.

Through my earphones, I hear a *thump* from the other side of my bedroom door. I take one earpiece off and hear Amma’s voice rising in argument with Appa—a sound that I’ve grown more and more familiar with over the past month. I pop the earpiece back on.

“Boyfriends are overrated,” I say.

I don’t want to end up like my mother, with an Ever After that consists of perpetual fights and disagreements, mostly about her only child. Amma likes to pretend it never happened, but I haven’t forgotten what she said to my father during our first week here: *If it wasn’t for Suzy’s education, we wouldn’t have to even be here.*

“Says the girl who’s never—oh, crap, I’ve got to get back to work.”

From Alisha’s end, I hear a mosque’s sonorous call for prayer. It officially marks the beginning of her evening study session and the end of our chat. She grimaces. “I have to go. Want to chat later? Same time tomorrow?”

"I'll be at school." I've memorized the timings—8:20 a.m. to 2:40 p.m. instead of 7:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. the way it was in Qala Academy. Even if I take the bus, I'll still only be home by 10:00 p.m. Jeddah time—which will be too late for Alisha on a school night. "How about the morning, my time? Like around 2:00 p.m. in Jeddah?"

"I have biology tutoring then." Alisha frowns. "Never mind. Text me. I really have to go now or my mom will blast me off into outer space. Bye!"

"Bye."

Instead of going back to the living room, where my mom is still arguing with my dad, I head to the window and push aside the curtain to let in more light. The fabric is navy—a shade that perfectly matches the bedspread and pillows Amma picked out for this room. There are days when I'm tempted to change things around with splashes of orange paint, followed by teal, purple, and gold. I imagine doing a replica of Basquiat's skull or Dali's melting clock or a creation of my own. I squint, picturing my latest sketch: a caricature of a man's open mouth forming the entrance of a subterranean tunnel, the insides teeming with butterfly fish, sea urchins, and sharks. For effect, I could add multihued coral creeping up the sides of his teeth and mouth.

I snort, imagining Amma's outraged *Aiyyo!*, followed by her punishing me for *spoiling the furniture*, the way she did when I had, at age five, decided to redecorate the stark white walls of our Jeddah living room with a bright green marker.

I don't look at the two paintings hanging on the wall next to the window—the only two I've done that have met with Amma's approval in all these years. A detailed depiction of a Kathakali dancer's green face done in oils sometime last year, and above that,

a watercolor of the sun setting over the Red Sea, King Fahd's Fountain white against the sky.

*Nice! Look how they brighten up your room,* she had declared when we were decorating the place in May, in that casual tone grown-ups use to describe hobbies they think have no potential to turn into careers.

I grip the curtain, my knuckles turning pink and yellow. Ali-sha does not know about the times I've screwed up the courage to ask about attending art school and failed. How, every time the topic of my career comes up, Amma and Appa get into an argument about what I'll be—a doctor (Appa) or an engineer (Amma).

I lean out the window and breathe in the cool September air. Unlike our neighborhood in Jeddah, where buildings were clustered more closely, interspersed by a mosque every couple of blocks, the nearest building over here is half a mile away, separated by an iron fence and a neatly trimmed lawn, the last of the summer flowers wilting now that fall is slowly setting in, the grass so green I wonder if it's even real.

Trees are slowly turning color—hints of russet and gold interspersing pointed evergreens. I revel in the difference for a few moments, in the absence of the brine and humidity that makes up Jeddah air.

The sound of bells under my window distracts me, a series of *clings* accompanying a pair of girls who weave across the street, dodging cars, pedaling in the direction of a park a few blocks away.

*Are you happy there, Suzy?* Appa often asks when we talk on Skype. *Do you like the new condo?*

*Yes, Appa, I always tell him. I love it here.*

He does not want another answer. He does not want to know that sometimes, when I Skype him, I try to time it so that I can

overhear the muezzin calling for prayer from the mosque next to our apartment in Jeddah. He does not want to know how every night, after Amma falls asleep, I scroll through Qala Academy's secret student group on Facebook and read the messages there, feeling a pang go through me whenever my friends plan a trip to the beach or joke about a new teacher.

A red car screeches up the driveway, a rap song blasting from its speakers, startling an old lady walking her poodle on the sidewalk. I watch it zoom up the ramp and then smoothly, flawlessly reverse park into one of the numbered slots to the side of our building. This person probably had no trouble during their driving lessons, I think resentfully.

Moments later, a group of boys stumble out, the rough sound of their laughter rising in the air. I instinctively cringe. Boys. Another element that my parents expect me to adapt to after growing up with no brothers, after next to no male interaction in an all-girls school for most of my life.

I have a year to do it before university starts, they keep reminding me. A whole year to take advantage of the free high school education every immigration agency and lawyer touts in the Gulf. A year I will spend with strangers instead of my best friend and the girls I grew up with. At Qala Academy, I would have been arts editor for the school yearbook this year. The headmistress had promised me free rein to do what I wanted, including comics. But that was before the Class XI finals. Before Appa came home, declaring that our application for permanent residence had been approved.

When I look at the parking lot again the boys from the red car have disappeared. I am about to turn and reluctantly go back to the living room, to Amma, when I catch sight of a figure standing near the building entrance, right under my window.

The boy, probably seventeen or eighteen years old, is looking right at me, his eyes wide and curious, his spiked hair shimmering in the fading afternoon light. A desi boy, I think initially—though I can't be sure without speaking to him—his skin the same shade of brown as mine. When my gaze meets his, his chest rises and falls quickly the way a runner's might after a couple of laps around the park.

I feel my cheeks grow warm. Under normal circumstances, I would step back or simply close the curtain, embarrassed to be the center of a boy's attention. But something feels different today—maybe because of Alisha and her constant prodding. It's ridiculous, I tell myself. Silly to be nervous over boys just because I haven't interacted with them before.

So I do the unthinkable. I draw up my courage and look back at the spiky-haired guy who stands on the pavement three floors below.

It's easier, perhaps, because he isn't looking right into my eyes when I decide to look back, his gaze resting on my hair which is lying loose over one shoulder. Easier because when he does look at me, I decide that he isn't handsome in the traditional sense. His head is disproportionately large compared to his small, lean body, his nose flat and somewhat off center. But there are parts of his face that I like as well: the strong, square jaw, eyes that shimmer with warmth in the fading light, even from this distance. He takes out a hand from the pocket of his shorts, grins at me, and waves.

What I want to do is smile and wave back. It's what my brain urges me to do. But then Amma calls for me and I remember why this is a bad idea, why dating and boys and marriage have been bad ideas all along. I retreat into the shadows again, waiting for a long moment until I hear the door below open and shut.





## Malcolm

When I see her again the next day, the new girl's hair is in a ponytail. It brings her features into sharp relief, the small, triangular jaw, the too-high forehead, the nervous, somewhat cynical look in her dark eyes.

She's so different from the curious girl I saw yesterday at Ahmed's apartment building that I am tempted to look around and check to see if she has a twin. But I'm pretty sure she doesn't. Ahmed, Steve, and I are smoking by the ramp outside the school cafeteria when I see her getting off a bright yellow school bus and I am pretty sure there's only one of her. A wave of ninth graders rumble past, fresh-faced kids with new backpacks over light fall jackets. Many wear eyeglasses and look nearly as confused as the new girl.

A hand rises from the rear of the pack, a familiar bracelet tied

to the wrist. My sister, Mahtab, grins when she sees she has caught my attention. Her long brown hair shields her face when she looks down at her phone and jabs at the screen. Seconds later, a text pings on mine.

Can I come talk to you? Or will you be embarrassed by your little sister's presence?

I grin and wave back hard. Mahtab weaves around the lost-looking ninth graders, completely unaware of the way jaws drop when she passes some of the boys. I glare at them and take a step forward.

"Malu. Stop it," Mahtab admonishes.

If I wasn't glaring at the boys, I would glare at her. Mahtab knows how much I despise that nickname.

"Hello, Mahtab. How was your summer?" I see Steve scan my little sister from head to toe, observe how his eyes widen a little, as if he's surprised by how much she has grown. I jab him with an elbow. He grins at me sheepishly.

"Boring," Mahtab says, cheerfully unaware of what passed between me and Steve. She stretches her hands over her head and I frown at the shortness of the crop top she wears under her denim jacket, the stud in her belly button that she got on her fourteenth birthday this summer.

"You're not wearing your sudreh," I say, referring to the sacred undershirt we both are supposed to wear for religious reasons, day in and day out, come life or death. "Or your kusti," I add, which is the sacred thread tied around the sudreh.

"It's a crop top." She slips into pidgin Gujarati, the way she always does when she wants to keep our conversation private. "Who'll wear a sudreh-kusti with that?"

I make note of the warning embedded in her tone: *Back off, and don't be a chauvinistic jerk, big brother.*

"Hey, *I'm* not the religious one." I raise my hands. "How do you think Ronnie will feel? Doesn't he want you to cover up head to foot like those old Parsi widows back in India?"

"Ronnie is not like that!"

Mahtab's face turns pink with guilt. Not many people know about the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism or its followers, the Parsis, who migrated from Iran to India centuries ago, but a single conversation with my sister on the topic usually changes that. She has always been more Zoroastrian than I'll ever be, with her daily prayers, her involvement in the ZCC Youth Committee, and that whiny Rohinton "Ronnie" Mehta, the Parsi boyfriend she brought home last month at a family dinner. Ronnie is the guy who will stop a speeding car to let a group of ducks cross the street, the sort of guy who will do anything for the betterment of the world. Me, on the other hand? You'd be lucky if you caught me praying, let alone found me with any one of Mahtab's or our father's uptight ZCC friends.

"Just because you spent the whole summer moping over You-Know-Who—"

Steve coughs, cutting Mahtab off. "Wait, so your ex is Voldemort now? We can't mention her by name?"

My face heats up.

Mahtab's mouth, pursed tight, softens into a smile for Steve. "He has been grouchy all summer. I couldn't wait for school to start."

I give her a stern look. Or try to.

The trouble is, I can't hold on to my anger, not around Mahtab. She wrapped her hand around my heart as surely as she got me

wrapped around her finger, ever since the day Mom first put her in my old crib, a brown-haired, brown-eyed cherub who always laughed more than she cried.

Steve blows a line of smoke to the side. He watches me warily, as if expecting me to break down and collapse on the pavement the way I did a couple of months ago, after my breakup with Afrin. The swoon was more from heatstroke than anything else, but Steve and Ahmed still think it was because I saw Afrin kissing a random guy outside the mall. I drop my cigarette butt to the ground and stub it out with my sneaker, watching the ash smear over the concrete, and then kick the butt into the bushes nearby.

“Don’t do that!” Mahtab gives me an annoyed look and picks up the cigarette butt. She walks over to the trash can a few feet away and drops it in. “If you *insist* on ruining your lungs, at least don’t ruin the environment in the process.”

“He’s already doing that with the smoke,” Ahmed points out before taking a drag of his own cigarette. Next to him, Steve rolls his butt between his fingers. If Mahtab was not around, I know he would have done exactly what I did and tossed it into the bushes.

My sister rolls her eyes. “Fine. Whatever. I need to go now or I’ll be late.”

“Do you know where your homeroom is?” I ask. “Want me to go with you?”

“Don’t worry.” She wraps me in a hug that smells of the sandalwood incense of our prayer room at home. “Text if you need me,” she whispers in my ear.

I close my eyes. I hate the sound of worry in her voice. Hate how she was forced to grow up over the past two years because of my mess-ups.

“I promise.”

“Really?”

I flick her nose with my finger. “Really.”

I watch her make her way to the front doors, the sun in her hair as she merges into the crowd of backpacks, jackets, and jeans, the flash of a neon sole as she skips up the stairs, her silver bracelet glinting as she waves at me one last time.

I ignore the faint twinge of worry in my chest and tell myself that Mahtab will be okay. She has always been the stronger one out of the two of us, sticking to the straight and narrow, even after Mom died. Unlike me.

First days, unlike other days at school, smell of waxed floors and artificial air freshener. Sounds gather and disperse in pockets: the metallic squeal of lockers opening and closing, the *thump* of a basketball on the floor, the high melody of a girl’s laugh. Hallways shrink with the added crush of students milling about and teachers in every corner, wearing pasted smiles, on the lookout for anyone breaking the school dress code. Last year, a guy from the basketball team came in wearing a neon-orange bikini top and jeans, and sang an old Queen song at the top of his voice while a couple of teachers escorted him to the principal’s office.

Nothing that exciting seems to be happening today. In the crowd gathered around the guidance counselor’s office, I catch a glimpse of the new girl again, standing at the very back, a puzzled expression on her face as she glances at the bright pink schedule she holds in her hands and then at the kids waiting outside the doors.

A boy swears, kicking a nearby locker, and the new girl jerks back slightly, even though the comment isn’t directed at her. Body language says a lot about a person and, unlike my sister, who looks like she has been going here forever, the new girl is clearly out of

her element. Glancing at her schedule one last time, she shakes her head and turns to leave, her eyes averted from everyone else around her, her lips straight and unsmiling—signs that point to extreme shyness or extreme snobbery, though for the moment I can't tell which.

I think I like her better with her hair all loose, hanging over her shoulder like a perfectly cut sheet of ebony, like those old-school Bollywood heroines, her face perked up with a secret smile—the kind that happens when you think no one's watching you. The best kind on a face like hers.

“Hey.” Ahmed nudges me out of my attempt at telepathically communicating with the girl. “Are you listening? There's this party tonight at Justin's place. Wanna go?”

Justin and I go back. Way back to when I was raising hell as a fifteen-year-old and my old man was making my life a living one. But things are different now. I don't drink as much, don't smoke as much. I definitely don't take any pills anymore and that's what we'll find at Justin's: a candy bowl of pharmaceuticals that he gets from God knows where.

“You know I don't do that anymore, Ahmed,” I tell him.

“You don't have to take anything.” Ahmed shrugs his broad shoulders. “I don't.”

“Not all of us are Muslims with balls of steel.”

Ahmed laughs.

But the truth is that I'm simply not strong enough. Not like Ahmed, who's so secure in his faith that the peer pressure to drink or get high never gets to him the way it does with me and Steve. Cigarettes are Ahmed's only vice and, even then, he usually stops after one.

“Besides, Mahtab will kill me.”

My sister and my mother, the two best people in my life. Only one of them remains with me now.

“By the way, Voldemort—I mean, Afrin was asking about you,” Steve says.

“Oh yeah?” I try to sound disinterested.

“She was saying she misses you.”

Sure she does. Several times she missed me so much that she didn’t know or care who she made out with or hooked up with when she got high. When I broke up with Afrin earlier this year, she kept crying, saying that she hadn’t meant it, that the guy she’d slept with looked exactly like me after she’d taken Justin’s favorite blue pills. Except for that time at the mall, I didn’t see Afrin for the whole summer. I want to pretend I’m over what she did, but even now the thought of her sleeping with some random, faceless guy pricks the inside of my chest.

“I don’t want to get into that anymore, Steve. If you want to date her, you have my blessing.”

Steve snorts. “And take away your only opportunity for a true Zoroastrian girlfriend?”

“Says the guy who drooled all over the floor when he first saw her at the ZCC.”

“She has great boobs! Where else was I supposed to look? Besides, you know I don’t date desi girls. No time for them—especially not another Patel!”

“What’s wrong with desi girls? They’re hot.” Ahmed grins and passes around a pack of gum. I pop two pieces into my mouth and sniff my jacket to make sure it doesn’t smell like cigarettes.

“I could be dating some long-lost Hindu ghotra cousin,” Steve explains. “Besides that’s what my *parents* want. For me to marry some good Patel chick.”

"Maybe that Patel chick won't want *you*," I tease him. "Ever thought of that, Sma—"

Steve shoves me before I finish the sentence, almost knocking me into Vice Principal Han.

"Sorry, sir," we chorus. No one wants to get on Han's bad side on the very first day of school. I did that in grade eleven and ended up in detention, with Han breathing down my neck every five minutes, lecturing me about how lucky I was that corporal punishment was banned by the government.

Today, however, Han does little apart from giving us dirty looks and telling us to behave ourselves. You'd think we were the high school's biggest troublemakers the way Han keeps his eye on us. At least I know I deserve it for mooning him last year from the window of the bio lab. But Ahmed and Steve only get into trouble for being my friends. For sticking with me through all my phases, including the bad ones.

Ahmed Sharif, the stud. With a beard as thick as a grown man's even though he's only seventeen, tall and muscular with a face that has been drawing girls since the ninth grade, even though he has dated only one girl briefly in the time I've known him.

Steve Patel, the class clown. Stork-like and skinny, with a smile that perpetually borders on a smirk. A guy who has been friend-zoned by more girls than both Ahmed and I can count, even though Steve always jokes about them getting intimidated by his (nonexistent) good looks.

Then there's me. Malcolm Vakil, hell-raiser. The One Without a Future, according to every adult in his life.

As I walk down the hallway to my locker, I see the new girl again, staring at a locker like it's some sort of math problem.

I watch her pull out a lock—slender and gold, the three-digit



kind that's super easy to crack. I am partly tempted to call out and warn her about this when she smiles slightly and slides it into the metal holes, closing it with a *snap*.

I was right about that smile. It changes her face, lingers when she lifts her head up and her gaze clashes with mine. Her eyes, rounded with recognition now, are deep and brown, the fine lines of the irises visible even in the dull fluorescent lights.

My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth and my palms bead with sweat the way they did yesterday afternoon when I saw her leaning out of her window, brown skin aglow, black hair falling over her shoulder. A faint bit of color tints her cheeks before she awkwardly twists her head around, turning this way and that before heading down the math and science hallway, without another glance in my direction.

Behind me, Steve laughs. "Whoa."

"Shut up, Steve."

"Come on, man. She's cute."

"Whatever." I bury my face in my locker.

Steve raises his hands. "All right, all right. With my luck, she's probably a Patel anyway."

"Don't think so," Ahmed says. "She was wearing those tiny gold chandeliers in her ears. South Indian girls wear those."

"How do *you* know?"

"Remember my old girlfriend, Noorie? She was from Kerala. She's the one who told me."

I continue watching the new girl, the slender curve of her neck as she raises her head to check the room number, the unconsciously graceful sway of her hips.

"Wonder if she lives near Square One, like Noorie. Maybe I should ask around," Ahmed teases.

"She lives in your building," I say without thinking.

"What? How do you know that?"

I bite my tongue. "I don't. Forget I said anything."

Ahmed grins the way a cat might right before it eats a mouse.

"Aww, come on. Don't be like that. If she does live in my building, I can hook you up."

"It's fate," Steve says. "You have a thing for her; looks like she has a thing for you—*ow!*" he shouts when I punch him in the arm.

As embarrassing as it was to be caught salivating over a girl—that's Steve's thing, not mine—I am not ready yet to get into a relationship like the one I had with Afrin. Afrin wasn't only the first Zoroastrian girl I ever dated, but also the first girl I felt something for that was more than lust. I've faced disappointments with girlfriends before, but Afrin was different. She taught me the meaning of heartbreak.

Ahmed and Steve think that hooking up with other girls will change that. But whoever these fictitious girls are, I know that the new girl isn't going to be one of them. She's way too shy, for one thing. It'll be a miracle if she says hi to me by the end of the semester, let alone allows me to slip my hand into the back pocket of her jeans.

"Malcolm. Come on." Ahmed's face is a little more serious now. "Don't you think it's time? I know what Afrin did was awful, but—"

"I don't want to talk about Afrin."

I ignore the look Ahmed and Steve shoot each other, ignore my heartbeat, which has gone from a steady canter to a gallop.

"In any case, it looks like she's taking calculus along with the rest of the nerds," I say, pointing toward the room the new girl

disappeared into. “It’s not like we’re going to have any classes in common.”

Or *anything* in common.

Pretty as she might be, I know that girls like her do not go for guys like me. Heather Dupuis. Elle Fernandez. Preeti Sharma. All straight-A students with crushes on star athletes like Vincent Tran and Sergio Garcia.

I look up at the new girl’s locker which, as luck would have it, is right next to mine.

“Should we leave you here?” Ahmed asks.

“Yeah, maybe you can practice talking to her locker,” Steve says.

“Shut up,” I tell them, and head to class as the warning bell goes off.

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I don’t see her again for the first half of the day. Not in college-level math. Nor in accounting. Not even during lunch, when the guys and I go out (with everyone else who knows better than to eat the cafeteria food) to inhale giant gooey cheese slices from Joe’s Pizzeria across the street.

Before the start of the third period, a part of me relaxes, thinking that maybe I won’t see her, when I suddenly do, right at the back of the room, in a university-level course I would never have enrolled in had it not been for my surprisingly good performance during eleventh-grade English and the insistence of the teacher, Mr. Kristoff, who thought I had “great ideas” and a “way with words.”

The new girl is sitting right at the back of my English class, in the second-last row, inches away from where Ahmed, Steve, and I usually sit when we have the same classes together. I can already

hear Steve suppressing a laugh behind me. I school my face into its usual indifferent mask and scan the rest of my classmates, familiar faces I know by name, but barely talk to. Then I see *her* and feel my mask slip again. Godafrin, a.k.a. Afrin, Irani. Long hair. Longer legs. Settled in the lap of some guy, her high giggle unmistakable, painful to my ears.

I walk to the back of the room, nodding at a couple of guys I recognize from basketball, and then, casually, without thinking too much about it, slide a hand over the new girl's desk. I don't miss the way her head jerks to watch my hand, or the slight blush on her brown cheeks.

She stares at the three-ring binder in front of her, already opened to a freshly lined page, the date and course code neatly written down in the upper-right corner in blue ink. An HB number 2 rests right next to the pen, the point fresh, sharpened.

A perfectionist. So not my type.

My fingers slide off the desk.

I begin chatting with Ahmed and Steve, ignoring the girl's presence, or at least pretending to, seeing her shoulders slowly, infinitesimally relax into a slouch. She picks up a pen again and flips to the back of the binder where she begins scribbling something.

Probably math equations. Maybe she'll be the one to finally discover a solution to world peace through numbers. I turn to face the front when I hear the door closing, the level of noise in the classroom growing subdued, announcing the arrival of the teacher.

The man—an awfully familiar man—clears his throat and adjusts his tie, probably still a clip-on, from what I remember from ninth grade.

Crap. What's Zuric doing here?

I check my schedule, wondering how I managed to miss this,

but the bright pink paper still only says *TBA* in small black letters next to *Instructor*.

"He's the only one teaching twelfth-grade English this year," Ahmed says, and I realize that I've spoken my question out loud.

"I'm dropping."

"Don't be an idiot. You can't. You won't graduate otherwise. Come on, man. It's only a dumb teacher."

I curse again.

When I signed up for this course last year, still doped up on Mr. Kristoff's praise, I completely forgot that he would not be teaching English this year, that he *never* taught the senior class. Clearly there's only one teacher for university-level English this year and that is my old nemesis Emil Zuric. The man who you'd think was a nervous wreck from the way he conducted class, from the way no one took him seriously, until the day he called my normally MIA father in the ninth grade to tell him I would fail English that year if I didn't wise up. I never lost the scars from the caning I got after that. Or forgot the role Zuric had to play in them.

"Good afternoon, everyone. Hope you're having a great first day back to school." Zuric's teeth flash a dull yellow; the classroom lights aren't doing him any favors.

His eyes move in that practiced way teachers have, scanning the room for old favorites, picking out new faces. Narrowing when they land on me, his smile slipping slightly.

"I heard some of you did really well in your English exams last year."

Afrin's highlights shimmer when she tosses her hair behind her back. She turns to look at me. I roll my eyes at the ceiling and ignore both her and Zuric.

"This is a good thing. Because let me tell you that this course

won't get any easier. We have a play and a novel to cover this semester, not including your independent study, along with several short stories and poems. This course is heavily focused on analyzing literary themes and will be more challenging to some of you than to others."

Zuric fumbles with the bulldog clip holding a stack of course outlines together. He splits the stack in four, one for each row of desks, and hands the outlines to the kids sitting in the front row.

I pull out a pencil from my binder and spin it on the desk like a compass. As the outline makes its way to the back, I tune out Zuric's mumbling monotone and once more find myself staring at the back of the new girl's head. I spy a thin strand of silver peeking from the hair tie at the center of her skull. A blessing from a loved one, Mom used to call them when they appeared on anyone younger than thirty.

I ignore the stabbing sensation in my chest that always comes with thoughts of my mother and force myself to smile for the crowd. The fake smile remains on my face when the new girl finally turns in her seat, holding out the last couple of outlines. She does not smile back, but this time looks me in the eye again.

Five seconds. Ten. Fifteen. She does not look away and this amount of time is pretty much an eternity when it comes to engaging a guy's attention according to those teen girl magazines Mahtab keeps reading. Despite my vow not to get involved with anyone this semester, I find myself leaning forward, reaching out to grab the papers and brushing her fingers in the process.

My skin tingles in a way it never has before, not even with Afrin, and I pull away, startled. The new girl turns quickly, tugging her long ponytail over one shoulder, exposing her nape and the tiny birthmark there, a dot placed right where her spine begins.

I roll my fingers in, accidentally crushing the paper's edge in the process. I am so distracted by what happened that I don't hear the announcement Zuric makes about class introductions. But he must have made one because I see a couple of girls in front stand and recite their names, favorite books, and hobbies to the rest of the class. Normally I couldn't care less about class intros, but I am now desperate to know who this new girl is, to put a name to the mystery, solve it and be done with it. Names classify things, make them familiar, easy to understand. Ordinary.

It takes a long time to get to the last few rows. The girl finally stands, a wrinkle in the back of her lavender shirt from sitting all day.

"My name is Susan Thomas. My favorite book is *Macbeth*. I like drawing things." Her voice is smooth and clear, the Indian accent unmistakable.

Mr. Zuric's face glows in the way it always does when someone mentions one of the classics or Shakespeare as a favorite book. "Thank you, Ms. Thomas. That's one of my favorite books, too."

Susan Thomas sits down, her shoulders hunching from the attention.

Steve is next: "Steve Patel. Favorite book—the *Kamasutra*." I grin as the class bursts into laughter. "And ladies . . . I'm available!"

More laughter, and claps, as Steve bows.

Zuric's face is a nice even shade of tomato. He squints beadily at Steve. "Thank you, Mr. Patel."

Zuric has got to be the only teacher at Arthur Eldridge who still refers to us by our last names. It's ridiculous, considering how he mispronounces every name that isn't European.

When Ahmed's turn comes, he winks at me. "Ahmed Sharif. Favorite book—*Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition." (A lie; Ahmed's real favorite is *Crime and Punishment*.)

Zuric's complexion deepens in color as the class laughs again.

"I like cars," Ahmed adds. (The truth.) "The faster the better." (Also true.)

A guy whistles from the front. A couple of girls giggle, one of them Afrin, who flashes Ahmed a flirty smile. I feel a sense of relief when Ahmed doesn't smile at her but only settles down, winking at Susan Thomas, who looks scandalized. There is a brief moment of silence before Zuric finally looks at me and nods. I don't stand up. I am never this disrespectful during other classes, but Zuric and I have a history. I know how to tick him off. I want to.

"Call me Vakil. Malcolm Vakil," I mock, part Ishmael, part James Bond.

"Mr. Vakil, will you stand up so that everyone else can see you, please?" Zuric says.

I give him a wide, fake smile. "I'm happy right where I am."

"Stand up." Zuric's hands are shaking. "Right now."

Unlike all the others, who have turned to look at my reaction, Susan Thomas is facing front. Her back is ramrod straight. I slip out of the chair and stand.

"Malcolm Vakil. Favorite book—*Moby-Dick*." Predictably this makes a few people giggle.

"I like drawing things, too."

Giggles turn to loud laughs and this is when Susan turns around to glare at me. I raise an eyebrow, tilt my head to the side, and smile. I can feel Afrin's stare from the front of the room, examining both Susan and me. When I sit down again, Susan's facing



the front of the room where Zuric is now going over the course outline.

The phone in my pocket vibrates. It's Steve.

so you DONT have a thing for her, eh? 😏

I look up again, pretending to watch Mr. Zuric write something on the board, before turning my phone off.

# Susan



## **BENEFIT CONCERT FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES**

Volunteers needed to help organize a special fund-raising concert to spread awareness about the war in Syria and the refugees struggling to make lives for themselves outside their homeland.

### **WE ARE CURRENTLY LOOKING FOR:**

Fund-Raising Directors—4 positions

VIP Liaisons—2 positions

Secretary—1 position

Treasurer—1 position

Art Director—1 position

### **INTERESTED? COME TO THE FIRST MEETING:**

Friday, September 25, 2015, School Cafeteria, 4 p.m.

## QUESTIONS IN THE MEANTIME? IDEAS?

Contact chairs Ronnie Mehta and Mahtab Vakil at

**BenefitConcertExec@arthureldridge.ca**

Printed in bold black, the posters are everywhere: on the bulletin board outside the guidance counselor's office, on the insides of the doors of the girls' bathroom stalls, flyer versions being handed out by a pair of boys at the door next to the cafeteria during lunch. One morning, a boy and girl show up during physics to talk about the concert as well.

"If you've been watching the news recently, you probably know about what's been happening in Syria." The boy who addresses the class wears glasses, pressed trousers, and a button-down shirt. I half expect him to carry a briefcase in one hand. "Many have been forced to leave their homes and seek asylum in other countries. Canada is one of those countries."

He looks to the girl, who's dressed more casually, in jeans and a green sweater. Her wide smile reminds me of Alisha—a younger version of Alisha with long, shoulder-length brown hair.

"We're looking for volunteers to help set up a concert in January to raise money for Syrians forced to leave their homes," she says. "Proceeds raised from the concert will go to the Red Cross."

"Where do we volunteer? Here?" Someone asks the question that suddenly pops into my head.

"Friday the 25th, in the cafeteria," the girl says. "Everything's on the poster. If there are multiple people trying out for the same position, we'll do interviews."

I take one of the flyers being handed out and fold it in half before placing it neatly into my binder. *Art Director*. The words

have a nice ring to them. I think back to what Alisha told me last week. What if I *do* tell my parents about art school?

“What if?”

I sing the words under my breath, feel them add a skip to my step as I walk out the door at the end of the period. Daydreaming does me no favors: instead of the stairs that lead to the cafeteria, I reach a dead end, an entire wall of lockers and—my cheeks flame—two students making out.

I double back, wondering if I’ll ever get used to scenes like this or even to attending a coed school. Relief floods through my veins when I finally locate the stairs leading down to the cafeteria. I take a deep breath and tell myself to stop being silly. They’re *boys*, not aliens. I, on the other hand, might as well have come from another planet.

My first week at Arthur Eldridge passed in a haze of rooms and hallways, a surprising maze of confusion for a building so small. At Qala Academy, our classes were static, which made sense as it was ten times larger. Over there, I would never have been able to make it from one end of the building to another on time, even at a dead run.

The schoolwork isn’t nearly as bad. Calculus is a breeze, the syllabus almost equivalent to what I already studied last year in Jeddah, except for the functions, which are a lot more complex. English isn’t difficult either; unlike Alisha and a few of my other friends, I’ve always liked reading. Art is pure joy—by far the best course I’ve taken at *any* school, I admit to myself, even though it feels like a minor betrayal of Qala Academy.

Physics is the most challenging of all my courses. I never really liked physics at Qala Academy, but I didn’t exactly find it difficult

to follow. However, unlike at my old school, at Arthur Eldridge the assignments are not a matter of rote learning. Not only does my new school have bigger and better laboratories, but here, class time is devoted to actually performing the experiments and drawing conclusions from our results—even if they don't match what we know of the theory. Our teacher, Mr. Franklin, may crack jokes in class and smile all the time, but when it comes to marking our assignments, he's even tougher than Verghese Madam.

Bridgita Aunty said kids who come from educational backgrounds like mine face similar issues with lab work. "You can't get away with *mugging* here, Suzy," she teased me last night over the phone, using the South Asian colloquial term for memorizing large sections of textbooks and spitting them out word for word.

I join the flow of bodies pouring into the cafeteria, dodge elbows, skip over stretched-out feet. The air is thick with the smell of grease. French fries are the only item the cafeteria sells hot, in red boxes filled constantly by a woman with pale blond hair. No one asks for the pizza, and it took me only one bite on my very first day to figure out why. I can still recall the taste of the burned cheese and too-sweet sauce, the paste-like texture of the crust.

A pair of girls from my homeroom pass by and find seats at a nearly full table. Spotting an extra chair at the table, I head in the same direction. As if sensing my approach, one of them drops her bag into the empty seat. "Sorry. This one's already taken."

I smile back stiffly and nod before turning and facing a sea—no, a veritable ocean—of tables, nearly every chair taken by a body or a bag. On my second day, I sat at a table full of ninth graders who appeared so intimidated by me that they gave me nothing more than monosyllabic replies or shy smiles when I tried to make conversation. Today, the only free spot appears to be at a table

where a group of boys wearing the school's basketball team jerseys are cheering on a teammate's attempt at inhaling soda through a pair of straws in his nostrils.

"Forget it," I mutter. I slip out of the cafeteria and walk rapidly in the opposite direction—past the brightly decorated art and music hallway where I have class fourth period, past the flowcharts and staid brown stencils marking the business studies wing, and through a pair of heavy green double doors—a side entrance that directly opens into the school's now-quiet parking lot.

It's here, atop a small set of stairs, that my lungs finally begin filling with air. A moment after I settle down, I hear the doors open again. I brace myself for a teacher or the stern vice principal, Mr. Han, who often lurks the halls in search of truants. But it's only a group of students who amble past, talking among themselves, paying me no attention.

It is an excellent spot for watching everyone without being noticed. Most students use the main doors to exit the building and cross the street to the tiny pizza parlor on the other side. Moments later, they emerge again, carrying big slices on cardboard trays. Though I can't see the pizza from here, I guess by the happy expressions on their faces that it's a lot better than the cafeteria's unappetizing version.

Though the canteen at Qala Academy is little better than the Arthur Eldridge cafeteria, no student is allowed to leave campus for lunch over there, especially not the girls. Alisha often grumbled about the double standards surrounding this decision—"At the boys' section, the seniors are allowed to go out with permission! Admin acts like we can't even cross the road alone because we're girls!" In this particular instance, I understand why she keeps calling me lucky to have moved to Canada.

I look at my lunch for the day—cucumbers and cream cheese on brown bread. “I’m tired of eating dosa all the time,” I told Amma last week. With the stress of settling in, I didn’t have the heart to tell her the truth. How on my first day here, when I opened my plastic box to the mouthwatering scent of a paper-thin rava dosa and coconut chutney, I heard a girl behind me complain about the “stinky curry smell” in the lunchroom.

I bite into the sandwich, wondering what it would have been like if I had screwed up the courage to turn around and educate the girl about the difference between curries and chutneys, to point out that if it was made in France, the dosa would be called a savory crepe. But in that moment my body simultaneously grew hot and cold, cheeks burning with embarrassment, jaw frozen shut, the way it always does in these situations. The comeback, as usual, came long after, when I was home in bed.

The cream cheese sticks to the roof of my mouth. I crumple the aluminum foil I packed the sandwich in, molding it into a hard silver ball.

To distract myself, I pull out my sketchbook and draw the beginnings of a face: an elderly Indian woman I saw on the city bus this morning. She wore a sari and coat, her socked feet stuffed into Crocs. I outline her mouth, the gentle slope of her nose, the small, bright eyes that twinkled when she saw me looking. Once I have the basic shapes done, I add texture and shadow: crosshatching the arch of her feathery brows, rounding out the lower half of her right cheek, emphasizing the slight indent in her chin. I’m drawing from memory, which means I’m likely getting some of the details wrong, but my new art teacher Ms. Nguyen said it’s good practice to draw faces to scale—even as a caricaturist. “You need to learn the rules first if you intend to break them,” she told me.

After a few moments, I'm stretching my arms out, trying to relieve them, when I spy a shadow from the corner of my left eye.

It's him. The boy from English. Malcolm Vakil or the Troublemaker as I think of him, with his spiky hair, baggy jeans, and thick silver chain around his neck. Up close, his nose is flatter and even more off center than I first perceived. Earlier this week, I tried to draw a caricature of him, focusing on the nose and that terrible porcupine hairstyle. *Caricature* comes from the Latin *carricare*, which means to load or exaggerate. By its very essence, it should have allowed me to focus on his imperfections, reminding me that he isn't as attractive as I once thought. Instead, I found myself outlining his strong jaw and the scar on his chin that could almost be mistaken for a cleft. I spent nearly an hour with my watercolors trying to match the exact shade of his eyes, which are unlike any I've seen before: brown with gray circling the pupils.

His stares make me nervous. Then there's that jolt I felt in the classroom when his hand brushed mine. I don't know what to make of it, what to make of him. When Alisha and I envisioned a boyfriend from my new school, we went the usual unimaginative Prince Charming route. Blond hair. Blue eyes. A younger Duke of Cambridge lookalike without the British accent and the bald head. Only, in the time I've been here, no white boy has ever caught and held my attention for longer than a few beats.

I watch the tall bearded boy next to Malcolm—Ahmed Sharif, I think his name is. I've seen Ahmed several times in my building. He lives a couple of floors above mine and each time we run across each other in the elevator, he nods at me and smiles. I've now slowly begun to smile back. Ahmed does not intimidate me the way the other boys at school do, does not make my skin break into goose bumps every time he's in my presence, the way Malcolm does.



As if sensing my thoughts, Malcolm turns, his eyes finding mine. A side of his mouth curves up. A smile. I snap my book shut and tear my gaze away, pretending to look for something inside my bag. I don't look up. Not when they approach the staircase I'm sitting on. Not even when the toe of Malcolm's sneaker lightly nudges mine on the way in.

I do nothing until their voices disappear, contained once again by the door behind me clanging shut. My breath rushes out, as if I've been holding it for too long, and I feel like an idiot because of it.

I pick up my phone and scan it for texts and emails. A forwarded message from Appa with a link to the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto: You should go with Amma. Picture texts, mostly quotes from the Bible and jokes in Malayalam from family members in India. Nothing from Alisha even though I can see she read the long text I sent her last night.

"Come on," I mutter. "What kind of friend are you?"

It's two weeks into September and the trees are ablaze with yellows and reds. September is mock-exams prep month at Qala Academy, when everyone from Classes X and XII starts studying for the central board exams set in New Delhi, India. Unlike regular school exams for other classes, which start and end in February, the boards start in March and can go all the way up to April, depending on which subjects you've taken. Brutally designed and unforgivingly marked, these exams decide the fate of every Indian who graduates from a CBSE-affiliated school anywhere in the world and plans on applying to colleges in India. Alisha told me once that the most competitive colleges evaluate your board exam results from *both* Classes X and XII, making the process even more challenging.

The memory of this makes me feel simultaneously relieved and guilty. Of course Alisha hasn't forgotten me. She has exams to deal with. Also, as head girl, she has more work piled on her than before. I now feel silly over my jealousy about the Instagram video she and my old classmates posted about their visit to the art museum in Al-Balad. It's not Alisha's problem that I haven't been able to make a friend at school yet. Rationally, I know this.

But Alisha isn't here. In a country where, in spite of speaking the same language as others, she would be judged on the South Indian lilt to her accent rather than on her words. Buffered by the same girls she grew up with since kindergarten, my best friend does not feel the sting of being snubbed outside classes or the bone-deep loneliness that settles in at seeing groups of kids chatting together at recess. I'm about to go back into the school building, when a voice calls out my name.

"Hey, Susan! Wait up!"

A girl I recognize vaguely from physics appears from somewhere in the middle of the parking lot, her bright blue jacket capturing my attention first and later her eyes: a pale azure tint that matches the September sky behind thick, black, square-framed glasses.

"Heather Dupuis," she says, holding out a hand before I make the attempt at recalling her name. "We're in physics together."

"I know. I mean, I've seen you."

I clamp my mouth shut. Two weeks of not speaking at length to a classmate and I automatically lose the ability to form sentences. But Heather only smiles. She wears skinny jeans ripped at the thighs and knees, a soft white sweater, and the lightest traces of lip gloss and liner. Her freckled cheeks are free of makeup and her curly red hair is braided neatly over one shoulder.

I force myself to not look at my own outfit: jeans bought to spite

my mother who called them “elephant-legged” and the oversize red polo I carelessly dumped into a handcart at Walmart without even trying it on.

“I’m sorry for interrupting your lunch,” Heather says, even though I’m clearly finished and she is not interrupting anything. “But do you happen to have this weekend’s physics homework on you?”

“Sure.” I unzip my bag to pull out the strange three-ring-binder that I use now instead of actual notebooks and pull out the sheet where I scribbled down the homework. “You can keep this if you want.”

“What?” Her eyebrows shoot up. “Won’t you need it as well?”

“Page 42. 1a, 2c, 5d, e, and f.” I recite the assigned problems from memory. “I think I’ll be okay.”

Heather grins, impressed. “Wow! That’s amazing. Do you have a photographic memory or something?”

I shrug, partly pleased, partly embarrassed. “I’m good at remembering things.”

The sort of memory that’s both a blessing and a curse because I remember everything I read. Word for word.

“Wow, I wish I was that good at remembering things. I can barely remember my locker combination most days.” Heather tucks the paper into her binder. “Thanks so much! You’re the best.”

“You’re welcome,” I say, smiling at the genuine gratitude in her tone. At Qala Academy, all I would’ve received for any kind of help I gave out was a nod and a quick *Thanks*—like nothing less was expected from the Smartest Girl in Class. As Heather leaves, my phone buzzes, the screen lighting up with a text.

*Alisha:* hey! sorry didn't write back before! wanna chat this weekend?

I grin. Yes! I text back. I feel like we haven't talked in WEEKS!

*Alisha:* MONTHS

*Alisha:* NO YEARS

*Alisha:* WHY'D YOU GO TO CANADA AND TAKE MY BFF  
WITH YOU????

I text back a series of heart emojis, my world temporarily restored.

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I drew a caricature of my physics teacher at Qala Academy in Class XI, during an especially boring chapter on relative velocity. While Verghese Madam stood by the blackboard and lectured, I added details to the sketch in my notebook. A flaring nostril. A curl matted to the forehead. An extra layer of flab under the starched folds of Verghese's gold-bordered kanjivaram sari.

It took thirty minutes for Alisha to give the game away, the snort lodged in her nostrils bursting into the air like a fart in the middle of a eulogy. It took another thirty seconds for Verghese to locate the culprit—*Soo-sun!*—before throwing a piece of chalk at my head and telling me to report to the headmistress for *disrupting the class*.

At Arthur Eldridge, it takes a grand total of two weeks for our English teacher to scold Malcolm for snickering with Ahmed in the back row. On the other hand, it takes about three seconds for Malcolm to smile in response and tell Mr. Zuric to *screw off*.

Mr. Zuric, with bachelor's degrees in arts and education and a master's in English literature, according to the biography in my course outline, a man twice as tall as Malcolm, blinks like an animal caught in the headlights of a van. His thick, pigmented hands fumble with the clip-on tie at his throat.

“What did you say?”

“I said, screw off,” Malcolm repeats calmly. “Sir.”

Giggles erupt in the classroom. Beside me Steve begins mumbling gibberish the way Mr. Zuric does when he’s talking out loud to himself or writing something on the blackboard. It makes Ahmed slam a hand on the table before covering his face, shoulders shaking.

“You shouldn’t say such things,” Mr. Zuric says, his face pink, his humiliation as palpable as the dried gum on the underside of my desk.

Our English teacher can recite yards of Shakespeare without looking into a book. But he is incapable of handling a rowdy class—especially a boy like Malcolm, who’ll walk out, whistling, before Mr. Zuric even thinks of throwing him out.

After class, I’ve often seen Malcolm mimicking Mr. Zuric’s unintelligible responses for his friends. He usually performs the acts right in front of my locker, leaning against the metal door, rotating the numerals of the sleek gold, single-digit combination lock Dad sent me from Jeddah. It’s my lock that interests him, I suppose: the only gold one in a row of round double-digit steel combination locks with fat bellies and dark blue dials. Whenever I approach, he moves away with a grin on his face—the same grin he gave me the day before school started, when I was looking at him from my bedroom window, still thinking about stupid things like being able to talk to a boy.

I no longer want to talk to Malcolm. And I think he senses that from the way he smiles whenever I hurry away, preferring to lug my four-pound textbooks in a backpack rather than putting them away in a roomy metal cabinet.

"Malcolm Vakil? He's not even handsome," I overheard a girl say in physics class this morning.

"Yeah, but he's so . . . cool." A giggle. "That don't-care attitude of his? It can be a turn-on."

"He's still giving old Zuric a hard time. It was funny at first, but now it's only getting disruptive."

"Malcolm wasn't always like this," Heather Dupuis said. "I still remember him from middle school. He was really nice back then. Friendly. The teachers thought he would be on the honor roll. But everything changed after his mom . . . well, you know. One day he came to school with bruises over his face. He told the teacher it was a biking accident, but everyone knew he was in a fight of some sort. He always is."

The conversation remains at the back of my mind, bubbles to surface in English class, when once again Mr. Zuric calls Malcolm to the front to pick up his assignment and the latter deliberately aggravates him by taking more time than needed.

On the way back, Malcolm slides his fingers across my desk. When I look up, he raises an eyebrow and winks. I glare at him wishing that Mr. Zuric could, like Verghese Madam, throw a piece of chalk at that spiky little head and hit the mark with painful accuracy.

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On Saturday morning, Amma and I go shopping at the Indian grocery store about ten blocks away from our condo, Amma muttering all the way about how inconvenient it is to lug our groceries back home on a crowded bus and how awful the transit system is over here. She's talking so loudly on the way back home that, at

one point, a couple of other passengers on the bus turn around and watch us with raised eyebrows.

“Amma, please!” I finally snap, feeling embarrassed. “People are staring. Also, I don’t see what the big deal is. Other people take the bus, too!”

It’s only when I finish that I register the silence around us, the smirks on the faces of some of the passengers, the fury and shame in my mother’s eyes before she turns away from me.

When we get back to the condo, Amma and I are no longer talking and I’m more than ready to lock myself in my room with my homework.

Can’t wait for our call, I text Alisha, wishing I didn’t have to wait another whole hour to Skype her. The message remains unread and, after a few minutes, I decide to get a head start on my calculus problem set.

An hour passes by. I log on, figuring Alisha will be here in a few minutes. When I finish the calculus, I look up: ten minutes gone. I send her a text—*waiting for you*—and decide to check Facebook. Another four minutes. By the time Alisha finally pops online, another whole hour has passed by, interspersed with a slew of missed calls and unread texts from my end.

“I’m so, so sorry, Suzy! I turned off my phone and my headphones were plugged into the computer!” Alisha lets out a *whoosh* of air. “With that badminton final against Abu Dhabi and that English debate on Monday, it’s so *busy* right now, I’ve barely any time to breathe!”

I’m tempted to tell her that I’m busy, too. The time I spent waiting for her could easily have been spent working on the *King Lear* essay that Mr. Zuric assigned us this Friday, five minutes before

class ended. But seeing Alisha's frazzled face now, her hair a mess the way it usually is after studying long hours, I feel my annoyance dissipate. "It's okay."

I tell her about my new school and classes, pleased when she laughs at my commentary about the cafeteria food. I also bring up the locker situation, finally admitting that it—*Malcolm*, a voice in my head corrects—bothers me more than I expected.

"Ignore him," Alisha says. "What's the point of having a locker if you don't use it? I'd kill to have a locker!"

"I'm not used to it." This is partially true. There are, after all, no lockers at Qala Academy. "Alisha, he . . . he stares at me. It makes me uncomfortable."

"What do you mean, he stares at you?" A frown mars Alisha's forehead. "Is he like, being perverted or something?"

"No," I say slowly. "It's not like that."

Malcolm does not leer at me or block my way when I need to use my locker. He always looks me in the face, as if mapping its contours, those too-pretty eyes of his clouding over with disappointment when he doesn't find what he's looking for.

"You know what, forget it. Forget I said anything."

"Hmmm."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"What you're not used to is boys hitting on you."

"He's not hitting on me!" I clap my hands over my mouth and whip my head around to make sure Amma is nowhere near my room.

Alisha rolls her eyes. "Chill, no one's there. Let's go back to this Malcolm dude—"

"Let's not," I interrupt, regretting having brought up the topic



in the first place. “He’s not important and it doesn’t matter in any case. I barely use that locker. I don’t have gym or a class where I’d need it to store clothes or stuff like that.”

“What about art? Don’t you need to store supplies?”

I say nothing.

“You *are* taking art, aren’t you?”

“Yes, yes, I am. But we don’t need to. Get supplies, that is. The teacher provides everything here.”

The teacher, Ms. Nguyen, who is only a few years older than us, squealed with delight when she saw my caricatures. “This is *so* good!” she said, holding up the one I made of Verghese Madam. “Almost professional.” She even asked me to do something with them for my final project, worth 30 percent of the class grade.

“Thank God.” Alisha looks relieved. “You have real talent, Suzy. And the great part is that you can do something about it. Not like the rest of us here who are stuck with the option of doctor, lawyer, engineer, or accountant.”

“I doubt it. When I first signed up for art, Amma said, ‘Oh, why art? Why not French? That’ll be more useful!’” Alisha and I roll our eyes. “She only gave in when Appa backed me up, saying I needed to have some fun with my other courses.”

The irony of my father classifying a school course as *fun* did not escape me, but in this case, I didn’t mind the comparison.

“But your dad is still a little more flexible than your mom, right?” Alisha insists hopefully. “Maybe you should ask *him* about art school.”

It isn’t a bad idea. Appa has always been more receptive of my art than Amma. It’s probably why he’s my favorite parent—even though I would never tell Amma that. When I was little, he’d often put up the drawings I made for him on the fridge. In Class VII,

when one of my sketches—a portrait of my youngest cousin from India—placed third in Qala Academy’s art exhibition, he took a picture of it on his phone and sent it to all our relatives in India.

“Or better yet, rebel, dummy!” Alisha says, when I don’t respond. “What’s the point of being a teenager otherwise?”

“Yeah, well, sorry I don’t meet your expectations,” I joke.

But the comment stings. I wonder if this attitude of mine—this lack of rebellion—stands out to my new classmates as well, driving them away from me. *Who, Susan? Oh, she’s no fun. She only studies all the time.* I’d heard the comments before, even in Jeddah.

“. . . and I need to . . . Susan? Susan! Soo-sun!” Alisha shouts into the mic, Verghese Madam-style, jerking me back into the conversation.

“Sorry,” I say. “I zoned out.”

“It’s okay. I need to go. Studying. Again.” She groans.

I sigh. “Bye, Alisha.”

“Bye, Suzy.”

I watch Alisha blip offline—after fourteen minutes of conversation—and turn back to my binder, to the neat pages of physics and calculus homework I’ve already completed. I could get started on the *King Lear* essay, a thousand-word literary analysis. But with the deadline two weeks away, it suddenly no longer feels like a priority.

It would not be like this in Jeddah. In Jeddah, I would be reading ahead like Alisha and the others, trying to prepare myself for my classes the next day. It was almost mandatory over there, especially during your final year, with the Class XII board exams hanging over your head like a guillotine.

It’s one of the few things about my old school that I do not miss. Here, classes are more relaxed. Even before a quiz, I often hear

students discussing other things—crappy bosses at work, the latest *Game of Thrones* episode, younger and older siblings, boy-friends, girlfriends, unrequited crushes. No one is squeezing their eyes shut and muttering prayers; no one is feverishly going over their notes.

Heather Dupuis smiles and says hi now whenever she sees me in physics. I smile and greet her back. This is usually the extent of our conversation—Heather has other friends she normally talks to during class—but it's nice to be acknowledged when I'm still miles away from fitting in with the other kids at school.

Amma and I might not stand out for being brown-skinned in this new city, but assimilating into the culture is another story. My father does not get this. He talks about *becoming Canadian* like it's a destination: a utopia of privilege that comes with a first-world citizenship, a house instead of an apartment, two cars, and a dog in the backyard. "That's what so many people did before us," he told me when we first talked about moving. "That is what we will do as well."

We, as in all three of us, not just me and Amma.

In Jeddah, Indian expats joke about a whole street of buildings across from the Mississauga Civic Centre, where new immigrants buy apartments to deposit their wives and kids in, and then return to their tax-free, high-paying jobs in the Gulf. Begumpura, they call the place: the City of Wives. "Now the City is expanding thanks to your father," Amma told me sarcastically, and I knew she wasn't referring to Mississauga.

Thoughts of Amma remind me of our argument this morning. I sigh, knowing I shouldn't have blown up at her like that. I find her in the living room, her nose buried in a romance novel, completely ignoring me even when I clear my throat.

"Amma, I'm sorry."

Silence.

"I shouldn't have yelled at you like that."

Amma's mouth purses ever so slightly at one corner. She turns the page, saying nothing.

"Please, Amma."

I'm thinking of the numerous ways I've groveled before my mother in the past and which ones have worked, when Amma replies, "Sorry doesn't make a dead person alive."

Okay, she's talking. A good sign.

"Oh?" I walk casually to the sofa and sit down. "Has my amma been replaced by a ghost? Maybe I should check and see."

Amma's eyes shoot daggers at me. "Don't you dare!"

I lunge, letting out my best horror-movie laugh. It cracks through my mother's stern facade, makes her burst into laughter as well, even though she grabs hold of my fingers before they reach her ticklish left side. Her arm wraps around my neck and draws me close, cloaking me with the smells of my childhood: steamed rice and jasmine oil, spices and coffee.

"I'm sorry, too," she says now. "I shouldn't be so critical of everything."

"It's okay."

"By the way, your Yvonne Chechi is visiting her parents for the weekend," Amma says, referring to Bridgita Aunty's daughter, who is also my second cousin. "Bridgita told me she's arriving this afternoon and that she wants to speak to you and *catch up on all the gossip* before she goes."

I laugh, a small weight lifting off my shoulders. Yvonne isn't really my older sister, but I've always called her chechi. During large family gatherings in India, Yvonne and I always ended up

together at the same end of a table or side by side on a sofa, mostly ignored by the rest of our cousins. “The two non-resident outcasts,” Yvonne liked to joke.

Yvonne is the only one apart from Appa who is capable of deflecting my mother’s attention from me when I’m being criticized, the only person in our family who saw—and fully approved of—my art.

“Can Yvonne Chechi come visit?” I ask, making a mental note to call her tonight.

“She goes back to Hamilton tomorrow night for university. Next time we’ll tell her to stay longer, yes?”

Amma gives me a squeeze and, for a moment, I’m thrown back into the past. To a time when my feelings for her simply ranged between love and more love.

“Amma, what if I want to take art at university?” The question floats out, hovers multihued in the air like a bubble.

*What if?*

My mother squeezes tighter. “Come, kanna.” Her arm slides off. “It’s time for lunch.”

I follow her to the kitchen, even though my heart has sunk to somewhere around my knees. “Amma, I really think—”

“Be serious, Suzy.” She lifts a lid off the pot of sambhar and turns on the stove. “It’s one thing to paint as a hobby, but as a career? You’ll only be stuck with a liberal arts degree that will leave you unemployed or married too early.” She undoes the lid of the Crock-Pot holding idlis, and ladles a few of the steaming rice cakes onto a plate. “Look at what happened to me.”

“It’s not the same thing!” Not this again.

“Isn’t it? I thought I was following my dream as well, marrying your father before I even got my degree. He said I would be able

to combine both—my love for him and my love for science.” Her laughter is as rich as coffee, and as bitter. “I thought it was the most romantic thing he ever said to me. It probably was.”

This is the part of her love story that Amma never tells our relatives: the bit where her Happy Ever After turns into a Lifetime of Drudgery. In me, Amma sees a way to live the future she could have had if she’d stayed in college in India, busy with Bunsen burners, instead of spending the last sixteen years behind a kitchen stove in Saudi Arabia.

“I’ll ask Appa,” I say defiantly. “I’ll see what he says.”

“Fine.” There’s an oddly pitying look on my mother’s face. “Come, now. Let’s set the table for lunch.”