

YOU  
BRING  
THE  
DISTANT  
NEAR

mitali perkins

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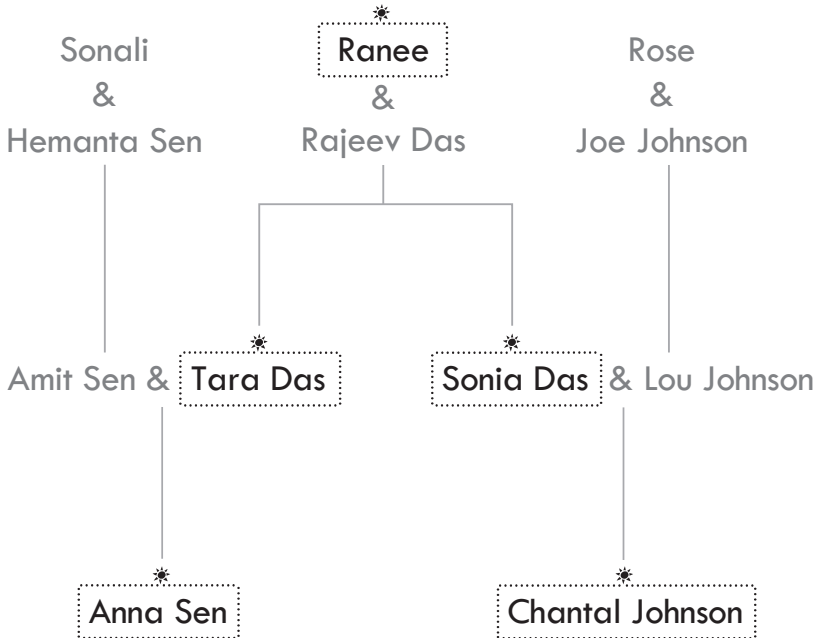
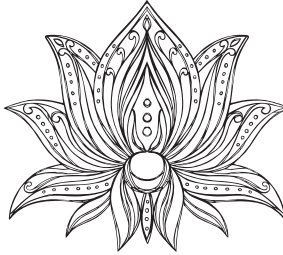
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*For Jacqueline Perkins Draine,  
my American mom*

# FAMILY TREE



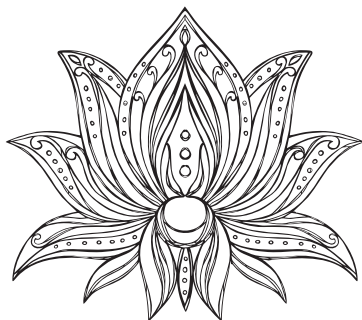
*Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not.*

*Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own.*

*Thou hast brought the distant near and made a brother  
of the stranger. I am uneasy at heart when I have to leave  
my accustomed shelter; I forgot that there abides the old  
in the new, and that there also thou abidest.*

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE,

from "Poems"



# Race at the British Club

1965

**T**HE SWIMMERS HAVE FINISHED THEIR RACES and are basking in the sun. It's almost time for the beginners' event. Tara kneels at the shallow edge, giving her little sister last-minute instructions. Floating inside her ring, Sonia pretends to listen.

Their mother stands alone by the deep end, sari-clad under the red monsoon umbrella she carries as portable shade from the West African sun. Kwasi, a Ghanaian waiter, offers her a bottle of icy cola. She refuses it. But the English mothers accept the cold drinks. Wearing starched blouses, armpits stained with sweat, they cluster in tight groups of two or three along the length of the pool. Their words melt

into the sound of water lapping against children—the steamy Accra air softening even the crisp cadences of their accents. They speak briefly to Kwasi. But never to the Indian woman.

Sonia and Tara can swim at the British High Commission club only because their father works for a British company. The four Das family members are the only dark-skinned people at the club who aren't employees—something even Sonia, at age eight, can't help noticing. She feels invisible here. Sometimes she's tempted to smash a cola bottle against the cement, but she doesn't want to make more work for Kwasi. She likes how he greets her in Twi: *Eti sen? How are you?* Eh ya, she answers. *I'm fine.*

Now, with the pool water lapping against her skin, she's ready.

"Time for the youngest racers to take their marks." The British woman who's organized this day of races likes bringing order through her megaphone.

"Show them what the Das family can do, Sunny," Tara says above her.

Eight milky-skinned, freckled children bobbing in their rings take their places along the wall beside Sonia. They're all six or seven years old, but three are bigger than she is. *I'm older*, she tells herself. *I'll outsmart them.* Her toes push against the rough concrete of the pool floor. She clutches

her white plastic ring under her arms, eyes fixed on the flaking blue paint on the far wall. She has to swim there and back. Fast.

Tara crouches near Sonia on the edge of the pool, silent now. The whistle blows.

"Good start, Bobby!" a mother calls.

"Go, Sunny, go!" Tara shouts.

Sonia pummels the water with her arms and pushes it behind her with her legs. Her eyes are fixed on the far wall, which is drawing closer by the second. Faster and faster she goes, churning the chlorine into the air. Redheads and towheads are falling out of her line of vision. The wall is just in front of her. All she has to do is touch it, turn, and swim back. The others are almost half a length behind her now.

She's going to win.

She's going to beat them all.

But just before she reaches the wall, she sees a tilted dome of red perched beyond it. Her mother is squatting at the edge of the pool, one arm outstretched toward the water. The hem of her sari is wet.

Sonia senses what's about to happen. She tries to slow her momentum through the water, but it's too late. Her mother catches hold of the white plastic ring and hauls it to the edge. Sonia fights, bracing her feet against the wall, but the



pull is too strong. Her mother's hands grip her tightly under her arms and her body slides up, out of the pool, out of the ring.

"You've won, Baby," her mother says, throwing a towel around Sonia and pulling her into the squat of her sari.

"No! NO! NO!"

The other racers touch the wall, turn, and begin to bob and kick and splash back to the shallow end. Tara is running along the pavement toward her sister and mother, weaving through swimmers, waiters, and British women. None of them are watching the race in the pool. Every eye is on Sonia, who is bellowing and struggling to escape. Wildly, her fists beat against the arms and thighs that enclose her.

Tara reaches them, panting. "Ma, the race wasn't over!"

"That. Woman. Said. One. Lap," their mother answers, still wrestling to contain Sonia.

"One *lap* means there and back! She could have won!"

The winner has reached the finish line. Belatedly, the distracted crowd notices and begins to cheer.

"It is only a game, Baby," her mother says. "Be quiet."

With a howl of rage, Sonia breaks out of their mother's grasp. She flings the towel on the cement and kicks the umbrella. Then she runs to hide in the coconut trees on the far side of the pool.

“Ekhane fire ai. *Ekhunee ai.*” Her mother commands her return. *Immediately.*

Sonia doesn't obey. Ma has instructed them to use only English at the club. If she can break the rules, why can't Sonia?

All the British members are still watching them. The Das family is no longer invisible. Kwasi's is the only face that's smiling. He flashes Sonia a thumbs-up.

As if given a cue, the heavy sky suddenly empties barrels of rain over the club. In an instant, sheets of water crash on the tin roofs of the clubhouse and flood across lawns and cement. Swimmers and non-swimmers squeal, take their mothers' outstretched hands, and race through the club doors held open by Kwasi. Tara grabs the umbrella and holds it over herself and their mother as they, too, hurry to shelter.

Tara turns before they enter the clubhouse. “Come soon, Sunny!” she calls toward the coconut grove, and then she's gone.

Hair sparkling, skin gleaming, uniform drenched with rain, Kwasi takes one last look at Sonia, then disappears behind the closed doors.

Under the trees, the downpour is making the coconut fronds applaud. Sonia's sobs slowly dwindle into silence. She strides out into the rain, picks up the discarded white ring

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still floating at the edge of the pool, and squeezes her body back into it. The air and her skin and her swimming costume are so wet that her leap into the pool doesn't come with the usual shock. A drumbeat of Ghanaian rain keeps time as she paddles and strokes and kicks to the finish line.

The background of the page is a light gray. In the four corners, there are decorative white line-art patterns that resemble stylized leaves or petals, each filled with a grid of small dots. In the center of the page, there is a large, intricate white line-art flower with many layers of petals, each also containing a grid of small dots. Overlaid on this central flower is the text.

1

# Strangers

1973–74





## Sonia

### Home Is Where the Stories Are

**S**TARRY IS CHANNELING TWIGGY, THE BRITISH supermodel, as we board the BOAC plane in Heathrow Airport.

“We’re moving to New York,” she’s saying to her audience at the front of the cabin. Eyes watch and ears tune in. “Father’s found a fabulous post there.”

I’ve had a front-row seat to my sister’s chameleon act for years, but it still amazes me. Tara (“Starry” to me) is Indian with black hair. Twiggy is white and blond. Yet the resemblance between them is uncanny. It’s more than the trendy bun, slender body, slightly Cockney accent, and clunky earrings. It’s even more than the striped red, blue, and yellow

dress and red tights—an exact copy of Twiggy’s *Vogue* cover outfit that Ma sewed on a neighbor’s borrowed machine. There’s something Twiggy-ish coming from *inside* Starry that colors how she moves and talks and breathes.

“Oh, that’s lovely,” answers the stewardess. “You’ll have to visit the theater. And the shopping on Fifth Avenue is smashing. Where are you from?”

“London,” Starry responds, without hesitation.

I’m not sure I’d answer that question with just one word, like my sister. Where *are* we from? It’s complicated.

Ma nudges me to enter an empty row of two seats. I settle into the one by the window and she plops down beside me. *Blimey*. I wish she’d let Starry sit there. I want to write in my diary, and my sister’s presence is the next best thing to being alone. With all the packing and paperwork, privacy has been hard to find these last few weeks.

The stewardess is checking out Ma’s sari and the red teep on her forehead. “But where were you *born*?” she asks my sister.

“In India,” Starry answers. “But we moved to London when I was nine.”

The pilot’s voice crackles through the intercom, telling us that the plane is now fully boarded. Starry takes the empty seat across the aisle from Ma, and the stewardess pats her

shoulder. “Well, love, we’re *all* leaving London now. Fasten your seat belt, why don’t you? I think the nice fellow next to you wants to help.”

I lean forward. Sure enough, a young American soldier is showing my sister how to operate a seat belt—something she’s known how to do since we were tiny. I have a surge of hope that Ma might tell Starry and me to switch seats. It’s always safer for me to sit next to anyone male. But Ma listens for a minute to the soldier’s voice; observes his gestures, medals, stripes, and uniform; and says nothing. *Oh, that’s right*. If he’s a “posh” young man (read: educated) raised in a “good family” (read: white or Bengali), Ma doesn’t mind when Starry gets his attention. Baba always minds. He doesn’t want boys around either of us, and would have taken that seat if he were here.

Ma’s eyes close as the stewardesses busy themselves with preflight chores. The older-Starry-like lines of her face look tired. Maybe she’ll fall asleep. If this move to New York has been exhausting, she has nobody to blame but herself. She hasn’t been content anywhere we’ve lived. Baba faults her for making us leave India. We joined him once for a few months in Ghana, but she hated it. After that, we stayed in London while Baba traveled to Singapore, Malaysia, Cameroon, and the Philippines on short-term engineering contracts. His income



wasn't steady, and landlords didn't like letting flats to "curry-cookers." So we had to shift within London three times. And our application for British citizenship kept getting denied. Baba came and went, came and went, and the fighting between them got worse. Especially when Starry started attracting men as well as boys.

While Baba was in Malaysia, a drunk neighbor banged on our door shouting, "Marry me, my Indian princess!" Baba was so upset when he heard, he wanted to move us back to Calcutta. I was furious. Calcutta?! Where my grandmothers cried because I wasn't a boy? *How can you give a strange middle-aged British man that much power over our lives?* I demanded. *I'm sorry the world is like that, Mishti,* Baba answered. *But my job is to protect you girls from those kinds of idiots.* Thankfully, for once Ma agreed with me. *I'm not moving in with your mother,* she argued. *I'll be judged right and left. No privacy. No freedom.*

It was the middle of the night—their favorite time to fight. I tossed in my bed and my sister stuffed fingers in her ears. *Find a permanent job! Ma yelled. Move us to America!*

And now he has.

I don't blame Ma for not wanting to return to India. She doesn't talk much about her girlhood in the village. But Baba describes his ancestral jute farm with bright eyes: coconut

and mango trees, perfect for a small boy to climb; a sparkling pond full of tasty fish; lush fields, green after the monsoon. But that land was taken during the war and isn't even in India now, thanks to Partition. All we could return to is a rented, joint-family flat in the overcrowded city of Calcutta, where Ma's inability to have a son would be a constant subject of conversation for other women.

The plane begins to rumble along the tarmac, picking up speed. I glance at Ma. She's definitely asleep now. My thoughts are about to boil over. Carefully, so I don't wake her, I reach for my satchel and pull out my diary and pen. There's something about putting words on a page in private that makes me feel powerful in public. It's funny, even though I love stories so much, everything *I* write about is real. Thoughts, emotions, ideas, and beliefs. It's weird how writing them down gives them weight. Baba gifted me a new notebook just before he left for New York. It's only half full because I've been writing in small letters. Shifting the satchel to block the view in case Ma's eyes open, I turn to a blank page.

*Here's to a new life in New York! A fresh start for the Das family! Maybe we'll have more money. Which means maybe Ma and Baba won't fight as much. Dig, nag, dig, nag, goes Ma, and then BOOM! Baba*

*explodes. I don't know why she can't see him the way Starry and I do. Maybe it's because she was only eighteen when her parents married her off. Baba got to pick her out of three possible brides, but she had no choice.*

The plane takes off and I watch London disappear beneath a bank of clouds. *Forever?* I wonder. After making sure Ma is still asleep, I keep writing.

*It's sad that I'm not sadder to leave. I'll miss Samantha and Elsa, but they promised to write. I'll miss my visits to the library, and Starry's and my tea parties with scones, clotted cream, and cucumber sandwiches. I loved our strolls with Baba along the Thames and the times he took us to the zoo or Trafalgar Square.*

*I'm hoping for more solitude in the Land of the Free. To write, to read, to think. In London, I was only allowed to go to the library and the park across the street alone. I'm better off than my sister, though. Since that midnight visit from the drunken neighbor, Starry's not allowed to go outside by herself at all anymore.*

I lean forward again. Now that Ma's head is drooping with sleep, the flirting across the aisle has intensified. I

don't worry much about Starry—she's good at protecting herself—but I like watching her in action. I study the soldier's face: blue eyes; tan skin; nice, defined jaw. You'd think my stare would draw his gaze, but he pays no attention to me. Not with Starry laughing and chatting next to him. Growing up with a beautiful older sister is like wearing a veil. *Doesn't it bother you at all?* Elsa and Samantha used to ask. *Not really*, I answered, and left it at that. I go back to my writing.

*I wish I could stay invisible in boys' eyes. Lately, the few that notice me don't focus on my face, anyway. My stupid breasts seem to be getting bigger by the month. I've been trying to make them look smaller by squashing them into bras that are two sizes too small. I support American bra-burners fighting for equal rights, but I don't think I'd have the courage to take mine off. Thank God for loose T-shirts. One day, someone special is going to look past all of this exterior stuff to see the inner me. No chameleon skin required. He'll likely be an American, but I'm hoping he'll still be a bit like my Mr. Darcy. Mysterious, reserved, kind, honorable. Those qualities last longer than a nice jawline. Although Darcy probably had that, too.*

Ma stirs, so I tuck my diary back into my satchel and pull out the secondhand copy of *Pride and Prejudice* Baba gave me. Is this the ninth or the tenth time I've read it? I don't keep track. *Why keep reading the same book?* Ma always asks. *What a waste of time.* She doesn't realize how easily I can make myself at home in the Bennet family's drawing room. And how much I want to feel that way in our home.

Elizabeth's good company and the sizzle of Mr. Darcy make the eight-hour flight across the Atlantic go by in a flash. I stay in Regency England as meals are served, while Ma sleeps on, and throughout Starry's chatting and laughter. It's only when the stewardess announces that we're about to land at John F. Kennedy International Airport that I put the book away.

Our plane descends through the clouds and my new city sparkles below, dazzling in the morning light. We soar over tall spires and blocky buildings, over a wide river jeweled with boats and spanned by bridges. Then, suddenly, there she is—that famous coppery green woman, raising her torch high in the harbor.

*Welcome, Sonia Das!* she seems to call up to me.

*Thanks, Ms. Liberty! Is that a sari you're wearing? I hope not.*

She doesn't answer, but I'm almost sure she's smiling. If it's a sari, I'm almost certain there's no bra under it.

The wheels come down, and we hit the tarmac with a *ta-da!* bang and a long glide. The soldier is trying to get Starry's contact information, and my sister is sweetly but firmly refusing him. "I don't know our address yet, John," she says, pulling out a mirror to adjust her bangs and add more lipstick. John gives up, watching my sister wistfully. Poor fellow. Join the queue.

Ma wakes up with a gasp, then straightens the blue silk sari Baba bought for her in Singapore. She glances across at Starry, and then swivels to take stock of my appearance. I brace myself. Sure enough, that familiar twitch of displeasure passes across her face. It's gone in a moment, but after years of rejecting her Light & Lovely skin-bleaching cream, I know what makes her wince. The darkness of my skin.

Which idiot in history decided that lighter pigment was more attractive than having more melanin? I have no idea, but somehow he managed to infect the whole world with his stupidity—including my own mother. I just don't understand it. My skin is soft and smooth and the color reminds me of rain-drenched earth. But it's as if the darkness of it keeps

Ma from noticing my assets: curly hair, a round face that makes babies smile, deep dimples in both cheeks, big eyes that notice details other people miss.

I like my face, even if Ma doesn't. I resemble Baba, and he's got presence.

We collect our carry-on luggage. Blue-eyed Soldier tries to hug Starry goodbye. Somehow my sister manages to avoid his arms—and Ma's eyes—as we disembark. Admiration from the “right” kind of boy is okay with Ma. Physical contact, though? Absolutely forbidden by both our parents. And we need our mother to be in a good mood. Starry knows this, too. Ma's about to see Baba for the first time in six months.

After a last longing look at Starry, her ex-seatmate flashes his U.S. passport and leaves customs and immigration. It takes *us* forever with our Indian passports and visas, but finally we make it through the blur of lines, paperwork, and questions from security agents.

And there, outside the opening and closing doors, is Baba.

Arms outstretched.

Tall, robust, cheerful.

Splendid.

I barrel into the smell of pipe tobacco and the scratch of his tweed suit. “Mishti!” he calls. It feels like forever since I've heard that nickname.

Oh, how I've missed him! The Das family, reunited again!

Starry hugs him next. As he draws her close, Twiggy vanishes and she's herself again. My sister. "Star!" I hear him whisper.

That's his nickname for her—what "Tara" means in English. When I was two, I started calling her "Starry" instead of "Didi," which is what most Bengali girls call an older sister. Bengalis are famous for nicknames—we each end up with about a dozen. Only outsiders call us by our proper names. I'm "Baby" to Ma (even at fifteen), "Sunny" to Starry, but I've always been Baba's "Sweetie."

Our father is wearing his hair longer, curls brushing his collar.

"You grew sideburns!" I say.

Starry and I stick to English with our parents, each other, and everybody else. Baba and Ma, though, always use Bangla at home, and speak English only with outsiders. This time, though, Baba uses English with us.

"Like them? They're all the rage. Your Baba's become a stylish young American." He smiles. "Everyone thinks I'm a pop star."

Starry and I laugh. We're hanging on to him from either side, but even if one of his arms were available, he wouldn't touch Ma. It's not proper for a married couple to show



affection in public. I can see his eyes, though, taking in the graceful lines of Ma's sari and searching her face. She gives him a small smile, and hope simmers in my heart.

Baba tells us he's borrowed a car from another Bengali family who live in the building where he's rented a flat. We head to the airport garage, towing our suitcases. "The flat's not big," he tells Ma, in Bangla, of course. "New Yorkers don't call them flats, by the way. They say 'apartment.' I've already started saving to buy a house."

"That is good news," Ma says, smiling at him for the second time in a half hour. It's a record. Starry and I exchange a quick glance to mark the significance of it.

The car's old and beat up, but roomy. The upholstery smells like fenugreek and mustard seed. In London, Baba didn't drive much, and I can tell he's still not used to it. As we leave the airport, he concentrates in silence while the three of us take in the sights: tall, dark buildings that block the sun; that same gray river I saw from above; bridges coated with rust; and dented yellow taxis racing by on either side. It looks less magical than it did from the sky. I can't see the statue at all. Will this place become familiar soon? When people ask me

where I'm from, will this be my answer? *I'm a New Yorker. From Flushing, Queens.*

"Almost there," Baba says as we pull off the main road. His hands are clenched on the steering wheel and the back of his neck looks sweaty.

The car stops in front of a large brick building that looks deserted. "This will be your school, girls," Baba tells us. Starry leans across me to get a glimpse.

"You'll be able to walk here from our flat, I mean, *apartment*. And that lorry is a *truck* here. The suitcases are in the *trunk*, not the boot. You'll have to learn how to speak American."

He starts driving again. One more block and we stop in front of another building. Adults and children both are entering and exiting through the open doors. I read the sign beside the steps: QUEENS PUBLIC LIBRARY, FLUSHING BRANCH.

"This is for you, Mishti," Baba says, smiling at me in the rearview mirror. "Five blocks from our new apartment."

Libraries. How I love them. My source of stories. And solitude. Where the musty smell of books greets me like the perfume in our grandmother's embrace. My old branch was two blocks from our London flat, and I went almost daily. The librarian and I both got teary when I said goodbye. And this

library is almost as close! I'll get a library card tomorrow and carry back my first installment of books. Maybe I can also find a quiet corner to write in peace.

Ma is watching the patrons come and go. "Do these people live in our neighborhood?" she asks.

"Some come by train, I suppose," Baba answers. "This is the branch for Flushing."

He starts driving again and we pass a playground full of children playing on swings and slides. I'm sitting behind Ma, so I see her profile as she surveys the scene. She's not smiling. After one long, wide-eyed stare, she turns to Baba. "Is this a dangerous neighborhood?"

"Not at all," Baba answers.

The children are laughing, shouting, running. Acting like kids in playgrounds everywhere. There's nothing dangerous in sight. It's only when I imagine how it looks to Ma that I notice what I missed with my own eyes: every child in the playground is black. Some are as dark as me, some lighter. They remind me of the kids in Ghana who used to play outside the gates of the British High Commission club.

Baba drives on, turning a corner.

"You'll have to stay inside the flat after school, girls," Ma says. "And that means both of you."

Starry glances over at me. That's been a rule for her, but not for me. Baba gives Ma a quick look, and I know he's surprised, too.

"I walked to the library by myself in London," I say.

"You can go out with your sister," Ma says, and her voice is stern. "But I can't let you wander around on your own in a place like this."

A place like *what*, exactly? "But, Ma—" I start to protest.

"*Chup!*" she says, with a hand in the air.

Baba catches my eye in the rearview mirror and his raised eyebrows are a warning not to argue. What in the world? I'll suffocate if I can't go out by myself. Already more restrictions than ever in the Land of the Free? *I'll find a way*, I promise the empty pages in my notebook.

Our new "home" is on the third floor of a tall, narrow building across from the playground. The apartment is made up of five hot rooms—two bedrooms, one bath, a living room, and a dining room/kitchen—that feel like the inside of a tandoori oven. But it came furnished, which means our father didn't have to buy anything. Baba's prepared his usual for dinner—fish, rice, and lentils—and stocked the fridge with necessities. He also has a few surprise purchases waiting for us. Starry squeals over a secondhand television, I get a

fresh notebook, and Ma looks pleased with a new sewing machine and reams of different kinds of cloth, buttons, zippers, and other supplies.

The machine brings Ma's third smile of the day—tallied by Starry and me through another silent look.

"No uniforms in American schools," Baba says. "But take your time, Ranee. The girls have clothes from London. And maybe they can wear the salwar kameez outfits my mother sent."

"I'll sew quickly," Ma says. "They need American clothes."

Baba sighs, but decides not to battle over this. "I'll leave that to you, Ranee. School starts in three weeks."

Finally—something my mother and I agree on. I hate how the cling of a sari and the cut of a salwar showcase my curves. Even the pleated skirt and tailored blouse of my school uniform always felt awkward to me. But dungarees—I mean *jeans*—and T-shirts? They're the Land-of-the-Free outfits that America exports to the rest of the world. I wore them in London on weekends, and that's what I plan to wear on school days here. As for Starry, I doubt she'll choose jeans for her first day, but I'm 100 percent sure she's not putting on a salwar. Ma keeps her in up-to-the-minute fashion, which has always been British until now.

Starry switches on the television and makes herself

comfortable on the faded sofa. “Three weeks is plenty of time to become an American.”

“Don’t forget you’re Bengali, too,” Baba says. “Which reminds me, Star. I’ve hired our neighbor to keep up your harmonium lessons. And your Rabindra Sangeet.”

My sister groans. “Do I have to, Baba?”

“You’re a Bengali girl, aren’t you? Tagore songs are a must. I’m afraid you’re forgetting how to speak our beautiful language.”

My sister doesn’t say it aloud, but I see it clearly on her face: *So is Sunny. Why doesn’t she have to take lessons?*

Starry’s expressions are easy to read. Her Twiggy bun is gone, and Baba tugs gently on her braid. “I’m sorry, Star, but you’re the one with your mother’s musical talent. Hearing her sing ‘Utal Dhara Badal Jhare’ when we first met took my breath away.”

Ma looks pleased. Starry and I have heard how our parents met before their marriage, chaperoned by our grandparents in Ma’s living room. Our parents didn’t speak to each other, but Ma served tea, sang that Tagore song, and—according to Baba’s version—fireworks exploded and a thousand sitars burst into music.

He’s right about Starry inheriting Ma’s talent. My sister’s paraded out at parties to make Bengali guests cry, her

flute-like voice adding even more meaning to Rabindranath Tagore's songs. Even Starry has to admit the man was talented. His words can almost make you smell jasmine, hear the river splash against the side of a boat, feel a tropical breeze on your skin. Starry only performs Rabindra Sangeet when Baba asks, though. She usually sings in the shower, right before we go to bed. She loves to belt out tunes by the Beatles or the Carpenters.

Later, for her first shower in America, she chooses Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence." I fall asleep to the familiar sound of my sister singing, and the unfamiliar sound of our parents laughing in the room next to ours.

The next morning, Baba kisses us goodbye, throws a smile in Ma's direction, and leaves for work. I try not to resent his freedom to race downstairs and stride alone to the train station. Why didn't he push back when Ma issued her new rule for us to stay inside?

"Don't worry, Sunny," Starry whispers as I watch Baba cross the street from our bedroom window. "Let her get used to life here—she'll allow you to go out alone soon."

"I'd like to visit the library," I say, my voice low. "Today, if possible."

"I'll take care of it."

It's a good thing I have Starry in my corner. We both know it's harder for Ma to say no to her than to me.

We spend the first part of the morning unpacking and cleaning. Ma makes us scrub every corner of the flat and turn the mattresses before putting on fresh sheets. "We don't know who lived here before us," she says. "I have a feeling they weren't clean people."

The rooms don't look dirty to me, and I hate that Ma is making this assumption. But I don't say anything. Instead, I scour the toilet and shower stall with energy, making sure she sees my effort.

At eleven o'clock, the three of us take a break to sip tea. I open my mouth to speak, but my sister throws me a look that clearly says, *Shut up and let me handle this*.

"Ma, how would it be if Sunny and I take a walk?" she asks, her tone sweet and polite. I do my part by placing a tin of buttery biscuits in front of our mother.

Ma sighs, takes a biscuit, and dips it into her tea. "I don't know what kind of neighborhood your father picked. The sooner we move, the better." She chews quietly, but there's a crease in her brow. "All right, then. But make sure you return in an hour."

I take time to clear away the tea before rushing to our



bedroom. My notebook is stashed beneath my socks in a drawer. Should I take it along? An hour is barely enough time to walk there, sign up for a card *and* pick out books, and then walk back. Writing is going to have to wait. I grab my empty satchel and Starry's hand and race down the stairs to freedom.

The playground is packed with kids riding bikes, playing hopscotch, and shouting at each other over the rules of different games.

"Hardly any white people in this neighborhood," Starry says. "That's why Ma doesn't like it."

"I know. I wish she wouldn't think that way."

Pulling my sister's hand, I make us pick up the pace. The streets are sizzling in the sun. London was never steamy like this, and both of us are sweating. Three boys draped across a park bench turn their heads to watch us. They're younger than me—the oldest looks about fourteen.

I let my satchel strap slip down my shoulder, hiding my rear end, but Starry's Twiggy-slim hips can't help swinging gracefully. Sweat has made her white T-shirt cling to her willowy body. My curves are hidden underneath a loose T-shirt I found at a London flea market that reads BAN BEAUTY PAGEANTS and I'm wearing an old pair of jeans one size too big for me.

A high-pitched voice calls after us. "Girlfriends? That's soooooo sexy."

Is this child asking my sister to be his girlfriend? Starry flicks a look of contempt over her shoulder. "Try again *after* you start shaving, little man," she says, and keeps walking. I notice, though, that she drops my hand.

The other boys snicker, but that doesn't stop their friend. "Cool accent, foxy mama. But in America, chicks don't hold hands unless they're dating. *Each other*, I mean."

I turn to face him.

"Don't engage," Starry tells me in a low voice. "It's not worth it."

But I'm irritated. This child needs to be schooled. "America's a free country. Anyone can hold hands. And we are not '*chicks*,' we are human beings."

His almost-man eyes look me over, head to toe, hip to bra, and back again. "Hold mine then, my curvy queen."

"The tall one's foxier, Gerald," his friend says.

Gerald tucks a comb into his hair. "Not in my eyes. The darker the berry, the sweeter the juice."

Now I'm furious. "You foul boy. Women are not objects—"

Starry tries to pull me away. "Let's go, Sunny."

Suddenly, a fire truck pulls up right beside the playground, siren shrieking. Our three hecklers jump up and race over to

where it's parking. I look around for smoke and flames, but instead of a fire, I see a grinning fireman descending from the truck carrying a big wrench and an even bigger radio. He puts the radio on the sidewalk and turns up the music. Drums start to beat and a deep, mellow voice sings, "Love and happiness, yeah, something that can make you do wrong, make you do right . . ." With two strong twists, he loosens the cap of a hydrant, releasing a shining, sunlit arc of water.

Dozens of children stream out of buildings lining the street. They're wearing swimming costumes or shorts and bare chests. Within minutes they're squealing with glee and leaping around the hydrant. They look relaxed and at home, girls and boys dancing side by side, singing along with the music. I even spot our heckler Gerald and his buddies, shirts off and jeans soaked to the skin.

Sweat is trickling down my back. I wish I could join them. We watch for a few minutes, and then make our way to the library. I take the stairs two at a time, stride through the main doors, and head for the front desk. Starry follows more slowly.

"What can I do for you?" the librarian asks. Hers is the first white face we've seen today.

"I'd like a card, please," I answer. "Sonia Das is my name."

"Oh, what a lovely accent," the librarian says, handing me a form. "Are you from England?"

I nod and start filling in the blanks on the application. Books are waiting.

"We grew up in London," my sister says, and she already sounds more American than she had on the plane. "But we're originally from India."

The librarian peers over her glasses at me and then at Starry. "Oh, are you sisters?"

"Yes, I'm seventeen, and my sister's fifteen," Starry answers. "We've just moved into the neighborhood."

I hand back my completed form. "That was fast," the librarian tells me. "Doesn't your sister want a card, too?"

"No, thanks," Starry says. "I prefer the telly—I mean television. Do you know any shows that might introduce us to life in America?"

The librarian shakes her head as she scans my application. "I don't watch much television myself. This looks fine."

She hands me a new card, and I slip it carefully into my empty satchel.

"Perhaps you've heard about a show that teenagers like?" Starry persists.

"My nieces talk quite a bit about a show called *The Brady Bunch*. It's set in a suburb of big houses, and lawns, and all—" She looks from me to Starry and back again. "Well, mostly

people of European descent. I'm not sure how it will help you navigate life in Flushing, that's for sure."

"Oh, we're not staying here for long," Starry says. "We'll be moving as soon as my parents buy a house."

The librarian sighs. "That's too bad. I think you'd love it here."

"We've—"

I interrupt my sister. "Pardon me, but how many books may I check out at one time?"

"Seven. The children's room is in that direction, and we have a section for teenagers there also. Enjoy yourself, dear. And welcome to the library!"

Leaving Starry chatting with the librarian, I decide to browse the teen shelves first. *Deenie* by Judy Blume and *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton are both new to me, so I choose them. And then I spot an old friend—*Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott—and grab it. It's easy to become Jo March, and Laurie's another crush of mine. That's three; I can check out four more. I head to the children's shelves and find *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C. S. Lewis, *Hans Brinker*, or *The Silver Skates* by Mary Mapes Dodge, and *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri. I've been re-reading all of these for years.

"Let's go, Sunny," my sister hisses. "We've got fifteen minutes to get home. I'm sure Ma's watching the clock."

Just enough time to jog back. We pass the throng of drenched and happy children still playing in the hydrant's spray. I spot Gerald, dancing with a toddler who looks just like him. Must be his little brother. He catches sight of us but this time something feels different. Is it the books in my bag? The loud and joyful music? His hands holding his brother's? In any case, I decide to wave at him and, after one surprised look, Gerald waves back.

He and his brother were probably born here; Flushing has always been home for them. But it's going to start to feel familiar to me soon, I'm sure of it. And besides, one half of my real home is banging against my hip in my satchel. The other is in the bottom drawer of our nightstand where the pages in a notebook wait for my pen. *Where am I from?* Can the answer be stories and words, some of theirs, some of mine?



# Tara

Marcia Magic

NEVER MOVE TO A SMALL APARTMENT IN Flushing, Queens, in August.

“Too bloody hot,” I tell Sunny, who ignores me and opens *Little Women*.

I’ve been wanting to use “bloody” without earning a demerit, but now the punch of it is gone. Time for new swear words. I wonder how Americans get demerits in school.

That jog to and from the library nearly did me in, but Sunny needed her fix. She tells me I use the screen the way she uses reading and writing, but she’s wrong. For her, that’s escape. For me, it’s research.

I fan myself with the issue of *British Pop Stars* someone

gave me as a goodbye present. It's useless to me now. Lulu, Diana, and Twiggy aren't famous enough in New York. I need to become someone new, but who? *Whom*, corrects the voice of a grammar-school teacher in my head. *Shut it*, I tell her.

I perfected Lulu after watching the film *To Sir, with Love* five times, then briefly tried on Diana Rigg from a television show called *The Avengers*. Recently I mastered Twiggy the pop star, my best act yet. Sunny says that as Twiggy, I sparkle and conquer. My sister's right. It moved me to center stage.

The performing started after we returned from Ghana. I noticed that my three other Bengali classmates had grown quieter and even less social than before I left. It was as if they'd been pushed into an audience while I'd been gone. If our school were a theater, the Bengali girls were invisible now, high up in the balcony seats somewhere. I didn't want to join them, admiring British-born actors who loved, cried, fought, and lived while we applauded. Nobody was going to shove a Das girl into the cheap seats. That's when I became Lulu, and then Diana. Twiggy was my last and greatest transformation.

But staying on center stage takes work—lots of work. I have to study, imitate, and rehearse until one magical moment when I move into another person's skin. And Twiggy's not going to work in America.



I switch on the television, rotate the channel dial through the four channels, and settle on a serialized show called *All My Children*. Reaching for the model Big Ben clock that we brought along from London, I set an alarm for ten minutes from now.

“What are we sharing this time?” Sunny asks, still not looking up from her book.

I hand her the magazine. “Fanning duty. Ten minutes you. Ten minutes me.”

Sunny flaps and reads, and the breeze she makes begins to cool my cheeks. Meanwhile, I watch *All My Children* intently, remembering the techniques my friend Melissa passed on to me. She was a decent actor, and one of Mrs. Campbell’s favorites. Our magnificent theater teacher in London didn’t even know I could act. What was the point of trying out for her shows? Ma wants me to have a career, but there are only two possibilities on her list. *Don’t make my mistake and give all the money-making power to your husband*, she says. *Study hard and become an engineer. Or a doctor*. Sunny has the grades for both those jobs, so she doesn’t have to worry. Unfortunately, I’m no star student. Far from it, in fact. I can imagine the over-the-top reaction if I choose theater as a career. Educated Bengali girls don’t act. When we’re too dumb for medicine or engineering, they marry us off. Fast.

But what's the use of worrying about that now? I still have two more years of high school, and I'm planning to exit to a standing ovation.

I focus on the television, paying attention to how mouths shape the flatter American sounds and that rolling *r*. I sing along with advertisement jingles. Strange how Brits and Americans sound alike when they sing.

I home in on two characters in the show: Erica, the villain, and Tara, the sweeter one, who shares my name. I always think of myself as "Tara," even though Baba calls me "Star." And I've always been "Starry" to Sunny. Ma calls me "Ma," thanks to a weird Bengali tradition where an older person calls a younger person by the title the younger person is supposed to use for the older person—sort of an affectionate play on words, I guess.

Big Ben chimes. My turn to fan. Television Tara, naïve with a hint of a tough core, is a better possibility than Television Erica. I put her on a mental short list, set the alarm again, and take the magazine.

"Can't you turn the volume down?" Sunny asks. "It's so annoying. Two silly women fighting over a man. Who watches this show, anyway?"

I shrug, get up, and mute the television. The overly dramatic gestures make the plot easy to follow even without a

soundtrack. Outside in the playground, I can hear the hydrant dancers we saw earlier. Their flattened accents carry up into our apartment from three stories below.

“Get off that swing! You’re too old!”

Another girl laughs. “I’m seventeen! Eric, come push me.”

“Hands off my man!” It’s the first girl’s voice again.

A deep voice calls out. “I can swing with two ladies at once.”

Something about their easy give-and-take makes me tired. Why do I have to start all over again? Twiggy was working just fine in London. I stop fanning before Big Ben releases me and turn the volume knob up, louder this time.

She’s so caught up in *Little Women*, Sunny doesn’t notice that I’ve stopped fanning or that Television Erica is throwing herself into Television Tara’s husband’s arms. My sister’s in nineteenth-century Massachusetts, where it’s cool and safe. I watch to the end of *All My Children*, but by then even Television Tara doesn’t seem right. The new incarnation of me has to be perfect. American to the core. Sweet, pretty, but not over-the-top sexy. I can’t pull sexy off—not with Baba’s strict, loving eyes watching so closely. Besides, after that nighttime visit in London, I’m not interested in attracting a dangerous audience.

The television announces that it’s time for *The Brady*

*Bunch* to air, so I sit back and watch closely. The librarian was right. The Brady family doesn't live in a Flushing flat—*apartment*, I mean—that feels like it's on fire. In her spacious (air-conditioned, probably) house, Mrs. Brady is a lighthearted blonde who bakes chocolate chip cookies; manages her hired hand, Alice; and organizes birthday parties for her children. Mr. Brady is her ideal match—a handsome, kindly architect who offers advice to any of their children in need. And there are three Brady daughters—Marcia, Jan, and Cindy.

I concentrate on Marcia, sweet-but-strong Marcia, flinging her long blond hair around, captivating eyes every time she comes on-screen.

Marcia Brady.

Power oozes from every American pore of her skin.

I sit up with a surge of energy.

"Found the next *Starry*?" Sunny asks, glancing up at the screen.

"She's perfect," I answer. "Don't you think?"

My sister's eyes follow Marcia for a minute or two. "She'll do."

For the next three weeks, while Baba goes to and from his job, and my sister reads and writes in that diary of hers, I

focus on Marcia. I watch her move, talk, laugh, and cry. Ma also joins me to watch *The Brady Bunch* for half an hour before bending over the cloth, shears in hand. I feel hopeful. Our mother's a sewing genius.

I set my hair free from the Twiggy bun, part it in the middle, and let it hang loose. Thank goodness it's long and silky. I glance at my sister, curled up on the couch, sweating and reading, sweating and reading.

"Time to do your hair," I tell her. "Sit up."

She groans. "Can I keep reading?"

"You bet," I say. I sound American already.

I dab the sweat off Sunny's forehead, take the comb, and part her hair in the middle, too. My sister keeps reading. I try to braid it, but her curls keep slipping out of my fingers. She turns another page and shifts around a bit.

"Sit still," I say. "I'm trying to Cindy-Brady you. We're almost there."

She throws me a look over her shoulder, and I smile. We both know that all Cindy Brady and my sister have in common is curly hair, and there's nothing I can do to change that. Sunny is always Sunny—alone, at school, at home when she's with Ma, Baba, and me. With her first-class brain, her writing, and all those books, nobody can make my sister take

a seat in the balcony. I picture her in a front-row seat, scribbling reviews that make or break the shows, vanishing at intermission while the actors' hearts break.

"I'm glad we're in the same school," I say, and drop a kiss on her head. In London we were enrolled in different schools because Sunny's so gifted. Here there's no separate school for extra-smart students, and she's coming in as a freshman, as they say, while I'll be a junior. With her around, I'll be sure to have one set of admiring eyes at least.

Two weeks till school starts, and then one. I watch the show daily and practice my Marcia, but my usual tricks aren't working.

Maybe the right costume will help.

I look over the outfits Ma has managed to finish. I like the lime-green pants that end in a flare, the blue and lime-green blouse, the pencil-slim orange dress with the big collar. But none of them seem right for the first day. At the last minute, I convince Ma to make me a powder-blue blouse and a navy miniskirt with a fringe that swirls around Marcia's white thighs. Thankfully, Baba provided reams of dark- and light-blue material. Two days before school starts, Ma hands me

a replica of Marcia's eye-catching outfit. She's whipped up a matching skirt-and-blouse set in Sunny's size as well. Amazing.

Sunny holds up the skirt first, and then the shirt, shaking her head. I know what my sister is thinking. "The skirt's too short and the shirt's too tight," she says. "I can tell without trying them on."

Ma is stern. "You'll both wear this on your first day. I measured you, remember?"

"I will never—" My sister catches my pleading look and stops with a sigh. "Oh, all right then. I didn't expect to miss that stupid skirt I had to wear in London but at least it was longer than this. My bottom might make an appearance when I drop something."

I give her a kiss, put on my outfit, and pose in front of the mirror in Ma's room. It's not just leg that draws the eye—the nylon fabric of the blouse clings to my small breasts. Sunny is definitely going to hate this blouse. She'll wear it untucked, I'm sure.

"I can't go to the movies, Jeff," I tell the girl in the mirror. "I have to work at Haskell's Ice Cream Hut."

The costume is right and the accent is decent, but something still feels off. The magic hasn't arrived yet. I feel another pang of worry. School starts the day after tomorrow. What

else can I do to get ready? I frown at the scuffed Oxfords on my feet. Maybe *all* the props have to be perfect.

That afternoon, while watching the show, I point out the platform shoes on Marcia's feet to Ma. "Ask your Baba," she says, as predicted.

So I bring the subject up at dinner. I hate to do this to Baba but I'm desperate. "Do you think we can afford new shoes, Baba?"

Ma leaps in with her lines right away. "Your father's paychecks are not that big. We barely have enough for new underwear after he sends money to his mother every month."

Baba sighs, and I fight back my guilt.

"We don't need shoes, Baba," Sunny says, shooting me a hard look. "I've seen both girls and boys wearing Oxfords around here."

"What kind of shoes do you want, my Star?" Baba asks wearily.

"Platform shoes," I say. "They have a three-inch sole all around. They're very stylish."

"I picked up those sequined sandals for you girls in Singapore," Baba says. "They reminded me of the ones my sisters used to wear. What happened to those?"

"We outgrew them, Baba," I say gently. Three years ago.

"Okay, Star. I'll see what I can do."



"I'm fine with Oxfords, Baba," Sunny adds.

"Get some for Baby, too," Ma says. "A girl's clothes must show that she is from an educated family—a good family."

"I said I'd try," Baba says curtly.

"That's what you always say. Doesn't he, girls?"

Sunny leaves the table. I try to change the subject. "How's work going, Baba?"

"I might be getting a raise soon," he tells me, face brightening.

"So you can send more money to Calcutta?" Ma asks. "I thought we were saving for a house."

"We are. But you know my mother is sick, Ranee."

"What about your daughters? We have to get them out of this neighborhood, I tell you . . ."

I manage to swallow one more bite of rice and lentils. Then I leave the kitchen to rehearse my Marcia.

It's here. Opening day.

Ma hands us the powder-blue blouses and navy mini-skirts, which she ironed the night before.

Once again, Sunny looks at the clothes with distaste. "Do we have to match? It all seems a bit much, doesn't it?"

"I need you to look like sisters today," Ma says.

Sunny releases one of her signature groans but gets dressed. Sure enough, she leaves her blouse untucked. I head to the mirror and try tying mine at the waist. No, that isn't right. I tuck it in again, but there's still no Marcia in sight. Finally, like my sister, I leave it hanging loose, but my reflection still shows Tara Das, and Tara Das only. This can't be happening. I won't survive this day without the magic. *Come on, Marcia*, I urge. But there's no response. The flat-chested, big-lipped foreigner in the mirror looks scared.

Our Oxfords are waiting by the door. They're going to look terrible with this outfit. As I'm about to slip them on, Baba comes out of the bedroom, holding something in his hands. Platform sandals! Two pairs! Hope rises again.

"I picked them up in a secondhand shop on my way home yesterday," he says, handing me my shoes first. "A first-day present for my girls."

"I gave him your sizes," Ma adds. "They're not new, but they look decent."

"They're perfect, Baba! Thank you so much."

He smiles and hands Sunny her pair. My sister looks them over. I know they look high and wobbly to her, but she slips her feet into them because they're a gift from Baba.

He reaches for Sunny's hand to steady her and clasps it inside both of his. "You'll do just fine today, Mishti. Let your sweetness shine."

She grins at him, and it *is* sweet.

Then he tips up my chin. "May your first day be a success, my Star."

*If I can become Marcia in half an hour.* "I'll try, Baba."

"It will be," Ma answers, handing him the tiffin box of lunch she packs in the mornings. "That's *my* job."

She's still wearing her nightgown, and Baba's eyes linger on her face and body. To my amazement, Ma holds her pose and lets him look. For a long minute. And then: "I'll wear that lovely green sari you bought in New Delhi."

"You'll outshine your daughters, Ranee," Baba says, eyes following Ma as she heads to the bedroom. When she's no longer in sight, he checks his watch and claps his forehead. "I'll miss my train!" Blowing us kisses, he dashes out the door.

Sunny and I practice in the platform shoes while Ma gets ready. For me, they're fairly easy to manage from the start. They make me feel even more slender and tall. Sunny, though, is taking small steps and teetering along, clutching the sofa for support. I imitate her with big gestures, hugging the back of the armchair while I squat on the floor, shaking and

trembling, and toppling over with my platform sandals straight up in the air. Sunny giggles, and I feel the snarl of anxiety loosen a bit.

"You going to be okay?" my sister asks. "You look great on the outside."

"That's not what matters." We both know I have to be Marcia from the inside out, not just look like her.

Meanwhile, Ma has been wrapping and tucking the green silk sari around her slim waist. She's applied lipstick and eye pencil, twisted a dozen golden bangles on each wrist, strung two necklaces around her throat, and selected a pair of dangly earrings. Even though she looks beautiful, I can't help thinking of the simple dress that Mrs. Brady wore during yesterday's show. I say nothing, but Sunny doesn't hold back.

"Do you have to get so dressed up, Ma?" she asks.

"A woman must look her best for the important events in life," Ma answers. "You will learn that today."

She dabs away imaginary crumbs from Sunny's grimace and then turns to appraise me. "You look fine," she tells me, smiling. "It seems like yesterday that I was seventeen. I was already considering suitors by then."

The knot in my stomach tightens again.

"We're going to be late," Sunny calls from the door.

I'm not ready! I need more time! But we have to leave.

The playground is empty. The sidewalks are packed with students striding, skipping, slouching toward school. I stay close to Ma, praying for magic before we reach our destination.

Sunny, I can tell, is enjoying being Sunny. She's liking the feel of the September morning breeze against her cheeks. Leaning into it, she leads the way along the five straight, short blocks, picking up the pace as she masters the sandals. Her blouse billows behind her like a sail and curls escape her braid to dance on her shoulders. I fight a twinge of envy.

We're here. The curtain opens.

Trios and pairs of students greet each other before disappearing inside a crowded lobby. Platform shoes. Miniskirts. Bell-bottomed, high-waisted pants. Tie-dyed T-shirts. The halls are filled with color. The faces around us are mostly brown, with a few white ones sprinkled here and there like salt. Afros abound, music's playing through the intercom, and a river of students swirls around us.

Enter, stage left. We push our way through the crowd. Staying close to Ma's sari, I take Sunny's hand. I can't help hearing the whispers and snickers that come our way. *Why are they laughing? Is it because we're Indian? Because we look so different? Or is it Ma's sari and the dot on her forehead?* Ma is drawing attention, but people are also staring at us, at Sunny and me. I see us through their eyes. Our matching

skirts and blouses and shoes are stylish, but because they're identical, they highlight how different the two of us look. And nobody in the school is holding hands, at least not two girls who look absolutely nothing like sisters. I should have remembered what we learned on our way to the library that first day in America: teenaged girls don't hold hands. I ease my fingers out of Sunny's and she doesn't hold on.

The receptionist's greeting is as crisp as her red blouse and black skirt. A pair of reading glasses dangle around her neck. She's white, like the librarian. "Good morning." Her eyes take in Ma's silk sari and golden jewelry. "Do you understand our language?"

"Of course we do," answers Ma, speaking slowly in her heavily accented English. "We are coming here from India. It was a British colony, just like America. Most recently we have been living in England." In London, most people were used to Indian accents, even if they didn't like them much. Here, Ma's English sounds odd, with tones that swing up and down and *t*'s formed with a tongue-flick on the roof of the mouth.

"Oh. Okay, then." The receptionist forces a smile. "We don't have too many people from India at the high school yet, but I understand our elementary school recently enrolled several families."

“Your government has issued a change in visa regulations a few years back,” Ma informs her. “So I presume more and more of us will be arriving, and then your school will have to educate us.”

The receptionist’s smile disappears. “Is that so? Well, on to more pressing matters—your daughters’ placements. My, they don’t even look like sisters, do they? If it wasn’t for those matching outfits . . .” She glances from me to Sunny, then back to Ma. “Mr. Daniels has asked to test your oldest daughter first.”

Ma narrows her eyes. “My youngest will be tested first. The oldest will wait here.”

There’s a short silence as the receptionist decides whether or not to challenge this. Then she shrugs. “Follow me, please.” Her heels click across the tile floor.

Ma rustles after her. Sunny follows, sending me an encouraging look over her shoulder, and the door swings closed behind them.

I need some Marcia Magic, and I need it now. I move to a bench in the corner of the office, take a deep breath, and get to work. *It’s all in the head, Star*, I tell myself.

That’s where the magic happens.