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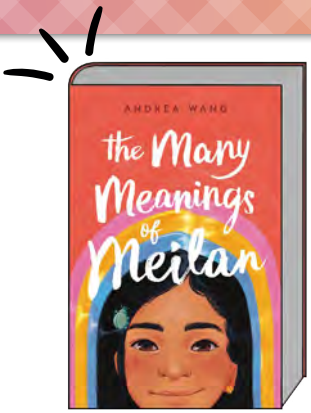

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The Many Meanings of Meilan

By Andrea Wang

Meilan Hua's world is made up of a few key ingredients: her family's beloved matriarch, Năinai; the bakery her parents, aunts, and uncles own and run in Boston's Chinatown; and her favorite Chinese fairy tales.

After Năinai passes, the family has a falling-out that sends Meilan, her parents, and her grieving grandfather on the road in search of a new home. They take a winding path across the country before landing in Redbud, Ohio. Everything in Redbud is the opposite of Chinatown, and Meilan's not quite sure who she is–being renamed at school only makes it worse. She decides she is many Meilans, each inspired by a different Chinese character with the same pronunciation as her name. Sometimes she is Mist, cooling and invisible; other times, she's Basket, carrying her parents' hopes and dreams and her guilt of not living up to them; and occasionally, she is bright Blue, the way she feels around her new friend Logan. Meilan keeps her facets separate until an injustice at school shows her the power of bringing her many selves together.

Chapter Six

For the next month, we are like the Hakka—the guest people of China that Māma told me about, who migrated from place to place. I discover that my parents have more friends scattered across the entire eastern United States than I ever knew about.

After we leave Niagara Falls, we visit one of Gōnggong's old friends in New York City, where he talks as much as he did before Nǎinai died. That's when I realize we're not just leaving behind good memories—maybe we are leaving bad ones behind, too.

In New Jersey, Māma makes us tour the castle-like brick buildings of Princeton University even though I won't go to college for six more years. Bàba insists on

stopping in Philadelphia to see the Liberty Bell, which is a lot smaller than I expected.

In Baltimore, my parents decide to splurge and have lunch at a café overlooking the harbor. "I come one crabcake, sauce on side," Māma orders.

"What did you say?" the waitress asks. Māma repeats her order. The waitress shakes her head, a frown crossed with a smirk on her pasty face. "Learn to speak English."

My parents' cheeks are flushed, but they won't make a scene.

I glare at the waitress. "Our English is fine," I say. Because it is.

Their English isn't "broken," like some people claim. It's a translation of what they would say in Mandarin, word for word. Sometimes I think English is the broken language, with all the exceptions to grammar and

spelling rules, words borrowed from other languages, and messy conjugations.

My voice catches on a lump of beetles, but I push through it. "My mother would like the crabcakes with the sauce on the side, like she said." I order for the rest of us, too, and shut my menu with a snap. The waitress grabs our menus without a word and leaves. When the food comes, another waitress serves us.

"It is good, Lan," Bàba says. I don't know if he means the crabcakes or my speaking for them. But I notice that they let me walk ahead and talk to the people in the ticket booths at the museums in Washington, DC.

They're both quieter, at least during the day. At night, they continue to stay up late, catching up with old friends on years' worth of news. When their friends ask questions about our future, like what kind of work they are looking for, Bàba says, "I'm going to become the next Chinese movie star," which makes everyone

laugh, since he's never acted in his life. Māma tells them she's going to be a professional poker player in Las Vegas, which I think is a dig at Fourth Uncle except that she would be really good at it. I can never tell what she's thinking. When Bàba tells them about Năinai's passing and selling the bakery, that's when Gōnggong falls silent.

I wonder why we've never visited any of these people before, and then I realize the answer. The bakery. And the family. We always had the family around us. Now we don't.

The thought makes me yearn to call Xing, but I don't have a cell phone anymore. One more thing lost to the squabbles about money. Neither of my parents have called any of the aunts and uncles since we left. Asking to borrow their phones to call Xing feels like a betrayal.

Bàba zigzags across one state after another, chasing the setting sun. We climb up into the mountains of

West Virginia, the trees changing from big leafy oaks to windswept spruces, the landscape a tapestry of different greens. I keep my window open so I can smell the sharp piney scent. The thin, cold air feels lighter and more alive than the heavy, wet air along the coast. Bàba takes deep breaths, too.

"Bìng cóng kǒu rù," Māma says in warning. Technically, her saying doesn't apply since I'm inhaling through my nose and not my mouth, but I understand that she thinks the cool air will make me catch a cold. I want to tell her that germs make people sick, not chilly temperatures. Instead, I take another long, slow breath.

Māma's voice gets sharper. "Lan, qiān jīn nán mǎi yì kǒu qì." Bàba shoots me an apologetic look, but I'm already rolling up my window. She's not worried about me, she's worried about Gōnggong, his mouth hanging open a little bit as he sleeps. She's right—a

thousand pieces of gold couldn't buy another breath if he got sick. We can't lose him, too.

As the miles fall away, so does Māma's happy tourist attitude. Maybe it's because she doesn't have any friends who live this far west. Or maybe she's afraid that being too happy will make the gods angry. Or maybe she's actually worried about how she and Bàba will find jobs and make money. Only Bàba stays cheerful. He tells Māma we are on our very own "journey to the west," like in the ancient Chinese novel.

I say goodbye to July from the back seat of the car, my head resting against the stack of boxes, and wake up to August in a parking lot. It's the middle of the night. Yellow light from the lampposts streams through the windshield, and the car engine ticks softly, like an old clock winding down. Māma and Gōnggong are still asleep, but the driver's seat is empty.

Bàba stands in front of a small building, staring through the large glass windows. I get out of the car and stretch, then walk toward him, my footsteps crunching on the gravel. He turns and smiles as I approach. He points, and I follow the path of his hand to a sign in the window. HELP WANTED, it says in large red letters printed on a white background. Below, in black marker, someone has scrawled *Pastry Chef*. I take a step back and look up at the building. A wooden panel hangs above the door, the words REDBUD CAFÉ painted in cursive with a flowering tree carved above them.

I turn back to Bàba. "You want to work here?" I ask.

He nods enthusiastically. "Three signs," he says. I must look confused, because he holds up a finger. "First sign: They need a baker. I know how to do this job." He smiles again, holding up a second finger. "Second sign: Name of café has 'red' in it. This is the luckiest color."

He's seeing extra meaning in the name of the restaurant, just like Third Aunt did in my story. Look where that got us.

But Bàba doesn't notice my frown. He holds up three fingers. "Third sign: moon." Startled, I look up and realize that streetlights aren't making the parking lot glow—it's the moon. It seems brighter out here in the countryside than back home in Boston. Bàba continues, "Full moon is a complete circle. It means that our journey is also complete."

I blink, trying to take it all in. "We're going to stop traveling? And live here?"

"Yes." Bàba's voice thrums with excitement. "Lan, I even found a house for us."

"A house?" I've never lived in a house before. Never had a yard. It seems like it would be lonely to have all that space separating each family.

"Yes," Bàba says again. "I drove all around this town

while you were asleep. There is a house for rent. I saw the sign."

Bàba goes to wake up Māma so he can show her the three signs and convince her that this small town is our new home. I should be happy that we won't be guest people anymore. But the beetles scurry around and around in my stomach, upset and unsettled. Bàba said the house was a sign. That's a total of four signs. Four is the unluckiest number because the Mandarin word for it, sì, sounds the same as the word for death. I want to remind Bàba about that, but I don't.

While Māma exclaims over the full moon, I crawl back into the car. Bàba had called me Lan again. Just Lan. He hadn't even noticed, but I had. Somewhere on the dusty road between Boston and this unknown town, with the heat rising off the highway like a poisonous mist, my parents had started calling me Lan.

My parents have always called me Lánlán—repeating the second syllable of a child's name is a sign of affection in China. I feel a sharp ache inside, the bite of a hundred mandibles. We left Xing and Tiffi, the aunts and uncles, the bakery, Chinatown, and now—my childhood. Has my phoenix story changed the way my parents feel about me?

I look around at the dingy café, the dirt parking lot, the shuttered storefronts across the street. This is it, I guess. My fairy-tale ending.

Chapter Seven

The town is called Redbud, too, and we've officially lived here for a week. Māma and Bàba signed the landlord's papers, but it still feels like we're squatters in an abandoned house. It's going to take another week to get our furniture and the boxes holding the rest of our lives delivered from storage in Boston.

I can't wait for my stuff to get here. It's been worse than being guest people. At least my parents' friends' houses were homes, filled with their histories and memories. My room is on the first floor and is twice the size of my old room. All that empty space around my sleeping bag just makes it feel bigger, emptier, lonelier. I'm glad Gōnggong is in the bedroom next to mine. When I asked Bàba how we could afford such a

large house, he smiled and said that Ohio didn't cost as much to live in as Massachusetts. I can see why—the town is super small, with only about a dozen shops on the main street. Chinatown might not have as much land as Redbud, but it has, like, five times the stores, restaurants, and people. And it's only a neighborhood of Boston, not a whole town by itself. How does Redbud survive? What is there for people to do?

I wonder who used to live in this house. Did another girl sleep in this room? There are two windows—one faces the street and the other looks out over the huge side yard. Did she stand here, like me, staring out at the yard, both scared and fascinated? It's not like I haven't been to lots of parks and gardens, but it's different when there's a huge empty space right outside my window. Especially at night, when I can't see anything. Anyone could be out there. Anyone could climb right in. Anyone like Gū Huò Niǎo, the bird demon.

She shapeshifts into a beautiful woman and snatches children at night. Particularly girls, who then become bird demons just like her.

Tomorrow is the first day of school. I've never gone to a school where I know absolutely no one. I never expected to leave Boston. I thought our family would own Golden Phoenix Bakery forever, that Xing and I would run it together someday.

I go to the kitchen and grab a handful of uncooked rice grains from the giant bag on the floor. Back in my room, I raise the window and the screen and scatter the rice on the windowsill. The night air flows in and around me, whispering. I whisper back in Mandarin, "Gū Huò Niǎo, I'm here." I'd rather be a bird demon than stuck in a school full of strangers.

I wake to the sound of Māma making a fuss over the open window. It's still dark out. There is no bright light

from the Golden Phoenix sign like there was in my old room. The nights here are filled with strange sounds, strange creatures hidden in the thick grass and twisting branches. But no Gū Huò Niǎo.

"Jié zú xiān dēng," Māma chirps. Another one of her Chinese proverbs. Something about victory and a foot being the first to climb. My feet are nice and toasty inside my sleeping bag. I groan and zip up further.

"Did you forget, Lan? Today is first day of school. We have to meet the principal soon." She's speaking English now. I'm glad she's practicing—she won't be able to speak Mandarin for any job in Redbud. And she needs a job, not just for the money, but also so I can get some time to myself again.

"Soon isn't for hours." I try not to sound whiny and fail.

"Come," she says briskly. "I will go make breakfast." She gives the top of the sleeping bag a tug, but

it doesn't budge. Māma frowns, and then her face softens. She smooths the hair away from my forehead. "Come," she says again. "Rise up. Maybe you understand this one better, since it is from the US, like you. Zǎo qǐ de niǎo'ér yǒu chóng chī."

"Yeah, yeah." I roll out of the bag and jam my feet into slippers. "Early bird. Worm. Got it."

I get ready, putting on black chinos and a floral top, the only clothes I brought that aren't faded jeans, leggings, or oversized T-shirts. I don't think I can stand hearing a third Chinese proverb from Māma this morning. The outfit doesn't go with my Dr. Martens, but by the time I put those on, it'll be too late for Māma to say anything. When I sit down to breakfast, she raises her eyebrows at my outfit and actually nods in approval. Mission accomplished.

"Gōnggong zǎo," I say, a little surprised that my grandfather is up and out of his room. The last few

days, I'd heard him toss and turn on his makeshift bed of spare blankets, trying to get comfortable. He must have gotten better sleep last night, because he smiles and urges me to help myself to the food.

Māma has gone all out—in addition to the zhōu, she's laid a variety of toppings and side dishes on the table for us. She must have brought all these ingredients with us in the car—there's no way the one tiny grocery store in Redbud would carry any of it. I put some salted peanuts, pork floss, and pickled vegetables in my rice porridge. I can only hope that the rest of the day goes as well.

Principal Reynard's office is not what I expected. Thick sheaves of paper are shoved into manila folders and stacked on his desk in messy piles nearly a foot high. Their sharp corners jut out like the yellow teeth of ancient beasts. Rolled-up posters are tossed in a corner

like the long bones of the beasts' prey, gnawed clean. The windowsill behind his desk is crowded with mugs, trinkets, and plastic toys. Gifts from adoring students or bribes meant to appease an angry god, I wonder.

Principal Xu at my old school, An Wang Middle School, kept only a pot of lucky bamboo and a miniature Japanese rock garden on her windowsill. She let students use the tiny rake on the bed of white sand to draw ripples around the rocks and make it look like water. It calmed the kids down, she told me once, and then she could show them how actions created consequences—like a rock dropped into a pond.

Principal Reynard clears off a small square table in the corner next to the door. "Please, have a seat," he says. His voice is just as fake-cheerful as Māma's this morning. "Thank you so much for coming in early. Did you bring all the forms like we talked about over the phone?"

Māma pulls the papers out of her bag and sets them on the table. She clears her throat and speaks carefully. "Yes, they are all here. I also brought transcript from her old school. As you can see, she is very good student."

I wince. Why does Māma always have to suck up to white people? At the bakery, she was always telling the white tourists how they were so smart to choose that pastry, that they must be rich to be on vacation, or that she liked their hair or tie or shoes. I know she was trying to get them to buy more, but it was still so embarrassing. Besides, she's not selling pastries now, she's selling *me.* And confirming what people always think about Chinese parents—that all they care about is grades.

The principal nods, a lock of his reddish hair falling onto his forehead. He sweeps it back with one hand until it lies sleekly against his head. His hand travels

down to stroke the goatee sprouting from his long chin. He glances at the form on top of the pile and then looks directly at me for the first time. His eyes are such a strange color—more orange than honey, like the amber beads on Māma's bracelet. "So, you must be Meilan." He stumbles over my name a little, pronouncing it MY-Lann. He draws out the second syllable in a nasal whine.

I almost say no. *Nope, that's not my name, you've got the wrong person, we're going back to Boston now, thank-you-very-much. There's been some huge mistake. I'll just grab my transcript and leave.* I wouldn't even be missing any school back home—classes at An Wang don't start for another two weeks. Māma catches my eye, so I quiet my inner me and nod at Principal Reynard. "Yes, sir."

I don't know where the *sir* came from; Ohio's not really that far south, but the principal looks like someone who wants to be called *sir*, and it just pops out.

"It's actually May-LAHN, though." If I have to go to a school in the middle of nowhere, at least they can pronounce my name right.

Māma shakes her head the tiniest bit. Another one of her favorite sayings is: "People have faces just like trees have bark." So I'm not supposed to correct people, especially adults, because it hurts them like stripping the bark off trees. Hurt people will get a bad impression of me and then think badly of our whole family, which according to Māma is a fate worse than death. But all I'm doing is telling someone how to say my name. How is that wrong?

Principal Reynard smiles widely, incredulously. His canines are sharp and glisten slightly. His red hair, the amber eyes, the beard, the long nose—it all reminds me of the Chinese folktales about crafty and devious fox spirits that can take on human forms during the day. "Mulan?" he says. "Like the Disney movie?"

Sigh. Like I haven't heard that one a million times. "No, sir. MAY-lahn, not MOO-lahn." I leave out the tones, the rising and falling pitch of each syllable. Correcting his pronunciation is bad enough in Māma's eyes.

"Well, now, that's . . ." Principal Reynard pauses, his lips pressed together. "An *unusual* name. Your last name is also rather unusual, isn't it? H-U-A." He spells it out slowly for us, as though we don't know. "How do you pronounce it? Hoo-ay?"

"Hwah," Māma says. "It means flower."

"Well, now," he says again. "That's nice."

He pins me with a steely stare; his eyelashes are red-orange, framing his amber eyes in a glowing fringe. The more I look at him, the more he resembles a fox. But is he the good kind of fox spirit, or the kind that deceives and tricks people? I'm not sure. Everything seems a little murky. Ever since I stepped inside the school, a

thin gray haze has been creeping over everything, like someone is slowly sliding a silk veil the color of smoke over my face. I rub my eyes briefly and open them to find Principal Reynard still inspecting me like a bug.

"Do you have any nicknames?" he asks.

What does that have to do with anything? I shake my head. "Everybody calls me Meilan." I don't mention that I used to have a family nickname but I lost it somewhere on the road.

"I see," Principal Reynard says. He makes a big show of rubbing the side of his nose thoughtfully. "Well, I'm just worried that kids here are going to tease you because of your unusual name." If he says "unusual" one more time, I'm going to scream. His fox-demon eyes and face are definitely stranger than my name. "You're coming in for seventh grade, smack dab in the middle of middle school." He smiles at his own wit. "Kids here have already formed their social

groups. I don't want you to start off on the wrong foot by making them think you're a Disney princess."

"I won't tell them I'm a Disney princess," I say. "Besides, Mulan wasn't a princess—she was a warrior." We stare at each other for a long moment. Next to me, Māma shifts in her chair, and the corner of her purse pokes me. My inner warrior shrinks, and I drop my gaze to the desk. "I don't mind if people call me Mulan."

Some of the iron in Principal Reynard's eyes leaks into his voice. "Regardless," he says, "I think it'd be better for everyone if we introduced you as Melanie instead." He smiles at Māma. "All right, Mrs. Hoo-ay? I really do think it will help *Melanie's* adjustment to Clifton Middle School."

My mother looks like she's about to fail an important test. She glances at me, then at Principal Reynard, then at the purse in her lap. "Meh-lah-nee?" She sounds out

each syllable, her voice rising on the last syllable. The way she says it makes it sound like ní, the Mandarin word for dirt.

"Don't you think that's a beautiful name? I have a cousin named Melanie. And it sounds so similar to Meilan—just a little bit more . . . American." He clears his throat. "You know, names are very important. They can influence who gets into the top colleges, selected for the most impressive scholarships, even hired for the best jobs."

Oh, he's good. What parent doesn't want their kid to be "top," "best," and "most impressive?" Māma's face lights up. She's sold. The two of them nod at each other, and the principal flashes his sharp teeth.

We all stand up, and my head spins. There's a sound like tearing silk, and for a moment I'm afraid that my pants have split. I quickly run my arm over my bottom like I'm smoothing out a skirt, relieved to find that my

pants are fine. Still, I'm a little disoriented. I've just lost another name. First my family nickname, now my real name. I look over at Māma. She'd been wrong this morning. I'm not the bird; I'm the worm.

Chapter Eight

We follow Principal Reynard out to the main reception desk, where Mrs. Perry, the school secretary, sits. Māma and I stand awkwardly to one side while he thrusts my folder of forms at her. There's a boy about my age sitting in front of the desk, staring at Mrs. Perry unhappily. He looks over at me, his eyes traveling from my face down to my red boots, and his eyebrows raise all the way up under his blonde hair. Great. I'm clearly going to be the odd new girl. I must grimace or something, because his eyes widen. His green eyes. Does everyone here have eyes that aren't a normal shade of brown? Quickly, I relax all my face muscles so I have no expression at all.

Mr. Reynard clears his throat, and Mrs. Perry says to the boy, "Hold on just a minute, Logan." She takes the folder from the principal and looks through the forms, filled out in Māma's spiky handwriting. She glances at me, then up at him. "How do you pronounce her name?" she whispers.

He shrugs. "Just put down Melanie in the database. We agreed that it would be better if she had an American name." The principal makes no effort to lower his voice.

No, I want to shout. We did not agree. And my name *is* American. It's as American as Mr. Reynard's first name, whatever it is. And as American as Mrs. Perry's first name, which the sign on her desk says is Susan. Both their names came from other countries originally. But because they were probably European countries, and Europeans founded the United States, their names are considered American, while mine isn't.

Māma must sense that I'm about to argue, because she grips my arm, hard. If I speak up, I'll be stripping bark off her tree, too. I think of Chén Shūshu and Lǐ Shūshu and remind myself to be a dutiful and respectful daughter. I hold it all in, watching carefully, though, as Logan's eyes get a little wider, a little sharper.

Now I'm the odd new girl with such a strange name that the principal had to give me a new one so I'd have a tiny chance of fitting in with the other students. If this Logan boy tells all the other kids, that tiny chance will drop to zero.

Mr. Reynard is definitely a fox demon. Only a fox demon would be that devious, that crafty, to make me suffer while everyone believes that he's helping me. He saunters over to Māma. "Don't worry, Melanie is in good hands. Mrs. Perry here will set her up with a class schedule. I'm sure you have a lot of unpacking to do."

His voice is dismissive. He shakes her hand briefly and retreats into his cluttered den.

"I'm fine," I say to Māma before she can come up with another inspirational Chinese saying. Māma squeezes my arm, more gently this time, and leaves.

I can feel the boy's eyes on me, but I deliberately avoid looking back at him. I stare at the industrial gray carpet under the secretary's navy-blue heels instead.

Mrs. Perry types a few things on her keyboard and clicks around with the mouse. I look up in time to see her shake her head. "I'm so sorry, Logan, but the Shale Team is full," she says. "The other students already have their schedules, and it wouldn't be fair to impose last-minute changes on anyone just to accommodate your desire to switch."

The boy slumps in his chair. The secretary gives him a little pat on the arm. "It's going to be okay, honey. It's only seventh grade. It's just a year, not forever. It

will pass." I can tell Logan doesn't believe her, but he straightens up and tries to give her a smile. She smiles back at him. "Could you do me a favor? Could you take Melanie around today? She's new, and she actually has the same schedule as you."

They both turn to me, and with a shock, I realize that I'm the one Mrs. Perry is talking about. I'm Melanie now. And I'm stuck with this Logan boy who already thinks I'm weird.

The secretary hands me my schedule. "You're on the Chalk Team, same as Logan."

"Hi," I finally say.

Logan smiles again, and this time it doesn't look forced. Or am I imagining it? "Hi. Welcome to the Cliff."

"Logan Batchelder!" Mrs. Perry chides in an amused way.

"The Cliff?"

"Clifton Middle School—the Cliff. Where we live life on the edge." He shoulders a backpack and leads me down the hall. "Just be careful that you don't fall off!"

I have no idea what to make of this. Is he saying that I'm in danger? Or that all the students here are edgy and hip and I'm clearly not? I look down at my mom-approved outfit and sigh. Whatever he means, it doesn't sound good. I already feel like the earth beneath my feet is crumbling away.

Chapter Nine

The morning passes by in a blur. Logan walks me to my—our—first class, which my printed schedule says is Health. We don't talk on the way; he still seems upset by Mrs. Perry's refusing to switch him to another team. He introduces me to the teacher, Mrs. Shaughnessy, and tells her that my name is Melanie. I feel like I'm wearing another person's skin.

If Mr. Reynard is a fox demon, Mrs. Shaughnessy is a snake sprite, from the skintight ankle-length green dress she's wearing to the way she draws out the s's in her name. Her platinum-blond hair is pulled back into a bun so tightly that her cheekbones jut out. She reveals her evil nature by making me stand in front of the class while she questions me.

"Where are you from, Melanie?" she asks.

"Boston," I say, keeping my side turned toward the class so I don't have to look at them head-on. Logan sits down at the end of the front row and nods at me. I think he's trying to be encouraging. I can feel everyone else's stares. They must not get many new kids here.

Mrs. Shaughnessy raises her over-plucked, penciled eyebrows. "Massachusetts!" she says, overemphasizing all the s's again. "My, that's a long way away. What brings you to Ohio?"

I hesitate. What's the right answer? A bedtime story gone wrong? Bàba's three—no, four—signs? "Fate, I guess."

The teacher snorts, which startles me. "Fate! What a strange thing to say! You're certainly an odd one, aren't you?"

I have no answer for that. After a moment, she says, "Well, I think your family will like Redbud. We do

grow excellent soybeans." The class snickers, and I feel my face flush. When Mrs. Shaughnessy points to an empty seat behind Logan, I sink into it and swing my hair so it covers most of my face.

I tune out while the teacher drones on about what we'll be learning this year and her expectations for us. In front of me, the collar of Logan's blue T-shirt rides up as he slouches in his chair. His hair has a little bit of a wave to it, like it would be curly if he let it grow a little longer.

I've always liked the name Logan. It reminds me of the fruit that Mrs. Yao, the grocer, sells on tables on the sidewalk during the summer. Lóngyǎn. The small, round fruit with a shiny large black seed peeking through the creamy white flesh. The Mandarin name means dragon eyes, which sounds so poetic. When I was little, I would hold a fruit up to each eye and run around, roaring.

A dragon's piercing, powerful eyes would be very helpful right now. They could reveal which students are friendly, or which teachers are truly sprites or demons. Instead, the smoky veil over my eyes from earlier doesn't go away. All I can make out when I glance around the room is that there are no other Asian students. There aren't any brown or Black students, either. Is that why they call it the Chalk Team, because it was all white before I came along? Is the other seventh grade team like this? I've gone to Chinatown schools all my life, surrounded by Asian, Black, and brown faces. There were white kids, too, but not many. I never imagined there could still be classes like this one, where I'm one drop of paint on a white canvas.

When class ends, I wait until the other kids have rushed out the door before following. There are two Logans in the doorway. The one on the right is wearing blue, and the one on the left is in a green shirt with a

tractor logo on it. I must look confused, because Blue Logan smiles tightly. Green Logan leans against the doorframe, with his arms crossed, staring at my feet. Does no one wear Dr. Martens in this town?

"This is my brother, Liam," Blue Logan says. "And yes, we're identical twins."

"Hi," I say to Liam.

"You're our new neighbor, huh?" Liam shoots a look at Logan. There's some kind of weird vibe between the two that I can't figure out.

I try to wrap my head around what Liam just said. "We're neighbors?"

Logan says, "We live in the house next to you. Our backyards touch. Or, I guess, it's really your side yard."

Our new house is on the corner of Wilson and Horace Streets, with the front door facing Wilson Street. There's a lawn around the whole house, but the largest yard is on the north side, next to my new

bedroom window. “The one with the giant tree in the back?” That house is turned ninety degrees away from mine, with the front door on a different street. Bryant Street, I think it’s called.

Logan nods, but before he can say anything, Liam asks, “Have you seen Old Mr. Shellhaus yet?”

“Ignore him.” Logan glares at his brother.

I shake my head. “I don’t know who that is.”

“Didn’t the lady who rented you the house tell you?” Liam smirks. “Old Mr. Shellhaus used to live there. Now his ghost does. Dropped dead right in the living room. No one knows what made him keel over.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” Liam says. “Your house is haunted. No one stays longer than a couple of months. That’s why you got it so cheap.”

"There's no ghost. He's just being superstitious. People leave because Redbud is boring." Logan tries to reassure me.

"*I'm* superstitious?" Liam retorts. "You're the one wearing your 'lucky shirt.' "

Logan's cheeks turn pink. "Come on." He motions me through the door. "I'm supposed to take you to your classes. We're going to be late for Social Studies."

Numbly, I follow him down the hall. A tall older Black boy passes by and acknowledges me with a brief what's-up nod, but I'm too distracted to ask Logan who he is. First a fox demon, then a snake sprite, and now a ghost. Bàba didn't know how right he was. We've stepped into a Chinese fairy-tale world.

The Many Meanings of Meilan

By Andrea Wang

What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

9780593206973

Kiki Kallira Breaks a Kingdom

By Sangu Mandanna

Kiki Kallira has always been a worrier. Did she lock the front door? Is there a terrible reason her mom is late? Recently her anxiety has been getting out of control, but one thing that has always soothed her is drawing. Kiki's sketchbook is full of fanciful doodles of the rich Indian myths and legends her mother has told her over the years.

One day, her sketchbook's calming effect is broken when her mythological characters begin springing to life right out of its pages. Kiki ends up falling into the mystical world she drew, which includes a lot of wonderful discoveries like the band of rebel kids who protect the kingdom, as well as not-so-great ones like the ancient deity bent on total destruction. As the one responsible for creating the evil god, Kiki must overcome her fear and anxiety to save both worlds–the real and the imagined–from his wrath. But how can a girl armed with only a pencil defeat something so powerful?

1

I had absolutely, definitely killed my mother.

Okay, maybe not *definitely*, but I was pretty sure of it. Like 90 percent sure. Maybe 85.

It all depended on whether I had locked the front door when I left our house earlier today, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't remember if I had. And if I *hadn't*, well, then there was a very good chance that Mum, who had been repainting the kitchen cabinets when I left, had since been murdered by a burglar.

Or had been eaten by an opportunistic goose, which only sounds ridiculous if you haven't met the geese that live in London.

The day hadn't started on such a tragic note. It was a hot July, and school had just finished for the summer, so I left home right after lunch to meet my best friend Emily, her little sister Tam, and two of Tam's friends. We took the bus halfway across the city to one of those pop-up amusement parks that always appear in the summer. We'd planned it for weeks and it was awesome at first. We had eaten ice creams in the sunshine, taken turns go-karting, and tried to win those giant cuddly teddy bears.

We had just joined the queue for the Ferris wheel when Tam said something about a locked room in a mystery book she was reading, and it had suddenly occurred to me that I couldn't remember if I'd locked my front door.

Now I bit restlessly on the end of my thumb and screwed my forehead up as I tried, once *again*, to remember. I could picture myself stepping out of the front door,

and I could kind of picture myself putting my silver key in the silver keyhole in the door, but was I remembering that from *today* or was I just remembering it from the gazillions of *other* times I had locked the door?

"Kiki?" Emily gave me a gentle jab with her elbow. "You okay?"

I nodded and tried to concentrate on what she and the others were saying, but all I could think about was the front door of my house. As far as I was concerned, the sequence of hypothetical consequences of an unlocked front door went something like this: burglar (or goose) sees unlocked front door; burglar (or goose) can't believe their good luck; burglar (or goose) bumps into Mum while attempting to loot the kitchen; and then, inevitably, burglar (or goose) murders (or eats) Mum.

Emily's eyes moved to my hand, and she watched with concern as I mauled my thumbnail. "You're not okay," she said, and lowered her voice so that Tam and Tam's friends wouldn't hear her. "What's up?"

If it had been anyone other than Emily or Mum, I would have lied and pretended I felt sick or had a headache or something, but it *was* Emily, so I told her the truth.

And because she was Emily, she listened to me and then she nodded. "And it won't matter if I tell you that your mother's death by goose is extremely unlikely, will it? Because once it's in your head, you can't get it out?"

She knew me so well.

"I should go home and check the door," I said. Shame, anger, and frustration made me grit my teeth. "If I don't, I'll just spend the rest of the day worrying about it."

"Okay, I'll come with you."

"No!" I said at once. "Stay. I'll just feel worse if you leave, too."

Emily hesitated, but then she said, "My mum's making Chinese chicken stew for dinner tonight. Come over and eat with us?"

"Chinese *ginger* chicken stew?" I asked, perking up.

Emily grinned. "Yep."

So after promising her that I would go to hers for dinner, I left the park in slightly better spirits. On the bus ride home, I pulled my feet up onto the seat, took my overstuffed sketchbook out of my backpack, and sketched a quick doodle of the Ferris wheel. I drew Emily's tiny delighted face peeping out of the car at the very top, and then mine next to hers. I giggled to myself as I added a gull in the sky above us, pooping on Emily's head. She'd love that when I showed her later.

I lowered my pencil and just looked at the sketch for a moment. Seeing the miniature version of me looking so happy on the Ferris wheel made me feel a little like I hadn't missed out after all. And on top of that, the twenty minutes I had spent on the sketch was twenty minutes I hadn't been thinking about my front door.

But when I got home and discovered that the front door *was* locked, all the warm, fuzzy feelings the doodle

had given me dissolved as quickly as a lump of sugar in hot tea. I could see my blurry reflection in the panes of frosted glass in the door, so I just glared at her, the other me. I was furious with myself. I'd left a fun day out with my best friend because I hadn't been able to stop obsessing about a *door*.

I let myself into the house quietly, resisting the temptation to slam the door in question. I could have gone back to the amusement park, I suppose, but then Tam and her friends would think I was even stupider than they probably already did.

As far as I could tell, becoming obsessed with a stray thought or fear, to the point that I couldn't *not* act on it, was not something most people did. But I couldn't help it. I knew I had been all sunshine and fearlessness when I was little, but at some point, anxiousness had crept up on me. I got twitchy about all sorts of stuff now. I worried the spider that ran under the floorboard would reappear on

my pillow. I worried a shark would sneak into my school's swimming pool (and, yes, I *did* actually know how absurd that sounded, but I worried about it anyway). I worried that a random, inconsequential thing I had said three days before was actually quite a stupid thing to say, and maybe everyone who heard it was now convinced *I* was stupid. I worried that Mum wouldn't come home one day. I worried that one of us had forgotten to close the kitchen window before bed—

And so on.

I guess it wouldn't be so bad if all I did was feel anxious for a little while, but that was never the end of it. Nope. I had to *do* something about it, or else I would never be able to get the worry or thought out of my head. That didn't matter so much when it was stuff like the spider, because Mum would come to my room, find it, and poof! The worrying would stop, just like that. But sometimes it wasn't quite that easy. Sometimes it was a lot harder to get my brain to be quiet again.

As I hung my backpack up on the hook in the hallway, the faint smell of paint and the sound of happy pop music drifted out of the kitchen, followed by Mum's perfectly alive voice: "Kiki? Is that you?"

I stuck my head in the kitchen, where she was painting the last of the cupboards. There were yellow splatters on her clothes, her hands, even on her dark hair, which was exactly like mine apart from the fact that hers was cut below her chin in a pretty bob and mine was longer and almost always up in a ponytail. I would have liked a bob, too, but I knew that if I didn't have my hair pulled away from my face and hands, I would never stop fidgeting with it, tucking it behind my ears, twirling it around a finger, all that. I already bit my fingernails every time I saw even a little of the white end-part grow back, so I really didn't need another distracting bad habit.

"You look like lemon pie," I informed my mother,

giggling. I snatched her phone off the counter and took a photo of her.

"Horrid thing," she said affectionately. "*You* picked this color."

"It's nice on the cupboards, but pretty weird on a human."

With a look in her eye I could only describe as evil, she flicked the wide paintbrush in my direction. I squealed as splotches of cold yellow paint sprayed my cheek and shoulder.

"You're right," she said, grinning, "it *does* look pretty weird on a human."

She was the actual worst. I grinned back.

"So," she went on, tossing me a tea towel to dab the paint off my face, "why are you back so early?"

"Oh, I couldn't remember if I'd locked the front door and I was pretty sure you'd been eaten by a goose, so I came back to check."

It was the truth, but I said it cheerfully, like it was silly and funny. Mum knew about the anxiousness, the obsessions, the need to *do* something. She was always nice about it and never made me feel bad, not even that time last year when I woke her at four in the morning by leaning over her to make sure she was still breathing. She just said, "Well, I used to do it to you when you were a baby, so I guess this is payback," and let me sleep in her bed for the rest of the night.

But I didn't think Mum knew just how bad it was for me. I had never told her, so how could she? It wasn't that I didn't want to. I just didn't want to worry her.

And I guess maybe I also didn't want to tell her because that would make this A Big Deal. A giant Something. I didn't want it to be Something. I wanted it to be Nothing, irrelevant, unimportant. I wanted it to be a Nothing that didn't disrupt my life, or make me unhappy, or turn me into someone I didn't even know anymore. A

Nothing so unimportant, it would go away very soon, and I'd get the sunshiny version of me back.

Now, narrowing her eyes at me, Mum ignored my nonsense about geese and cut right to the important part: "You were so worried about whether you'd locked the front door that you left your friends early and came all the way back?"

I didn't want to lie to her, so I tiptoed around it by saying, "Well, and I felt a little sick. It was really hot." Both true.

"Kiki—"

"Oh!" I said excitedly, shamelessly interrupting her before the conversation became Something. "You'll never believe what Emily told me today! Her mum is going to have another baby."

Just like that, Mum was distracted. It was cool that Emily was going to have a baby brother or another sister, but I wasn't really all that interested in babies. Mum, on

the other hand, *loved* babies. I was pretty sure she'd have had at least five of her own if my dad hadn't died before I was born.

"A new baby!" Mum cooed. "Hand me my phone, will you, duckling? I'll text Mei and see if she needs anything."

"Can I look through your stash of blank notebooks while you're on the phone? I've run out of space in my sketchbook."

"Yes, of course."

I left her excitedly tapping out a text to Emily's mum, and went upstairs to the room Mum used as her home office. She worked in animation, so she usually went to a studio to work with a team of other animators on a project, but she also did some teaching and tried to work from home whenever she could. Which meant her home office got a lot of use and was filled with student essays, storyboards, piles of research materials, her shiny computer monitor and graphics tablet, and her bookshelves,

including an entire shelf crammed with empty notebooks and sketchpads.

I edged around a stack of books to get to the shelf. I picked up the one on top—*The Illustrated Book of Indian Folklore: Vol. I*, a beautiful, enormous thing Mum had read to me when I was little. And, yes, it was only volume one, because it turned out there was a *lot* of Indian folklore. Stories of monsters and gods and heroes, of goddesses who rode lions, of demons who kidnapped princesses, of kings and queens and cities and snarky jackals and, well, a whole lot more than that, too.

I'd loved those stories. They'd been special to Mum, stories she'd grown up with in Karnataka, in the south of India, where she'd spent half her life before moving here.

After putting *The Illustrated Book of Indian Folklore: Vol. I* back on the stack of books, I checked the shelf of empty notebooks. There were a few that would do the

trick, but I kept looking for The One. Like a warrior choosing her sword or a witch choosing her wand, I, Kiki Kallira, had to choose my new sketchbook. It was not a task to be taken lightly. The wrong choice could prove to be the undoing of the universe!

And then I found it. It was beautiful, bound in white spirals, with two hundred thick sheets of clean white art paper. The cover was a perfect, soft buttery yellow, the exact color of evening sunshine.

It had been so nice and uncomplicated to be a sunshine girl. Not so long ago, I had found it easy to fall asleep at night. I hadn't needed to search the whole house just because I'd seen a shadow out of the corner of my eye, and never got a scratchy feeling inside my brain when a book on a shelf had its spine facing in. Why wasn't I like that anymore?

Maybe this *was* Something, after all. I knew this wasn't normal, but I couldn't help feeling like it was all my fault

for not being stronger and braver. Why else would this anxiousness, this Something, sneak in and make itself so completely at home?

My eyes had filled with tears and I was clutching the yellow sketchbook so tightly my knuckles had gone white, so I turned quickly and went across the landing to my bedroom. Flopping down onto my rug with my box of art supplies, I opened my new sketchbook and started to draw the first thing that popped into my mind.

Monsters started to take shape on the first page. First the wolf from "Little Red Riding Hood," then the Beast from "Beauty and the Beast," and then an Asura—a huge, monstrous demon from Indian folklore. By the time I'd finished the pencil outline of the Asura, I felt calmer.

No, it was even better than that: as I stared at that third sketch, I felt the sudden, electric excitement you get when you have a totally brilliant idea.

One of the stories Mum had told me years ago, with my bedside lamp turned down low and *The Illustrated*

Book of Indian Folklore on her lap, was the story of the Asura king Mahishasura. It went something like this:

Hundreds of years ago, long before India became the country it was now, there was a kingdom in the south called Mysore. It was a rich, golden city, with beautiful shining palaces, gentle hills, and lush green land.

Then Mahishasura came to Mysore. He was the cruelest and most powerful of all the Asuras. He killed the kings of Mysore and took the city for himself. The people resisted, but they were no match for him or his Asura army. They stole children from their beds, burned the crops, and threw anyone who tried to fight back into deep prisons so that they never saw the sun again. And Mysore became a sad, dark place, where the people lived in fear and where all hope seemed lost.

The first question I'd asked when Mum told me the story was "But why didn't the gods stop him?"

In Indian folklore, the gods are always incredibly powerful, and three of them in particular: Brahma, the

creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. When I'd pointed this out to Mum, she rolled her eyes and said, "If you keep your gob closed for longer than two seconds, Kiki, you might find out."

Because, as it turned out, Mahishasura had a secret weapon. Before he came to Mysore, he had spent years praying to Brahma. Impressed with his persistence (and I guess because gods did this kind of thing all the time in the stories), Brahma had offered him a boon.

"I want to be immortal," Mahishasura said.

"I can't do that," Brahma replied. "All I can do is make you so powerful that no god or man can kill you."

Satisfied, Mahishasura accepted the gift. No god or man could kill him.

So when the whole destroying-Mysore thing happened, the gods were a *teensy* bit annoyed. They went to Brahma and demanded to know how they were supposed to defeat Mahishasura while he was protected by such a powerful boon.

"Well," said Brahma, "I said no god or man could kill him. Perhaps you should send a goddess."

So the gods combined their power and created the warrior goddess Chamundeshwari, who was every bit as awesome as she sounded. She rode into Mysore on the back of a great lion and, at the foot of the hills, she and Mahishasura had a long, bitter battle. In the end, she won. She killed the demon king and saved Mysore. Yay!

To show her how grateful they were, the people of Mysore gave the hills a new name in her honor. They called them the Chamundi Hills. ("The next time we visit Granny and Gramps," Mum said, "I'll take you to Mysore to see the real Chamundi Hills. You can even see a statue of Mahishasura and a temple for Chamundeshwari at the top!")

It was a fun story. Just a story. Much like Zeus and Thor and Osiris, Mahishasura had never *really* existed. I sometimes liked to think they had all been around once,

because mythology was so cool, but I was eleven years old and I kind of knew myths were just myths. Jackals didn't talk, the sun wasn't pulled across the sky by a god in a chariot, and Asuras weren't real.

And the totally amazing idea I had right then, with the yellow sketchbook open in front of me, was to create a Kiki version of the old city of Mysore and retell the story of Mahishasura my own way.

I sketched quick, sharp lines with my pencil, went over them in black ink, and filled the shapes in with shades of cream, white, gold, and red. Mysore Palace sparkled back at me from the paper, almost exactly like the one I had seen in the real city the last time Mum and I visited India. It was so warm and alive that I could almost hear the birds and feel the heat of the sun.

I drew outward from there, taking pieces out of the story Mum had told me and jumbling them up with my own whimsical ideas. I drew palaces and clockwork

trains, outdoor markets and rainbow houses. Red London double-decker buses and jackals in deep, dark woods. Cobblestone streets and lush green hills. A circus that never stopped, a castle in the sky. Sketch after sketch after sketch. Black ink and vivid colors. My hand cramped and my neck ached, but I barely noticed because I was so excited about the world growing right in front of me. *My* world.

I'd been having so much fun with my weird, perfect, patchwork Mysore that I didn't really want to ruin it by introducing Mahishasura and his army of demons into it. But all good stories need an enemy the heroes have to fight, right?

I started with his head. Mahishasura was a buffalo demon, so I drew a pair of thick, curled horns. It took me a little while to get the pencil lines just right, but once I was happy with them, I inked them in with bold, black strokes.

And that was when the real world got weird.

At first, it just felt like I was on a train. A bit rumbly, but fine. Then the rumble got rumblier and my whole bedroom shook. I looked up in time to see an empty cup rattle violently on my desk. My colored pencils rolled away from me. The cup crashed to the floor.

The sky outside my window went dark. Not nighttime-dark, but the dark of storm clouds. They gathered and swept across the sky, churning in time to the rumble of the earth.

Somewhere below, Mum's voice called my name in alarm. I looked out of the window and saw that beyond our back garden, the river was choppy and frothy, like the waves on an ocean. A boat rocked back and forth while water splashed over the tall sides of the riverbank.

Then, abruptly, it stopped. Just like that. The room went still, the skies cleared, the sun came back out, and the river went quiet.

"Kiki?" Mum was out of breath as she appeared in the doorway of my room. "Are you okay?"

"What *was* that?"

"An earthquake, I think," she said, perplexed.

Of course, it hadn't been an earthquake at all, but we didn't know that then. We didn't know that the furious churning of the earth, water, and sky had been a warning.

This was the point at which I should have thrown my beautiful yellow sketchbook into the river, but I didn't know that, either. Instead, I threw away the broken cup, made myself a grilled cheese, and kept drawing.

2

Fast forward three months to October. Emily and I went back to school, Emily's mum told us the new baby was going to be a boy, and my not-so-new-anymore sketchbook was almost full.

"Kiki?"

It was Mum's voice, but I didn't answer her. I was in the middle of a really detailed, delicate sketch of one of my characters' battles with an Asura and I just *couldn't* stop now, not when the strokes of my pencil were coming so quickly and I was *so* close to capturing the look of glee on my heroine's face.

"Kiki!"

A swoop of my pencil for the swish of her hair as she leaped at the Asura, a sword shining in her hand.

"Kritika. Kallira."

Uh-oh. Mum had used The Voice *and* my full name.

I tore my eyes away from the paper. "Yes?"

"Come down here, please!" she called, clearly exasperated. "Granny and Gramps want to say hi."

With one last mournful look at my sketchbook, I left it behind on my bed. It had been a few days since we'd last FaceTimed with my grandparents and I did really like talking to them, but I just wished it didn't have to be right *now*.

"She never has her nose out of that book," Mum was saying as I walked down the stairs.

"Oh my word," Granny's voice replied somewhat drily, "I wonder who she gets that from."

Mum snorted a laugh, but said, "I don't think I'm *quite* as bad." I could almost picture her shaking her head. "I

love that Kiki is so passionate about something and works so hard at it, and her art really is brilliant, but I wish she'd spend a little more time in the real world."

But the real world was so much harder to live in.

I went into the kitchen. "Hi, Granny! Hi, Gramps!"

"There you are, pet!" Gramps boomed from the screen of the tablet propped up on the kitchen counter. "It's always lovely to see your smile."

Granny stuck her head into the frame as well. "A few of your aunties are here," she said. I noticed she was wearing a sari, which was unusual. "I think they want to say hello, too."

Then there was a flurry as Granny and Gramps got out of the way, and three beaming, plump aunties pushed and jostled each other to get a good look at me.

"Kritika!" one of them squealed. Her hands flapped at me like she was dying to pinch my cheeks. I could practically feel the bruises forming. "Look at you!

Eleven years old now, hmm? You look more and more like Ashwini thayi every year."

"Every year," another auntie echoed. "If you turn your face just slightly to the right, Kritika, you could be a replica of that old photo of Ashwini thayi!"

Ashwini thayi was our family's cautionary tale. *Thayi* means grandmother, but it can be used for pretty much any female relative who is either dead or old. Ashwini had been my great-grandmother's sister and she had died at the age of thirteen, of causes that no one could ever agree on because no one who had actually known her was still alive. Gramps said it was the flu (which was probably true), my uncle Shiv said it was a broken heart (what?), and at least five different distantly related aunties all insisted it had been bad behavior (again, what?).

So the kids in the family were all pretty used to hearing things like "Careful, or you'll end up like Ashwini thayi!" or "Do you want to end up like Ashwini thayi? No? Then don't be so cheeky!"

I always felt like poor Ashwini thayi deserved a better story than that, so I had put a version of her in my Mysore. Honestly, my version of her was no truer to the real Ashwini than the stories the aunties came out with, but I liked to think she would have liked it. My Ashwini was an Asura slayer, fierce, proud, and brave. In my Mysore, Ashwini thayi got to be a hero.

Coincidentally, she was the one I had been drawing when Mum interrupted me.

The aunties were still talking over one another. I caught snatches of "How are you?" and "What are you studying in school these days?" and then, at last, Granny wrestled her phone back and shooed them away.

"Are you having a party?" I asked her, puzzled by the unusual number of visitors in their house this late in the day. India was four and a half hours ahead of us, so it was past ten o'clock at night there.

"Only a small one," said Granny. "It's Dussehra."

Dussehra is an Indian festival. It was celebrated in different ways around the country, but in Karnataka, the state where my grandparents lived, it was celebrated with lots of delicious food, elephant parades in cities like Mysore, and processions of goddess statues down the river Kaveri. Part of the festival was about celebrating Chamundeshwari's defeat of the demon king Mahishasura.

The Kodava people of Coorg, which was where Gramps's family came from and where Ashwini thayi used to live, celebrated the actual Kaveri instead. Their beliefs revolved around the river and our ancestors rather than gods or goddesses, so their Dussehra sometimes involved a trip to Talakaveri, the place where the river begins.

Basically, India has a *lot* of different traditions and cultures, probably because there was a time not so long ago when the country was a bunch of separate states

and kingdoms. I didn't even know most of the traditions, but I was pretty sure people in the north of the country celebrated Dussehra differently. They called Chamundeshwari by the name Durga, for a start, and in some places, their Dussehra celebrated the defeat of a totally different demon king by a totally different god instead.

Mum and I usually went to India once a year, during the summer, but one time, we went in October, and that was the only time I'd ever celebrated Dussehra myself. It had been a whole week of eating delicious things, which, as far as I was concerned, made it the best festival ever. Sometimes, if I tried really hard, I could almost still taste some of the treats we'd had: Mysore pak, a buttery, sugary biscuit that came in slabs; jalebis, those sweet, sticky, sunset-colored rings soaked in syrup; dosas, which were sort of like savory crepes that I'd slather with butter; and kaju katlis, diamond-shaped sweets made out of ground-up cashews and sugar.

There had been a *lot* of sugar involved. I was practically drooling just thinking about it now.

"I'm so jealous," I said mournfully.

"I'll eat an extra piece of kaju katli just for you," Gramps said generously.

"I have a whole box of Mysore pak right here," Granny chimed in, a very Mum-esque twinkle of mischief in her eye. "Do you want to see?"

Mum and I looked at each other in a moment of mutual sorrow that we'd been saddled with a family like this.

After the call, Mum started chopping garlic and onions for the risotto she was making us for dinner. As I measured out the rice, she said, "Kiki, I know you overheard what I said to Granny and Gramps about your art . . ."

"Would that be the part where you said I'm brilliant?" I asked, smiling angelically.

She rolled her eyes. "I know what it's like to love something so much that you hate to be parted from it. I could read books and scribble with my pencil all day."

"I'd do that, too, but I'd also need cake," I said firmly.

She considered that. "Same, actually." And then she gave herself a quick shake. "The point is, it's okay to love the worlds inside your head."

"But?"

"No, that's it," she said, and smiled. "It's okay. Yes, it's annoying when I have to yell your name six times before you hear me but, you know, pot and kettle. If this is what makes you feel better on a bad day, then I'm glad you have it."

Guilt and love and gratitude made my throat tight, so I just hugged her. I had never told her just how bad it got sometimes inside my brain, but maybe I didn't need to. She understood me anyway. She *got* me.

Later, teeth brushed and pajamas on, I went back to my room and, more importantly, back to my sketchbook.

Ashwini took shape on the clean white paper, a girl with a sharp dark bob, merry brown eyes, a red leather jacket, and an expression of pure glee on her face as she battled one of Mahishasura's demon soldiers.

In my story, Ashwini was the leader of a group of rebel kids who were trying to take Mysore back from the Asuras. They called themselves the Crows, because crows are stubborn and cunning and loyal, and they lived in a lovely crooked house that had a talent for hiding them from Mahishasura's minions.

The crooked house wasn't going to be in this sketch, though. I wasn't sure what the background would be yet, but it would be outdoors, maybe on a large arched bridge over the Kaveri.

I sketched out the finer details of the Asura that Ashwini was fighting. He was a dragon demon, like the one the god Indra had defeated in one of the myths, and he was the size of a horse, with enormous black wings, slit

nostrils that breathed smoke, a spiky scarlet tongue, and shiny black jewels for scales. Before Ashwini had tracked him down, he had been one of Mahishasura's most feared minions. The sight of his silhouette swooping across the night sky had made the people of Mysore tremble in fear.

I inked over the pale pencil lines and reached for my box of colored pencils. Sweeping black lines and blocks of rich color transformed the white paper into something alive. Soon, the battle felt so real that I could almost feel the hiss of the Asura's breath on my face.

My bed gave a jerk beneath me. I jerked, too, startled.

"Hello?" I said foolishly.

Funnily enough, no one answered.

I shrugged it off and went back to my sketch. I gave the Asura's tail a wicked curve.

"Ow!"

I dropped the pencil and snatched my hands back. It had been a quick, sudden burst of pain, like an

electric shock. I could have sworn it had come from my sketchbook!

After a moment of hesitation, I put one hand back down on the page, ready to snatch it away if I needed to. Nothing happened. It was just paper. *My* paper, as much a part of me as my own skin.

I was probably just tired. It had been a while since I'd had more than five or six hours of sleep at night, and while it was *definitely* more fun to stay up and draw than it was to stay up wondering if I needed to double-check the downstairs windows, I knew I'd be useless at school tomorrow if I didn't at least try to sleep.

I put my sketchbook and pencils back on my desk, got under my warm, cuddly blanket, and flicked my lamp off.

When I woke up, my desk was in flames and there was a demon in my bedroom.

Kiki Kallira Breaks a Kingdom

By Sangu Mandanna

What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

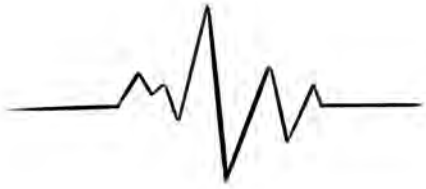
9781984814630

Maya and the Robot

By Eve L. Ewing
Illustrated by Christine Almeda

Maya's nervous about fifth grade. She tries to keep calm by reminding herself she knows what to expect. But then she learns that this year won't be anything like the last. For the first time since kindergarten, her best friends, Jada and MJ, are placed in a different class without her, and introverted Maya has trouble making new friends.

She tries to put on a brave face since they are in fifth grade now, but Maya is nervous! Just when too much seems to be changing, she finds a robot named Ralph in the back of Mr. Mac's convenience store closet. Once she uses her science skills to get him up and running, a whole new world of connection opens up as Ralph becomes a member of her family and Maya begins to step into her power.



CHAPTER 1:
THE WORST SCIENCE FAIR EVER

If you looked outside through the cafeteria windows, it seemed like a perfectly normal day. The sun was shining. Birds were chirping. A regular day. A *beautiful* day, even. But inside the cafeteria, things were anything but normal. All around me, kids and adults were screaming. I tried to shut out the chaos for a second and focus on the sunlight. *Just breathe,* I told myself. *Count your breaths. Calm down. One . . . two . . .*

"Yaaaaarghhhh!" came the ear-piercing yell from behind me. "My computer is covered in pudding! Pudding!"

I spun around to see Zoe Winters, the most popular girl in my class, standing in front of a display table where her science fair project had once stood. When I had walked into the cafeteria carrying my own project, I'd noticed how neat the whole thing was—the letters that spelled the project title, "Coding and Circuits," across the top of the board, the computer and circuits and batteries set up in a display at the front of the table.

Now it was a mess that mostly resembled a pudding waterfall. Pudding dripped over the title, smeared across the letters so it said COD CIRCU S. Pudding filled the keys of the computer keyboard. But I really cringed when I saw something even worse than ruining an expensive computer. Zoe hadn't noticed yet, but there was also—

"PUDDING IN MY HAIR! CHOCOLATE PUDDING IN MY HAIR!"

Okay. I guess she had noticed. Brown, thick, fudgy droplets cascaded from Zoe's once-perfect curls into her eyes, and she stopped saying words and started making horrible gurgly sounds. "Ayyyaaazzzrrrruuuuggghhhmaaargh!"

I was going to go over and help her when a streak of something yellow flew past my ear. I looked behind me to see that it was creamed corn. It had been launched with the accuracy of a fastball, landing dead center in a huddle of screeching first graders. They were sheltering in the corner with their teacher, screeching and giggling at the pudding waterfall, but now that it was raining corn, they started panicking and running in circles, except for one kid who must have been hungry, because he started trying to catch the bits of flying corn with his mouth.

"Mommy, I don't like corn!" wailed a kindergartner. She took off running at top speed to try to get as far away from the corn hurricane as possible. "No, stop!" I yelled after her, but it was too late. She skidded on a gross mixture of pudding and corn that was waiting on the floor like a cartoon banana peel, her light-up gym shoes slipping and sliding as she struggled to stay upright. Desperate, she grabbed the nearest solid piece of furniture—the corner of the display table where my best friend Jada was trying to guard the scale model she had built of a suspension bridge. It was a work of art. I could tell Jada must have fussed over it for weeks—it wasn't any old thing she made out of a kit. There were LEGOs and toothpicks, tiny wires, plastic beads, Popsicle sticks, and even a tiny glowing LED light at the top of the bridge. It was complex and beautiful. The little kid grabbed the table, and Jada froze,

seeing her creation in danger but not knowing what to do. She couldn't push a younger kid out of the way, but I could see by the pain in her face that she was strongly considering it. "Noooooo!" a voice screamed, and when they both turned their eyes on me I realized that the voice was mine.

Have you ever seen one of those videos that shows an avalanche coming down a mountain in slow motion? Imagine that, but replace the snow with LEGOs and toothpicks and beads, and you'll see what I saw as Jada's project came tumbling down onto the small girl sitting pitifully on the floor in a puddle of pudding.

Jada stood there, arms hanging at her sides, and watched it happen. For a second she seemed to be in shock. Then she took a deep breath, furrowed her brow, and hollered at the top of her lungs: "THIS! IS THE WORST! SCIENCE FAIR! EVERRRR!"

And then she began to cry. First her voice, then her sobs, reverberated around the room, but no one seemed to hear her. Everyone was too busy trying to handle the disaster that was unfolding.

The gym teacher was blowing his whistle for order. But it stopped making any sound when a blob of mashed potatoes flew into his face. He kept blowing, but the whistle only shot out white specks of mashed potatoes with every breath. Ms. Hixon, the cafeteria lady, had transformed into some kind of acrobatic martial artist, leaping from table to table, slapping flying food projectiles out of the air with a huge metal spoon. "You think this is my first food fight? This ain't my first food fight!" she yelled at no one. In one corner, there was so much creamed corn spilled on the floor that it made a pond large enough for several preschool kids to be sitting in it and having the time of their lives, putting it in

each other's hair and throwing it at each other and grinning like it was a playground sandbox. Near the door, Mr. Samuels, the custodian, was standing forlornly with a bucket, shaking his head. "Nope," he said over and over. "Nope, nope, nope. No way. I'm gonna need a bigger mop." Pudding and mashed potatoes and corn were on *everything*. On the tables, the floors, the walls, in people's hair. Pudding was splattered on the windows. People were digging mashed potatoes out of their ears and wiping it off their glasses.

And smack dab in the middle of the mayhem, there he was. Whirling in circles at top speed, scooping food out of industrial-sized vats and launching it in every direction. Beeping at a terrible high pitch, flashing multicolored lights, and appearing perfectly willing to spend the whole rest of the day tossing potatoes at people with no

sign of stopping. This calamity, the screaming, the mess, the ruined science fair . . . this was his fault.

No, I realized. This was *my* fault.

After all, he was my robot.

My spinning, beeping, flashing, food-catapulting, going-completely-berserk-in-the-school-cafeteria robot.

Right on cue, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned around to see Principal Merriweather. She was scowling. I gulped.

"You, my dear, are in big, big trouble," she said. I opened my mouth to respond, but before I could speak, a glob of pudding hit me right in the middle of my forehead.

I guess I kind of deserved that. And I found out that getting hit in the head with projectile pudding is more painful than it looks.

How did I get here? I didn't wake up, hop out of bed, and say, "I want to be a troublemaker kid who brings a robot to school and stands by doing nothing while it goes bonkers in the cafeteria, starts a creamed corn apocalypse, ruins the science fair, and makes my best friend cry." Definitely not my goal. I swear, I'm really a regular person. And at the moment, a regular person who is probably about to get suspended, unless for some reason the principal *enjoys* wearing a pile of mashed potatoes as a hat.

Well . . . I'm a *mostly* regular person. A regular person with a robot.

But it wasn't always that way. If the year had gone how I'd wanted it to, I probably wouldn't have a robot at all.

It all started on the first day of school.

CHAPTER 2:
THE FIRST DAY

Pancakes. Warm, golden, perfect pancakes. Thousands of them, piled high. A *mountain* of pancakes. I put on my climbing gear, threw my rope and grappling hook up Pancake Mountain, and started to make my way toward the summit. As I went along, I reached out and grabbed pieces of the mountain and popped them into my mouth. Glistening streams of maple syrup flowed down the side, and I stuck my tongue out to catch the droplets of sweetness. Then, in a booming voice, someone was calling to me from the peak. What's that they were saying? They seemed upset. Who could be upset on Pancake Mountain?!

Pancake Mountain is a place of joy and happiness. Who–

"MAAAAYAAAAAAAA! I AM NOT! GOING TO TELL YOU! AGAIN! Turn that alarm off and let's get a move on!"

I sat straight up in bed and rubbed my eyes. I looked around. Not a pancake to be found. Not even the mini-size silver dollar ones. And my mom, from the sound of things, was not happy. It would be so nice to just drift back to sleep, where everything was cozy and warm and syrupy. If only I could turn off that alarm.

My eyes darted to the corner of the bedroom I share with my little brother, Amir. On the desk was a bunch of dried Play-Doh he had left out, a couple of stuffed animals, a model of the solar system with little teeth marks in Saturn and Mercury (I mentioned the little brother, right?), a pile of my

overdue library books (I'm almost done with that Mae Jemison biography, and then I'll send it back! I swear!), and the beeping alarm clock. Next to it was . . . my book bag full of school supplies and the clothes I had laid out the night before. *Oh my gosh. Today is the—*

"First! Day! Of! School!" The bedroom door flew open and my mother leaped into the room. She tugged the covers off of me.

"Let's go, Patricia Maya Robinson!" My mother has two jobs but somehow manages to have the most enthusiasm and energy of anyone in the world. I knew she had been up before the sun, getting Amir ready for my grandma to pick him up and take him to day care, getting my lunch together, and listening to the radio. Unlike pretty much every other adult I've ever met, she didn't even drink coffee, but she always seemed ready

to do backflips in the morning. *Maybe that would be a good science fair project*, I thought. *Adult responses to caffeine. Does it have to do with age? Height? Weight? Blood type? What about—*

"Maya, don't make me tell you again."

"I got it, Mom. I'm up." I groaned and climbed out of bed. "I'll get dressed."

"Oh, I know you will," she replied. She went over to the desk, threw the dried Play-Doh in the trash with lightning speed, and picked up the neatly folded school clothes. She tossed them onto the foot of the bed. "You got five minutes, baby girl. I need you washed, dressed, and ready to eat, fast, so you can get out the door on time. I picked up Ms. Yolanda's shift, and I can't take you to school if you miss the bus."

"Okay," I mumbled, still half-asleep. Drowsily, I tugged off the satin bonnet that I had worn to

protect my freshly braided first-day-of-school hair. I was surprised it stayed on throughout all my sleeping and dreaming. I probably had a big line on my forehead.

"Better hurry up," Mom called over her shoulder as she hustled out of the room and back to the kitchen. "I made pancakes."

"Pancakes!" Suddenly I wasn't so sleepy. "Why didn't you say so?"

I got dressed in record time.

If only the first day of school had ended as well as it started. The pancakes were delicious, and then it was pretty much downhill from there.

When I got to the playground, right away I headed to where MJ and Jada would be waiting for me. I know everyone thinks that their best friends are the *best* best friends, but my friends are the certified, record-breaking greatest friends in the

solar system. Probably the galaxy. I was really excited to get back to school and see them. Most of the kids at my school live in different neighborhoods and different parts of the city, so I don't get to see them as much as I want to. Sometimes I read books and see TV shows where the characters are riding bikes to each other's houses every day after school, and that always makes me sort of jealous. If I could ride my bike to see Jada or MJ, I would be with them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Instead, I have to wait for someone to plan it out and give me a ride. That's no fun.

When we are able to get together, we think of really creative things to do. Jada and MJ are always down to assist with my latest science project, and they get just as excited as I do when I can actually get something to work. One time we spent twelve hours building a Rube Goldberg machine that could

tip a watering can and water a plant when you put a race car on a track. Another time we made up our own movie, with a script and everything, and then MJ's brother let us use his phone to record it and edit it. It was a mystery called *The Case of the Missing Toaster*, and I got to be the detective searching for the toaster, MJ was the villain who stole it, and Jada was the director. We tried to make MJ's cousin Boogie play the role of the toaster, but he wouldn't do it. Another time we went down to Jada's basement, built a giant fort out of blankets, and spent the rest of the day with some flashlights, making up stories and looking through the photos and yearbooks Jada's grandpa left down there, laughing at the funny old hairstyles and fashions. Jada's mom has a catering business, and sometimes she lets us help her prepare food for someone's birthday or wedding shower. One time she showed

us how to test if a cupcake is done (you stick a toothpick in the center, and if it comes out wet, it needs more time) and how to perfectly balance a cherry on top of a bunch of frosting.

On Halloween, sometimes we trick-or-treat at MJ's because he lives in a really big apartment building with hundreds of people, not just three apartments like my building. Last year we went door to door inside, which was good because it was pouring rain out, and we still got a lot of candy. I knew that this year we could have just as much fun. When we hang out at my house, we usually play with Amir, and since I have the biggest LEGO collection of anybody, we work on those for hours and hours, either following directions or making our own LEGO designs. We don't have to be super creative all the time. Sometimes we play video games or watch television and relax. Daddy calls us the Three

Jedi Knights. He's the one who showed us the original Star Wars movies, and then he showed us the old cowboy Westerns where George Lucas got his ideas from. Some people would laugh if they went to visit their friend and their friend's dad wanted to watch a bunch of old movies, but Jada and MJ were completely into it. They're really open to trying something new, and even if they weren't feeling it, they wouldn't have laughed. See what I mean? Greatest friends in the Milky Way.

I spotted them right away, in our usual spot by the fence, overlooking the basketball court. MJ and I are into watching on the sidelines. Jada, who is a basketball fiend, wishes she could jump in the game. But the older kids always take over, and so Jada usually lingers at the edge of the fence with lost-puppy-dog eyes, trying to get up the courage to ask them if she can join.

Today was no different. “I can’t wait until we’re in seventh grade,” she said when I arrived. No hello or anything, and she didn’t look at me directly. Her eyes were locked onto the ball as it bounced three times against the pavement and then soared through the air, arcing toward the basket. “As soon as I get a chance, I’m—”

“Gonna be the first in line for tryouts,” MJ said. We’ve heard this speech so many times that he’s able to finish the sentence for her at this point. Jada barely noticed, still hypnotized by the action on the court.

“Didn’t Coach Tanaka say she might let you try out next year?” I said to Jada, poking her gently in the arm to remind her that MJ and I exist. “Since you’re already as tall as most of the seventh-grade girls anyway.”

“Yeah,” Jada said wistfully. She turned,

consciously noticing me for the first time. "Hi, Maya."

"Hi, Jada! Hey, MJ!"

Before MJ could respond, an older boy who overheard us walked away from the court and leaned over the fence, furrowing his brow. MJ rolled his eyes. He already knew what was coming.

"Ay!" said the boy. "I got a question. If your name is Michael Jordan, why you so scrawny?" MJ ignored him. But Jada wasn't here for it.

"*First* of all," she said, stepping up to the fence to face the boy. "Your joke isn't very original. He's heard it a million times. 'Ooh, let's see a dunk, Michael Jordan.' 'Where's your championship ring, Michael Jordan?' It's old. Second of all, our boy here grew a good two inches over the summer! Can't you tell? Sure, okay, some of that is his hair standing up, but—"

By this point, Jada had managed to bore the older boy to death, and he lost interest in making fun of MJ, wandering back toward the action of the game. MJ was flushed red, ready to about die of embarrassment.

"Man, you gotta ignore them," Jada said. "We're in fifth grade now. Forget their old jokes."

"And you really *did* grow some over the summer," I said. As MJ stood there with his arms crossed, fuming, I walked around him so that we were standing back-to-back. We were about the same height, but I hovered my hand over both of our heads so that it was hard to tell who was taller. "See? You're taller than me!" MJ was unconvinced.

"I wish I didn't *have* to ignore them," he said, frowning. "Why couldn't I have a regular name? Even *Michael* without the *Jordan* would be an

improvement. I don't know what my dad was thinking."

"He was thinking you was gonna be great!" said Jada. "Epic. Unstoppable. A high school basketball star, following in the footsteps of his pops." She folded her arms, pretending to cradle a baby, and batted her eyes down lovingly. "He was looking at you, his brand-new baby boy, and thinking, *He is going to be exactly what it says on the statue.* 'The best there ever was. The best there ever will be.'"

Last year, MJ's dad had taken the three of us to our first basketball game. His brother, MJ's uncle, works for the city, fixing big potholes in the ground. His job gave him free tickets for a special occasion, and we got to go. We sat so way up high that the players were the size of hamsters as they ran around on the court, but it was still one of the best days ever. And we took a picture together in

front of the big Michael Jordan statue. *The best there ever was. The best there ever will be.* Ever since then, Jada had become obsessed with the phrase, writing it in the back of her notebook over and over.

She turned and grinned at me. "You finally made it!" she said. "I was worried you would be late for the first day of school." She gave me a big hug. Jada is the kindest person I know. A lot of kids act scared of her or think she's mean because she's so much taller than them, but she has been my friend and stuck by me since we were in kindergarten, and she helped me get the best blocks off of the top shelf that I couldn't reach. But it's not because she's my bestie—she's nice to everybody.

I stepped back and lifted a hand to greet MJ, since that older boy had interrupted us. "Hey, grumpy."

MJ reached a hand out, and we exchanged our special dap. Two quick slides of the hands, two quick taps of a peace sign against our chests, and an exploding fist. "Hey, goofy," he said back. This was our ongoing joke. MJ is as kind-hearted as Jada. But he's not so quick to show it. He's always got this super-serious frowny face, and his brain tends to jump to thinking about the worst thing that could possibly happen. He says that I'm too quick to lose track of things, to let my mind wander and start thinking about impossible stuff instead of facing reality. I say that he's too negative, always so concerned about the bad things that could *maybe* happen that he forgets the good stuff that *is* happening. Maybe we're both right, and that's part of what makes us a good match as friends—not being the same, but being two sides of the same coin.

I reached into my pocket, grabbed the small plastic bag of apple slices I had brought with me from home, and started to munch on one. "So, are y'all feeling ready for today? I'm just the teeniest bit scared. I know I'm ready for fifth grade, but I have heard that Ms. Rodríguez is really mean and strict."

Jada and MJ both gave me a funny look that made me nervous. Was I being a baby? "I mean,

don't get me wrong," I said quickly. "I think we can handle it together. And this is the science fair year! Just kinda got butterflies in my stomach is all."

They looked at each other, then back at me. "Maya," said Jada gently. "We both got letters last week saying that we're gonna be in Ms. Montgomery's class." She furrowed her brow, worried about me. "We assumed you got a letter too."

Ms. Montgomery? They were in Ms. Montgomery's class?

"What do you mean?" I understood what they were saying but also didn't get it at all. MJ, Jada, and I had been in the same class since we were five years old. Being in school without them was . . . well, I couldn't even imagine it.

"I guess some new kids transferred into the school at the very end of the summer, and they had to switch some things around to make the numbers

work. MJ and I ended up with Ms. Montgomery."

Ms. Montgomery had a reputation for being the coolest, most fun teacher in the entire school. She played the blues guitar in a band on the weekends and sometimes would bring it to school and sing songs. She had three dogs, and her room was decorated with pictures of them and lots of other animals. And, most important to me, she was a scientist. A real one. She had been a chemist before becoming a teacher, and she was always showing off amazing science demos in her class. She was even friends with some of the people at the Museum of Science and Industry, and when she took her classes on field trips there, they got special behind-the-scenes tours.

MJ and Jada were going to be in Ms. Montgomery's class listening to her play guitar and sing songs she made up about the water cycle and the

different parts of the ecosystem, and doing real lab experiments with microscopes and chemicals. Meanwhile I would be stuck in Ms. Rodríguez's class. Ms. Rodríguez, whose main claim to fame was that she once made a kid write a ten-page report about gum after he stuck some under a desk. Great.

And worst of all, we wouldn't be together. How would I make friends? Who would I sit with at lunchtime? Who would I do group projects with?

Instead of asking any of these questions out loud, I stood there in silence, feeling like a rain cloud was hovering over my head. My worry must have shown on my face, because MJ reached out and patted me on the shoulder. "It'll be okay, Maya," he said. "Even if you don't make any new friends, there's always next year."

"Next year?!" Jada gave him a look. "Don't listen to him, Maya. You're going to have a *great* year.

And we can still hang out in the morning. We might have recess at the same time, too! Plus, how bad can Ms. Rodríguez really be?"

I was about to try to say something brave, when we were interrupted by an ear-shattering whistle. We looked toward the school entrance. Ms. Montgomery was standing by the door. She had long dreadlocks elegantly twisted up on the top of her head, a huge pair of glasses with gold rims, and she was holding a bright-pink clipboard. Students were crowding around her eagerly, and she was greeting each of them with a warm smile.

But she was not the one who had blown the whistle.

"Fifth grade!" bellowed a woman standing nearby. "Fifth grade, it's time to line up! Immediately!" She looked around the playground, scowling. She stood at attention, her back completely straight, and

she held a regular plain-looking brown clipboard in her hand, which she tapped impatiently. She reminded me of Miss Trunchbull from the book *Matilda* by Roald Dahl. Across the playground, kids were scurrying over to her, terrified to get caught in her glare.

This was Ms. Rodríguez.

Jada gulped so loud that I could hear her from a few inches away. Then she smiled a thin smile, putting on a positive face for my benefit. "Well . . ." she said. "Let's go line up! Maybe we'll see you later today, Maya."

"Yeah," I said weakly. "Maybe." MJ started to say something but obviously couldn't come up with anything, so he made a weird face, baring his teeth at me. Clearly, it was supposed to be a smile, but MJ is not very good at faking his emotions.

"Uh . . ." he said awkwardly. "Enjoy . . . your . . .

um . . . Don't forget to write down your homework assignments at the end of the day!" And he sprinted off, lining up with his class. I nodded and started walking toward the door. I knew that I was walking to my doom.

CHAPTER 3:
THE PERFECT FRIEND

When I got home from school, I went straight to my room, threw my book bag on the floor, and flopped onto the bed. What a day.

Ms. Rodríguez had somehow managed to be even worse than I expected. Her room was arranged with the desks in rows and columns so that everyone sat by themselves, in alphabetical order. When she talked, she barked out commands. Most of the time when she asked a question everyone was too afraid to raise their hands, so she called on people at random, which is how I found myself messing things up with her almost instantly.

"And what do we know about multiplying numbers by zero?" she asked the class during the math period, tapping a yardstick impatiently against the ledge of the chalkboard. "Anyone? Anyone?" I scribbled in my notebook, hoping that maybe if I didn't look at her I would turn invisible. Except there was nothing to take notes on at that moment, so I was drawing the same tiny circles and lines over and over. No one else volunteered an answer, either. Ms. Rodríguez picked up her clipboard and looked at the attendance sheet. "Let's hear an answer from . . ." She ran her fingertip down the line. "Patricia?" I gulped and looked up. Everyone looked around the room. Most people looked at me, knowing that Patricia is my real first name. I was named after my grandma as a sign of respect, but I've always gone by my middle name, Maya. A couple of the new kids and kids I didn't know that

well turned their heads back and forth, confused, wondering who "Patricia" was.

I didn't know what to do. Usually, this was the point where I would nicely correct someone about my name. My mom and dad had taught me a certain polite way to do it. "Actually," I would say, "I prefer to go by my middle name, Maya." And then I would answer the question. The *prefer* part made it sound very grown-up and responsible and polite even though I was correcting someone.

But in that moment, Ms. Rodríguez was staring at me with this scowl on her face, and I don't know why, but I completely froze. "Patricia?" she repeated. "Aren't you Patricia?"

"Um . . . I . . ." Before I could put a sentence together, Zoe Winters spoke up, loudly. Even though no one was even talking to her. "Yes, Ms. Rodríguez," she said in her most overly dramatic

voice. "That's Patricia Robinson." I shot her a look. Like, *Thanks, I think I remember my own name.* Except, in that moment, I guess I didn't.

"Okay, Ms. Patricia Robinson," said Ms. Rodríguez. "Let's hear it. What happens when you multiply numbers by zero?"

Everyone was looking at me, and I didn't like it. I wished a huge snow cloud could appear out of nowhere and drop an instant blizzard on our heads so that everyone would freeze and be covered with snow. Or maybe an alien spaceship could land on the playground, so everyone would run to the window to see it and forget about me altogether. Anything to get me out of this situation. But no magical blizzard or alien invasion appeared, and I felt my cheeks getting hot as everyone waited for me to respond. I could sense that my classmates were grateful—as long as Ms. Rodríguez was focused

on me, they were spared. Finally, I managed to say a few words, quietly.

"When you multiply—" My voice squeaked like an old rusty bicycle. I cleared my throat and tried again. "When you multiply a number by one—I mean zero—it equals zero. Zero times anything is always zero."

"Zero, zero, zero," Zoe repeated in a whisper behind me. No one else seemed to hear her. I couldn't tell if she was making fun of me or not, but somehow it made me feel even worse.

"That's right," said Ms. Rodríguez. "Thank you, Patricia." I winced. Here it was, another chance to make things right. If I could speak up . . . For a second I felt time slowing down. Has that ever happened to you? I've felt that way before, when I'm embarrassed or when things feel out of control. A voice in my head was yelling at me. *Speak up!*

This is your chance! Now! Go, go, go!

But all I did was nod. I didn't say a word. And then, time was moving at a regular speed again, and Ms. Rodríguez moved on to something else. I nervously tapped my pencil against the side of my desk, feeling terrible. After a few minutes, I tapped it so hard that I dropped it, and it rolled behind me and toward Zoe's desk. She picked it up and handed it back to me. Just before I took it, she smirked. "Here you go, *Patricia*," she said, showing a toothy great white shark smile.

I tried to remember Jada's words. *Ignore them*. I took it. "Thanks."

I couldn't wait until recess, when I would have a chance to talk it over with my friends. Even though I had said the right answer to the math question, I felt so small in the moment, and embarrassed. I hadn't done anything wrong, but I felt sick to my

stomach. And I felt ashamed that I had failed to correct Ms. Rodríguez about my name. *Your name is sacred*, my grandma always told me. *It belongs to you. You have to protect it.* I wanted to see a familiar face, someone to remind me that I was still Maya and to make me laugh or distract me.

So I was disappointed when I got to the playground and saw that Jada and MJ weren't there. Their whole class was still inside. As my classmates ran to the swings and formed circles, laughing and talking, I found Principal Merriweather, who was monitoring the playground. "Excuse me," I asked, "do you know where Ms. Montgomery's class is?" Principal Merriweather looked down at me. She was a tall, thin woman with gentle eyes. She had been born in Mississippi, which came through in her soft southern accent. "Hello, Maya," she said. "How are you? How is your first day going?"

"It's okay," I lied. "But do you know where—"

"Aha," she interrupted me, and I saw a moment of understanding in her face. "You are looking for Ms. Montgomery's class. Because you want to see MJ and Jada, don't you?"

Could she read my thoughts? I nodded at her, feeling confused. "Well," she continued, "I'm afraid they're not here, honey. They have the second recess break, at eleven o'clock."

"A different recess?!" My mouth fell open. Eleven o'clock? *You've got to be kidding me.* Not only was I not going to see MJ and Jada right now, I wasn't going to have recess with them ever. Ever. For the whole year. As Principal Merriweather gazed at me calmly, I looked desperately over the playground. Who was I going to talk to? Who would play with me? Listen to my bad jokes? Make me feel better about having the meanest teacher in the whole

world? My face started feeling hot again, and my eyes stung. I swallowed. No way was I going to cry. Not on the first day of school. Not in front of the principal. Not a chance. Not—

"Oh, my dear." Principal Merriweather reached out and put an arm around me as tears fell down my face. "I know it's hard to have new routines," she said. "And to meet new people. I understand you wanted to be in a class with your friends. But it's going to be okay." I pulled away from her, wiping my face on my sleeve. I understood what she was saying, but I could barely hear her. I was so mortified at having cried on the playground. In fifth grade! Who does that? My eyes darted over to the swings. I hoped no one had seen me. I took a step back from Principal Merriweather and coughed.

"It's okay," I said. "I'll be okay. Thanks." And

before she could say another word, I was gone. I spent recess in the familiar corner by the fence, kicking a chunk of cement around with my shoe and pretending I didn't care.

The next day was more of the same. And the next. And the one after that. By Friday afternoon, as I lay on my bed remembering the whole week, I felt defeated. On Monday I would have to go back to school with a teacher who called me by the wrong name and no hope of even seeing my friends for more than a few minutes. There had to be something I could do. Something to make the days better, to make a new friend who could stick by me and see me through this year. There was no way I could make it alone.

Amir was on the floor, singing happily to himself as he stacked blocks into a tall column. I leaned over the edge of the bed and poked him on

the shoulder. He grinned his baby grin.

"Amir, what would you do if you were having a hard time at school? And your teacher was mean to you?"

He furrowed his brow for a second like he was trying very hard to understand what I was saying, then nodded and pointed at his blocks. "Block, Maya. Block! Maya have block?"

"No thanks," I said gloomily.

"Maya have block!" He threw a block at my arm and giggled as it bounced onto the floor.

"Ow. We don't throw, Amir. No throwing."

He nodded seriously and went back to what he was doing. I sighed. One day Amir would be old enough for me to talk to when I was feeling lonely, but today was not that day. I frowned and looked at the red mark on my arm where the block had hit me. Ouch. Staring at the ceiling, I felt my mind start

to wander. *The perfect friend*. Someone who would agree with me most of the time, and other times we could have interesting debates and arguments. Someone who would do the things I liked to do, or teach me how to do new things, and help me be brave enough to try them. Someone who would think I was funny all the time. Someone who would always be by my side, no matter what.

Just as I was sinking further into my bad mood, thinking that maybe the solution was to never leave my bedroom again, Mom stuck her head in the door. "Hey, kiddo," she said. "I forgot to mention, sorry. I saw Mr. MacMillan earlier, and he said that he has some work for you to do if you want to go over there today. He asked me yesterday, but I told him you had homework and had to wait until the end of the week. I still want you to do some

homework before you go, so that it doesn't all get left for Sunday."

And with that, the clouds parted. I sat straight up. "I finished my homework! Well, most of it!" Since I had no one to hang out with at recess, and since the math assignments this week were review from last year, I had finished that quickly. We were also supposed to read the first chapter of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, but Auntie Lou had read that book with me over the summer, and I already knew the whole story. So I was mostly good. I hopped off the bed. "Homework is handled! Can I go now?"

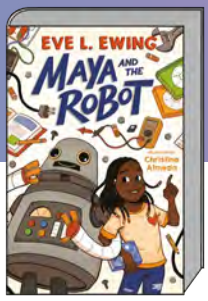
Mom laughed. "Sure," she said. "You need to be home by six thirty for dinner. Tell him I said hello."

"Will do!"

I was already out the door.

Maya and the Robot

By Eve L. Ewing
Illustrated by Christine Almeda



What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

9781984816191

Samira Surfs

By Rukhsanna Guidroz
Illustrated by Fahmida Azim

Samira thinks of her life as before and after: before the burning and violence in her village in Burma, when she and her best friend would play in the fields, and after, when her family was forced to flee. There's before the uncertain journey to Bangladesh by river, and after, when the river swallowed her nana and nani whole. And now, months after rebuilding a life in Bangladesh with her mama, baba, and brother, there's before Samira saw the Bengali surfer girls of Cox's Bazar, and after, when she decides she'll become one.

INSIDE OUR HOUSE

Our house, made of bamboo
chopped by Baba's bare hands,
sits on a hill with other houses
just like ours.
The roof is crinkly blue plastic,
noisy in the wind,
hot in the afternoon sun.
Rain drips through its holes,
making dirt puddles
on the ground.

Inside, we have a single room
for the four of us.
Mama and Baba's sleeping mat
covers one corner.
Close by, Mama's silver pot
and Baba's old spit cup,
stained red from his betel leaf.

Khaled stores a cricket bat
in his corner.
Next to it, on the floor, is

my brother's blue notebook.
He tucked it in the waistband
of his longyi
and brought it all the way from
Burma.

What's mine is a stool that holds
my special blanket,
Nani's gift to baby me.
It's torn and frayed,
but when I brush it against my skin
on cool winter nights,
me and Nani are together again,
cheek to cheek.

My stomach twists
when I think about
what little
made it here with us.
But things don't make a home.
Family does,
even those still in Burma.
Nani and Nana do,
even though they are gone.

EGGS

Our eggs go *plop-plop* into water,
bubble and mist as they simmer
in Mama's silver pot.
When they're ready,
she spoons them out
and sets them in my bucket.

Our livelihood lies between
these brittle white shells.
My job is to sell
as many hard-boiled eggs as I can
to beachgoers
in Cox's Bazar.

Each oval brings
money to my palm
and food
to the bellies
in my family.

SALT

Last night, Baba said,
"If you sell all your eggs, Samira,
we can buy extra salt to keep."
He was squatting on the floor,
wrapping coconut, fennel, and nuts in betel leaf.
It's his favorite treat.

A spiral of joy rose in my belly.
Salt crystals transform Mama's dahl.

Beneath my crossed legs,
the prickly straw mat
suddenly felt smooth.

A bucket of eggs
turns into bundles of taka
turns into pinches of salt
turns into mouthfuls of joy.

I send out a wish
to sell all my eggs.
Come extra hungry to th e beach, tourists!

SCOOT LOW

Every morning,
a narrow milky stream
of drip-drop pouring cha
tumbles from high
to greet me.
This is how Mama pours it.
Moments with her at dawn
bathe our day in sweetness.

Baba is the first to leave.
Shrimping is early work.
Next, Khaled,
to clean dishes and tables
for the café at Seaview Hotel.

Mama kisses me on the cheek.
"Stay safe, Samira," she says.
I'm the last to go.

Low, low I scoot,
zigzagging
down our sneaky steep hill.

My walk is filled with
sky, wrapped in pearly indigo
air, crisp and still,
and birds chirping
every morning.

KNOWING

I step past the woods
to meet a wide stretch
of golden-gray sand.
The beach goes beyond where I can see.
Khaled says it's the longest in the world!

Café doors creak open.
Outside, whining
packs of stray dogs
beg for food,
waiting for scraps
that miss the rubbish.

Fishermen throw out nets
for their daily catch.
The sea, sparkly in the morning sun,
breaks in little waves near the shore.
My eyes follow their slow, gentle peeling.
My ears tune in the gentle roar
of water tumbling on sand.
It sounds like water lapping at a boat,
like the one we boarded to cross the river

when we left Burma,
just me, Khaled, Mama, and Baba,
and Nani and Nana.
The others stayed behind:
Hasina Auntie, Jamal Uncle,
my cousin Shoba,
and my best friend, Sahara.

It's been three months
since the river tossed our boat,
our chests sinking, stomachs plummeting.
Water can be dangerous
and beautiful at the same time.
For now, I stay as far away
as I can.

A BETTER LIFE

In a cluster, books under arms,
Bengali boys watch the waves before school.
Envy bubbles inside me.
I wish I could go to school, too.

"Life will be better in Bangladesh."
Mama had promised,
hope shining in her eyes.
Nani had said,
"You'll be able to walk to the market with friends."
Baba told us we'd be safer.
"Even to go to mosque," Nana had added.
"Bangladesh is full of Muslims.
We'll be free to practice our faith."

But in Burma, I learned at the madrasah
in a class just for girls.
In Burma, I had Nani and Nana,
who would make me special dried fish treats.
Nana had a way with spices,
he was the best cook, Nani always said.

Now I am left with a big hole,
right in the center of my chest.
Peering into its emptiness,
I wonder if school could fill it,
and reading and writing and books.

MY LONGING

"School's not important for girls," Baba insists.
His dark eyes meet mine.
It's easier to focus on the locks
rushing out from under his cap.
Yes, Baba, I understand.
My thoughts bounce back and forth inside my head.
I know what Baba will say next.

"You need to help feed our family."
I glance at the floor as Baba continues.
"If we could afford school,
we'd send your brother
because only boys
can change a family's fate."

His words squash me.
But, Baba, maybe girls can, too.
Maybe my hard work
my sweat
will bring our family
money

food
safety.

And if there's extra money,
couldn't I go to school?

SAMAJ

Back home in Maungdaw district,
we had samaj.
Here, there is no community
to share food with the hungrier families,
to help fix our roofs when they drip,
to keep peace when villagers argue,
to warn us of the burning.

Here, while I work, Mama takes care of our home.
There is no Hasina Auntie,
Mama's closest sister,
with her patient ways and high-pitched laugh
and big, round smiling face
to cheer us up.

Here, there are no family gatherings
after Friday night prayers,
with fried chicken, sticky rice, and banana leaf,
prepared by Nana,
served by Baba.

Here, we have just us.

THREE, PLEASE

I hear the adhan
and see men walking to mosque.
It must be past noon!
Wiggly lines of heat
sear the top of my head
through my double-folded orna.

Down the beach, I see girls
sellings chips, bread, jewelry, and shells.
There are no police today
walking around,
monitoring the area,
ready to run them off.

I wonder if they're all friends.
What are their names?
What do they dream of?
How do they keep cool?

My half-empty bucket
means half-empty bellies
means I must stay in this heat.

A couple sitting under a red umbrella
wave me over.
Hot sand crunches beneath my feet
as I walk their way.
I show them my eggs.
The lady smiles in approval,
her black sunglasses reflecting the water.
The man reaches for his wallet with one hand
and holds up three fingers with the other.

Tap-tap breaks the shell.
A quick swipe of each egg
against the string
attached to my bucket
reveals the yolk inside.
I sprinkle salt and red chili
on each open half.
My customers smile wide,
sinking their teeth into
a spicy snack
that tastes of the sea.

And just like that
my bucket
and heart
feel a little lighter.

SWAP

After his shift,
Khaled likes to talk with customers,
picking up English from tourists
and more Chittagonian from Bengalis.

Nani and Nana taught us Chittagonian.
They learned from trading
with Bengalis at the border.
Golden fiber bags were Nani's weak spot.
She swapped jade beads for them.
She swapped our words for theirs.

Some of them are the same
like *flower* and *three*,
and some are different
like *safe* and *rescue*.

More and more,
we must use their words
to get by,
to feel less on the
outside.

KEEPER

Like always,
Khaled has found his way.
He surfs with new friends
on a board he rents
with rasgulla instead of taka,
from a Bengali boy named Tariq.

Before the scraps from Khaled's café
make it to the rubbish
or to the dogs,
Khaled collects them,
bringing home roti or vegetable curry.
Even rasgulla.
Until Mama said more food
and less dessert.
Now the sweet, fluffy cheese balls
go to Tariq,
who has a sweet tooth
so big,
I see it when he laughs.

But the truth is
the boards are not really Tariq's.
Khaled says a missionary visiting Cox's Bazar
brought them.
The truth is
they are for all to share,
not for one to keep to themself.
The truth is
sometimes
hard to speak.

ZING-ZING

After three months,
my brother can catch waves
sometimes.
It doesn't matter to him
when he falls off
because each time he's out there,
he's having fun with his friends.
I hear them on the water.
Their splashing and laughing
could smother all the sadness in the world.

When Khaled sees me,
he comes in,
wet shirt stuck to his chest,
wavy hair glued to his forehead.

"What did you learn at the café today?" I ask.
"A lot," he replies.
I slap his hand away
as he reaches for an egg.
"Learning English is hard, too hard for you."
He pokes me,

and I sneer at him.
Though he is just teasing,
my throat tightens.
"I'm the best egg seller on the beach, Khaled!
If I can work, I can learn."

My brother splashes me,
and I let out a cry,
splashing him back.
My feet are in the water
sending a *zing-zing* charge
up my body.

Water can trick us.
It took my Nani and Nana
when we crossed into Bangladesh.
It draws more than a line on land.
It separates our old life
from our new life.

It wasn't always that way.
Auntie and Mama
brought me and Khaled
to bathe and swim in the river,
to jump and make big splashes.

Now, the water tries to whisk me away,
rushing around my feet,
burying them in sand.
It licks me *zing-zing* again,
my toes curl,
and suddenly I feel
courage.

"I'm going to ask Mama," I announce.
"Ask her what?" says Khaled.
"If I can go to school."

MY ANSWER

Mama's bun, free from her hijab,
wobbles as she speaks.
"Samira, girls don't need to go to school."

People think me and Mama
resemble each other.
We have eyes the color of charcoal,
eyebrows arched like bird wings.
Our round faces are mirrors,
except for the ring in Mama's nose.
Although she sits across the mat while we eat,
she suddenly seems so far away.

"Mama, but why not?"
Too late to swallow my words.
One look from her is enough.
Did you know eyes can be spiky?
I want to say, *Mama,*
I need something more
than just selling eggs.
Mama, before you sold
the gold necklace Baba gave you

to pay for these chickens,
before we came here,
before our Buddhist neighbors
said we didn't belong,
before the Burmese government
said Rohingya were from Bangladesh,
we had a life.
I had a life.

I stare at my dinner.
The pool of saltless dahl
looks sad.
Khaled makes silly slurps
to cheer me up,
but it doesn't work.
Like hot roti,
the conversation drops.

THE LESSON

While Mama and Baba still sleep,
Khaled taps my arm.
Why is he up so early?
He can teach me some English, he says.
I poke him. "Stop teasing, Khaled."
He grins and tells me to get up, poking me back.

Khaled acts like he's much older,
as if he learned everything about the world
in those twenty-four months he lived before me.
Though sometimes he is helpful
and kind,
he can be annoying!

He's not said his prayers this morning.
Did he forget
or has he chosen to delay
or skip them
just for me?
Either way, my lips are sealed.

"Let's get started," Khaled whispers
as he lays out the tools, treasures:

A small yellow pencil
with the letters *HB* on the side
and his notebook,
a gift from Nana,
crammed with
writing and pictures.

In a corner of our house,
the lesson begins.

Flicking past pages,
Khaled finds a blank space,
then writes fresh things.
"A, B, C," he whispers, pointing to the letters.
Their sounds tickle my ears like feathers,
and I smile.
I am learning English.
And, this morning,
I don't miss my cha!

OLD BAD DREAM

My day is not marked by the
rumbling of my tummy,
or the heat of the sun.
I don't even feel them because of
letters.

And now, lying awake at night,
I think about how proud Nani and Nana
would be of my learning,
if they were here,
if they hadn't gone
to the bottom of the river.

A tightness
squeezes my chest.
I imagine water
pushing against my limbs,
and below my feet,
nothing.
In a panic,
I kick hard
trying to swim to the surface.

But an anchor tied to my waist
keeps me down.

This vision appears often.
Each time, I'm back at the river crossing.
Our boat rocking back and forth,
inside, hungry babies crying,
parents clutching them to their chests,
wailing in fear
of losing their lives to water,
after dodging death
to get this far.

It happened so quickly.
Nani stood
to stretch her aching legs.
Nana helped.

And they slipped
over the side
of the boat.

Mama called out,
but it was too late.
Nani and Nana were slurped up

by milky brown chop.
Our outstretched hands
never met their grasp.
Their limbs weary,
their hearts long broken.
They had nothing left to hold.

Nani and Nana disappeared into the river,
vanishing forever.

Samira Surfs

By Rukhsanna Guidroz
Illustrated by Fahmida Azim

What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

9780593326213

Rez Dogs

By Joseph Bruchac

Malian loves spending time with her grandparents at their home on a Wabanaki reservation. She's there for a visit when a pandemic starts, and ends up quarantining with her grandparents.

Everyone is worried about the pandemic, but Malian knows how to keep her family and community safe: She protects her grandparents, and they protect her. She doesn't go outside to play with friends, she helps her grandparents use video chat, and she listens to and learns from their stories. And when Malsum, one of the dogs living on the rez, shows up at their door, Malian's family knows that he'll protect them too.

Told in verse inspired by oral storytelling, this novel about the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the ways Malian's community has cared for one another through plagues of the past, and how they keep caring for one another today.

chapter four

three muskrateers

Her phone was ringing.
She picked it up
and looked at the time.
It was midnight.
Who would be calling her at midnight?
Her daily call from her parents
had taken place just after dinner.
Her grandparents had been in bed
for two hours already.

"Hello?" she said.
"Help!" replied the voice
on the other end.
"Who is this?"
"It's us," said a
sort of familiar voice.
"It's us, the Three Muskrateers."

It was Darrell Muskwas.
Of course, Malian thought.
Who else would be
calling up this late?
He and his two best buddies,
the Glossian twins,
Abel and Mark, started
calling themselves that
a couple of years ago.

Darrell's last name
in Wabanaki meant "muskrat."
Unlike Malian, the three of them
had never read Alexander Dumas,
but they'd loved the movie.

The three of them
were not bad kids.
But if there was
any trouble
you could get into
around the rez,
they would be
knee-deep in it

before you could
say Tabat! Stop!

Malian had
known those guys
since all four of them
were real little.
Whenever she spent time
with her grandparents,
usually during
the summer vacation,
those three guys were who
she almost always
ended up
hanging out with.

Even though she'd been
living off rez
since kindergarten,
they'd pretty much
accepted her—
even though Darrell
had started
the three of them
calling her Macintosh.

Macintosh, the apple
and not the computer.
It was a play on
the slang word *Apple,*
a name for someone
who looks Indian
but acts more
like a white person—
red on the outside
and white within.
An insult to say
to somebody Native.

But they said it
good-naturedly,
and Malian
was never one
to let words hurt her,
especially since
she knew
real well
who she was.

"Why are you calling me
at midnight?" she asked.

"Because we need help,"
Darrell pleaded.

"What kind of help
do you need?"

Darrell's voice
was strained.

"We need you now!
Right now! To keep
your dog from eating us.
We're way up
in the old ash tree
across the road.
And your big dog
is here snarling
at the base of the tree,
jumping up at us
and growling
like a werewolf!"

Malian barely managed
to keep herself
from laughing out loud.

"What did you do
to make him chase you?"

There was a long silence
from the other end.
Then Darrell said,
"The three of us
sneaked out of our houses.
We came over
to your place
just to see
if maybe you'd like
to come out with us.
You know,
just do something.
It's so boring at home."

Malian had to agree
that it sure was
boring at times.
She wished she could
hang out with friends;
if not the kids
she'd gotten to know

in her school,
then her Penacook buddies,
like the Muskrateers.
Would it really hurt
to just spend
a little time
out of the house
with them?

Then she shook her head.
The way things were,
she had to be
responsible—
she couldn't
think first about fun
like a little kid.

"Right now?"
Malian said,
putting on her
grown-up voice.
"At night
in the middle
of a pandemic?"

"Aw," Darrell said,
"come on, Malian.
Everyone knows
what we've heard
on the news.
Kids don't get
this disease,
so isn't it crazy
for us to stay
all cooped up
like chickens.
Anyhow, we
sneaked up real good
and were just about
to throw some little
stones at your window
to wake you up,
when we heard
this deep growl!
Then your big dog
came charging out
and us three,
we barely made it
to this tree."
This time it was even harder

for Malian not to laugh,
but she didn't.

"Okay," she said,
her voice calm.
"I will go call him,
but you have to
promise me something."

"Whatever you ask,
we'll do it,"
Darrell said.

"Okay," she said.
"Now, first of all,
maybe us kids
don't get COVID-19
as bad as adults do,
but we can give it
to our elders.
You three guys all
have grandparents at home.
So you should be
ashamed of yourselves."

There was an even
longer silence.

Then Darrell said,
in a quieter voice,
"You got a point."

"You bet I do.
Now if you really
agree with me
I'm going
to whistle and call
our dog back to me
and you three
are going
to climb down
from that tree
and go straight home.
All right?"

There was a long pause
and she could hear
a muffled sound like grumbling
from the Muskrateers,
probably muffled
because Darrell

had his hand
over his phone.

"Oh-kay," Darrell
finally sighed
in a resigned voice.
"We guess you're right."

Malian whistled.
Malsum stood,
shook himself,
took one last look
up the tree,
then trotted
to her side.

Trying not
to laugh,
Malian watched
as the boys
climbed down,
then called to them:

"Good night!"

chapter five

frybread

Malian put her
iPad aside, sighed,
and leaned against
the porch railing.
Malsum, who
was sitting by her feet,
turned his head
and looked at her,
as if to ask
if she needed help.

Malian looked at him
and shook her head.
"It's okay, boy.
There's nothing
you can do to help"
—she held up her iPad—
"with this."
She tapped the icon again.
Nothing!

It was so frustrating
trying to do
anything online
here on the rez.
Even here outside
she sometimes couldn't
get enough bars
on her personal hotspot
to connect.

Ms. Mendelson, her teacher,
had been understanding.
"Just connect when you can
and if you miss class,
don't worry because
I'll always e-mail you
the assignments so
you can keep up."

That was good,
but still, Malian didn't like
to always have to
be playing catch-up.
Back in Boston,

she was always
one of the first
to hand in
her assignments.
Her dad had taught her
that was one way
to avoid being seen
by narrow-minded people
as a “lazy Indian.”

She sighed again,
louder this time.

Malsum, who’d
been sitting by her side,
looked up at her,
then carefully placed
one of his big paws
in her lap.

Malian patted him
on the head.
His friendship helped,
but it simply couldn’t
solve everything.

She sometimes
felt so cut off,
it was like she was
floating in midair.

Unlike the other kids
here on the rez,
like the Muskrateers,
Malian wasn't used
to going to a school
that was barely in
the twenty-first century
without any Wi-Fi
and spotty Internet.

She had heard
how off-rez kids
like her Boston classmates
with all their
high-speed connections
were having trouble
doing things at home,
especially with all the strain
of being with family
all day, every day.

She loved her grandparents,
but kind of envied
those kids stuck
with moms and dads.
She really missed
her mother and father
so much that at times
it seemed
as if her heart
was going to break.

Malsum made
a soft greeting sound.
Ha-woof, ha-woof!
Malian turned
her head to look.
Her grandmother
stood there
in the doorway,
a plate of warm frybread
and a jar of honey
in her hands.

"Like some of this, darling?
Mitsi da? Want to eat?"

"Onh-honh!"
Malian said,
at the very same time
as Malsum made
the small growling sound
he always made
whenever he was
offered food.

Malian had to smile
as she looked at him.
"Malsum," she said,
"you're a real Indian dog."

She smiled for herself, too.
She was always ready
to eat frybread,
and her grandmother's
was really, really good.

"Ktsi wliwini, Nokomis.
Thanks so much, Grandma."

They each broke off

a small piece
of the warm brown bread
and placed it
under the cedar tree
to share it with
the Manogies,
the little people
who are the guardians
of the natural world.
Malsum sat
and watched
as they did that.
Somehow the big dog
always seemed to know
food offered like that
was not for him
and he never
tried to take it.
But it was always
gone the next morning.
Her grandmother
sat on the steps
beside her.

"Your father loves
my frybread too,"
Grandma Frances said
as she offered
a small piece
of the bread
to Malsum,
who gently took it
from her.

"You know,"
she continued,
"I usually win
the competition
at our festival
for the best frybread
just about every year."
Malian nodded,
not able to talk
because her mouth
was already full.

As she ate,
her grandmother
started to sing

a thank-you song—
its words so old,
there was no way
to say them in English,
though Malian
could understand
what they meant.

Malian thought
about frybread.
How Native people
all over the continent
made it and everyone
did it their own way.

It was made
of white flour
and lard and sugar—
commodity goods,
the meager rations
the United States
government provided
to honor the treaties
her people had been
forced to sign

in which
they gave up
most of their land.
The cheapest and
the worst kind of stuff
in place of the old-time
nutritious foods.

Yet Indian people
had made it their own.
Just like
so many other things
brought by
the Europeans.

"I remember,"
her grandmother said,
"the first time your mother
had my frybread.
She said it was like
a taste of heaven.

"You know, her being
taken away like that
when she was so little,

she never grew up
eating frybread."

Malian nodded.
Her mom had told her
the story more than once.
How when she was little
social services
people took her
away from her parents—
saying they were unfit.

They were not bad parents,
but they were just poor,
being Indian and all.
That sort of thing happened
to so many Native kids—
all the way
up into the '90s.
Whenever people saw
social services coming,
they would try to hide
their kids away to keep
them from being taken.

The ironic thing,
Malian thought,
about her mom being
taken away,
is that it was
almost the same
as what happened
to her grandparents.

When they were little
the Indian School
Attendance Officers
would come
and drag them away.
Whenever her grandmother
talked about that,
she actually quoted
a famous white man—
an American philosopher
named Henry David Thoreau
who lived about
two hundred years ago.

Her grandmother
was always reading

and had three shelves
full of books on her wall.
So it wasn't surprising
that she knew
about Thoreau.

"It was Mr. Thoreau,"
her grandmother said,
"who wrote that if
you see someone coming
to your house
with the express purpose
of doing good for you,
leave quickly
by the back door."
It was from
her grandmother
that Malian also learned
how Mr. Thoreau loved
the New England Indians.

"So much that
he'd planned
to write a big book
all about us

but he died
at a real young age."

Her grandmother
shook her head.
"It just might be
the happiest times
of his life
were when he was
up in the Maine woods
being guided by Joe Polis,
that same Penobscot
Indian guide
who was your
great-great-great-
grandfather."

Her grandmother
dribbled honey onto
another piece of frybread
for Malian,
then gave more
of the still warm bread
to Malsum, who,
though drooling,
was waiting patiently.

"After your mother got
snatched up by those
social workers,
she ended in foster care."

Malian nodded
as she bit into
her second piece
of frybread.
Her mother had told her
that foster care
was like purgatory,
someplace
with no address
and stuck
in between
heaven and hell.

"That was when that
nice white family
the Wintons came
and adopted her.
But as soon as she
was old enough,

and off in college,
she began to search
for her own family
and found they came
from our reservation,
though all of them
by then had walked on.
Those Wintons,
George and Ethel,
they were good people.
I wish you could
have met them,
but they were already
in their fifties
when they took
in your mom
and a year before
you were born,
when your mom
was twenty-one,
they both passed on.

"When your mom
found out where
she came from,

those Wintons decided
the right thing to do
was to bring her here
for a visit.

"The very next summer
they rented
a summer home
near Penacook
and came up here.
She was just nineteen
and that July
was the one when
she met your father
at our annual
Penacook festival."

Malian smiled
as she remembered
how her mother laughed
when she spoke about that.

"Talk about an apple,"
her mother said.
"I was both the reddest

and the whitest one
in the entire barrel.
Your dad said I looked
like Indian Miss America,
but talked like a Valley girl.
Good thing I've always
been a quick learner."

Malian thought about that.
Even though she
was not being raised
on the reservation,
both her dad and her mom
were doing their best
to keep her connected
to who she really was.
That was why whenever
she came back
to the reservation
she felt at home.
And that was why
when the Three Muskrateers
called her Macintosh
it would just
roll off her,

like rain falling
on a duck's back.
"Want another piece
of frybread, darling?"
her grandmother asked.
"And maybe one
for Malsum, too?"

"You bet," Malian said,
holding out her hand
as the big dog growled
his agreement.

chapter six

our best best friend

Malian sat
on the front porch steps.
It had become
her usual spot.
She could see
across the yard
and onto the street
that opened up
into a wide circle
since it was
a dead-end road.

The only other
house in sight
was a hundred yards away.
Every now and then
the people in that house—

the Sabattis family—
would come out,
wave to her.
And she would wave back.

Malsum, as always,
sat next to her.
He had leaned
his wide head over
into her lap
and she was petting him.
He was such
a muscular dog.
His chest was broad,
his legs as strong
as those of a husky,
the sort of dog
she'd seen pulling sleds
as she watched a film
about that big race
that took place
up in Alaska every year.
She had heard that
many of those dogs
had a lot of wolf in them.

She smiled
at the thought of that.
You could say
that Malsum was a wolf
who had a lot
of dog in him.
He was licking her wrist
in a gentle way
that made her
feel like hugging him.
She'd never had
a dog of her own.
Where she and
her parents lived
in the city
it just wasn't possible.
Not unless
whatever dog they got
had to stay in all day
while she was at school
and her parents were at work.
And that was not fair.
A dog needs people
as much as people
need a dog.

Now, here on the rez,
was different—
a perfect place
to have a dog.
He could run free
through the small woods
behind the house,
even catch his own food.
Twice, he'd even
brought things he caught
back to them.
The first was a partridge
and the second
a snowshoe rabbit.
Her grandma
had cooked them both
into a stew—but only after
thanking the dog for his gift.

Her grandparents had
always had a dog.
Their last one, Willow,
had been with them
for fourteen years before
her spirit took the Sky Road.

They just hadn't yet
adopted another
before Malsum showed up
and adopted them.
They still had
the big bin out back
that Grampa Roy
kept filled with dry dog food,
so much that there
was more than enough
to take care of
their new friend
for a long time.

Her grandmother
came out and sat
down on the porch
next to them.
Malsum lifted his head
to lick her face.

"You be careful,"
Grandma Frances said,
"you're taking

off all my makeup.
I'm gonna look terrible
when the TV cameras
come to interview us."

Of course, there were
no TV folks coming.
It was just one
of Grandma's jokes.
She knew,
as did everyone else
on the rez,
that Indians were
pretty much the last people
anyone cared about
during this crisis.

Malian had read
in the weekly e-newsletter
from *Indian Country Today*
that Native people
were suffering some
of the biggest rates
of infections and deaths.
Especially on

the big Navajo reservation
way out west.
She'd helped her grandparents
make a donation
to a Navajo nation
relief fund with her phone.
Twenty dollars was all
they could afford,
but it meant a lot
to them to do it.
"Did you know,"
her grandfather had said,
"that way back
in the nineteenth century
when there was
that potato famine
over in Ireland,
some of our Indian people
pooled money together
and sent it to help them.
I hear that now
in the city of Dublin
they even put up
a statue to thank us."

That story
had almost
brought tears
to Malian's eyes.
Even thinking
about it now
she felt a lump
in her throat.
Her grandmother
stroked Malsum's back.
"I ever tell you,"
Grandma Frances said,
"how it came to be
that dogs always
walk beside us?
How it is they
are the only animals
on this old land
who've always lived
with us human beings?"

Malian shook her head.
"You haven't ever
told me that story."

And that was true,
she'd never heard
the story from her grandparents.

But her father
had told it to her
more than once.
It was usually
when they were talking
about how they were going
to move out of the city
once they had enough saved,
get a place in the country
where they could
have a dog of their own.

"Well," her grandmother said,
"I hear the way
it happened is this.
Long time ago
there were real big animals.
You've probably learned
about them in school.
Huge bears, giant elk,
all sorts like that,

even great big
hairy elephants
maybe ten thousand years ago."

Malian nodded.
In her biology class
they'd talked about
the megafauna
of the Pleistocene Era
here in North America.

"Well," her grandmother said,
stroking Malsum's back,
"what happened was this.
Gluskonba,
the one first shaped
like a human being,
was given power
by the Creator
to change things
and make them better
for the humans
who soon
would be here.

"One day,
Gluskonba,
he decided
to call the animals
together and ask
what they would do
when they saw
their first human.
The big ones
like the giant bear
and the giant moose
said that they
were going to destroy
every human being
that they saw.
Bear said it would
swallow them whole.
Moose said it would
spear all the humans
with its sharp horns,
then crush them.
So Gluskonba,
he took those big animals
and shaped them all down
so they're the size

they are today
and not so dangerous.
The most dangerous
one of all was Mikwe,
the red squirrel.
He was as big
as three elephants.
He said what he
was going to do
was tear every human
being into pieces.
So Gluskonba
shrunk that red squirrel
way down,
so small, it fit
in the palm of one hand.
Some animals did not
need to be
changed at all.
The rabbit said
it would just run away
when it saw a human
and the deer said
the very same thing.

"Finally,
all that was left
was just one animal
sitting there
and wagging its tail.
It was Dog, of course.

"'Are you going
to do something,'
Gluskonba asked,
'to hurt the humans
when you see them
for the first time?'
Dog shook his head.
'NO, NO, NO,' Dog said.
'I have just been waiting
for those people
to get here.
I want to hunt
and run by their side.
I want to live
in their homes with them,
watch over them
and guard their homes,
sleep by their fires,

play with their children
and be their best,
best friend.'

"Gluskonba nodded.
'That is how it will be.
You will always be
a friend to them,
a better friend than
some of them deserve.
From this day on
you will always live
with the humans
and you will be known
as Alemos—the one
who walks with us.'
And that is how
it is to this day.
Nialach?"

"Nialach,"
Malian repeated.
"So it is."

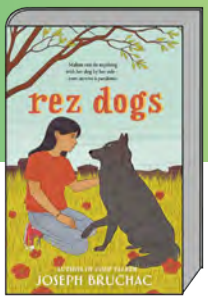
Malsum stood up
as if knowing

the story was ended.
He walked out
to the end of the walk
and then sat
looking down the road.
Grandma Frances
leaned over
and picked up
the plate
Malsum
had licked clean.

"Yup," she said,
nodding toward
the big dog,
"that's how it still is.
Living with us,
watching over us
to this very day."

Rez Dogs

By Joseph Bruchac



What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

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Too Bright to See

By Kyle Lukoff

It's the summer before middle school and eleven-year-old Bug's best friend, Moira, has decided the two of them need to use the next few months to prepare. For Moira, this means figuring out the right clothes to wear, learning how to put on makeup, and deciding which boys are cuter in their yearbook photos than in real life. But none of this is all that appealing to Bug, who doesn't particularly want to spend *more* time trying to understand how to be a girl. Besides, there's something more important to worry about: A ghost is haunting Bug's eerie old house in rural Vermont…and maybe haunting Bug in particular. As Bug begins to untangle the mystery of who this ghost is and what they're trying to say, an altogether different truth comes to light–Bug is transgender.

Prologue

It's strange living in our old house, now that Uncle Roderick is dead.

I already know my house is haunted. It's always been haunted. That hasn't changed. We avoid the freezing cold spot in the corner of the living room because someone probably died there. Windows slam themselves open or shut on the stillest days. So do doors, and these doors are heavy. For a long time I thought it was normal to sense someone standing behind you, or next to you, and not be able to see them. For invisible hands to brush past your hair, your clothes.

And it looks haunted: wooden, unpainted, weathered with time. There's an elaborately carved front door, peaked roofs jutting out in all directions, tall windows with shapes

flickering behind them. The porch wraps around front to back with rocking chairs that sometimes rock on their own. We're out in the middle of nowhere, and at nighttime there's moonlight and starlight and nothing else. When I was in kindergarten I checked a book out of the library because the house on the front cover looked like a photograph of my home. Uncle Roderick tried reading it to me that night, my head resting on his chest, his arm tucked beneath my shoulders. We always read together before bed. He had to stop after the first chapter because it was a collection of scary stories; he believed that dreams were important, and he didn't want to give me bad ones.

But now this old house seems haunted in a different way. A way that's both more boring and more frightening. There's a half-empty jar of okra Uncle Roderick picked and pickled that he'll never finish eating, and Mom and I both hate okra. His winter boots are jammed in the closet. He always put off wearing them for as long as possible, saying they

made him look like a lumberjack, but now he'll never need them again. He subscribed to magazines, the *New Yorker, National Geographic,* and they'll keep being addressed to him until we tell them to stop. Until they take his name off the list. Forever.

I prefer the ghosts.

one

The moment he dies, I know. It's the middle of the night. My eyes open, and I grip the mattress with both hands. I'm suddenly, irrationally convinced that my bed is toppling over. Like it's unbalanced, perched precariously on the top of a mountain and about to come crashing down. Or like it's teetering on the edge of a black hole, with nothing familiar on the other side.

Uncle Roderick's room is at the top of the stairs. Mom's is at the end of the hall. For eleven years I've fallen asleep snug in the middle, their warmth and weight keeping me grounded from both sides. Even these past couple months, when he's been in the hospital and then the hospice, I could still feel him there, keeping me safe at the top of the stairs. But now I know my uncle is gone.

The stairs creak, sharp and loud. That doesn't mean anything. They creak all the time. "The house is settling" is what Mom says, and sometimes it might be a harmless ghost. But now I hear the groan of a foot on a step. And then another. It's like the sound of someone slowly moving up our wide staircase, someone with a heavy tread.

It's mid-June, and hot, and I'm lying under a sheet with a fan blowing warm air around the room. I pull the sheet up to my chin, wishing for the weight of a comforter to press me into the mattress, something to hide under.

The creaks stop at the top, right in front of Uncle Roderick's bedroom door. I hold my breath and strain my ears. I can't hear anything, but it doesn't sound like no one's there. It sounds like someone being silent. I only exhale when the creaks descend the stairs, as slowly as they came.

Uncle Roderick always told me that passing spirits and lingering presences are a normal part of living in a house

almost as old as the dirt it sits on. Mom says that the creepy things I sense or feel or hear are just part of an active imagination, and that Uncle Roderick shouldn't encourage it, that ghosts aren't real.

I only occasionally believe my mom: When the sun is bright and I can explain away strange hands touching my neck or a mysteriously slammed-shut door as stray gusts of wind in a drafty old building.

I believe my uncle now, surely and suddenly. But I don't want to. "There's no one on the stairs," I tell myself, wanting it to be true, still holding on to the mattress for dear life. "There's no one on the stairs. There's no one on the stairs. There's no one on the stairs." The rhythm pounds through my brain, repeating itself over and over, crowding out every other thought that also must be true. I manage to fall asleep by curling up into a ball, my back turned toward the half of the room that echoes the new emptiness in my chest.

I wake up again a few hours later because the phone rings. I feel grounded now. Not in a free fall, not hurtling through space. But there's an empty room inside my chest.

Mom's voice struggles through the wall. None of the words are clear, but if I didn't know about Uncle Roderick already, I would know now from her tone, the rise and fall of sentences. She comes into my bedroom a few minutes later and I sit up.

She holds me and cries. I've seen my mother cry before, but it's never been my job to comfort her. It's always been Uncle Roderick's job. But her brother's not here, and I am. I hold her tight, and breathe as shallowly as possible until her sobs subside. I should have cried that first day, almost a year ago, when Uncle Roderick came home from the doctor with bad news, but I couldn't. I remember a rushing sound filling my ears, drowning out the details, my brain refusing to take in anything beyond one main truth. Something too big to touch, with no details to snag on. I told myself I'd only cry

once he was gone. But that day has come and I've got nothing. No tears, and no anything else. There's sadness, but it's whirling around outside of me. Like a hurricane of grief, and I'm the dry, unmoving eye.

"He loved you very much, you know," Mom says, after a bit. She lets go, sits up straight, palms the tears off her cheeks. I wish I had a tissue to offer her.

"I know he did," I say. And I do. But it doesn't help. Mom hugs me once more, then says she has to make some phone calls. I stare across my room, sunlight streaming through the tall window with rippled glass, and wonder what happens after this.

two

Mom and Uncle Roderick and I rattled around our house like peas in an oversized pod. Sometimes we would have houseguests from New York City or Burlington or Montreal, filling it up with noise and laughter and memories. But the three of us could fill it up just as well.

Tonight the house is full of people and memories, but not much laughter. Family friends have come from all over. But not many people from our little pocket of Vermont show up. We moved here when I was a baby, and old Vermonters don't acknowledge you until there's "six in the ground." Six dead people, they mean, in a row, stretching back through the years. Well, we've got our first.

But Uncle Roderick isn't even in the ground. Not really. He didn't want a funeral, he said, or a burial. *Just sprinkle my*

ashes on the land, he told us toward the end. We did, putting handfuls in the creek, the woods, the garden, everywhere.

Mom says that everyone deserves a chance to say goodbye. I wish they could say goodbye somewhere else. The house has never been this full before, and I can't go hide with Uncle Roderick in his room. I have to wear this dress that makes me look like Samantha from the American Girl books. It's rumpled from being at the bottom of my closet for months, and Uncle Roderick usually took care of the ironing.

People pat me on the shoulder or hug me, and since I'm the one with a dead uncle it's okay that I don't hug back. My dress is like a force field; it blocks out the pressure of their hands or arms around me, which is good because if I actually feel anyone touch me I'll break apart into smithereens. In between I focus on tightening my ponytail and tugging at the wrinkles in my dress. It's too small for me, and if I hunch forward the material pulls across my back, keeping me a gasp away from a full breath.

Conversations pause if I walk by them, but tucked into a corner of the living room I catch snatches here and there.

"Awfully young, he was only thirty-two, right?"

"It's so sad, especially since Sabrina's husband died right after she gave birth. A car accident, if I'm remembering correctly."

"No, they don't have anyone else. This place started out as a vacation home, and it's been in their family for a while, but no one else is left."

One of Uncle Roderick's ex-boyfriends is across the room, down from Portland. I think his name is Tobias. He's tall and thin, like Uncle Roderick, but with a shaved head and a beard. He was nice, but had wanted kids, and my uncle decided that I was enough kid for him, so they broke up but stayed friends. Tobias catches my eye and gives me a small, sad smile. I turn up the corners of my mouth in what might be a smile, and skitter away before he can come over to shake my hand or hug me or pay whatever respects he has.

I duck into the kitchen but catch my dress on the doorframe. I reach down to tug it away, from a nail or whatever. It's not stuck on anything, but there's a rip that I don't think was there before. Oh well, I'm getting too big for it anyway.

No one else is in the kitchen. There are dishes cluttered on the wide wooden counter, crusted with food, so I dump them in the sink and turn on the faucet. I've always begged Mom for a dishwasher, especially since I only just got tall enough to reach the bottom of the huge sink, but right now scrubbing at dishes in hot soapy water quiets the jangling in my brain. I start planning out what I need to pack for summer camp, and have gotten into a rhythm of washing and rinsing when I look up at the window behind the sink.

A strange face stares back at me, darkly reflected in the glass.

I yelp, jump back, and a glass slips out of my hand and crashes onto the kitchen floor. A second later the kitchen door swings open.

"You okay, Bug?" a voice calls out. Mo. My best, or oldest, or only friend. She and her mom showed up a while ago, but I haven't said hi yet.

The dress is still pulling on my back and shoulders. "Fine," I say. I can't figure out how to get my mouth to say more than that. I grab at a broom and dustpan to hide my shaking hands.

This happens a lot. I'll be minding my own business, in the bathroom or kitchen or wherever, and catch a glimpse of something in the mirror that isn't me. Not a blood-dripping evil face, or anything obviously supernatural. Just a face that isn't quite mine. Almost mine. But different enough that it gives me a shock every time. Another part of living in a haunted house, I guess. Except it doesn't happen only when I'm at home.

Mo always makes me swear that she won't get attacked by ghosts when she spends the night at my house. I always promise, but that's because ghosts don't attack people. Don't

notice people, even. They're in their own world, whatever that is, and we're in this one. The only times we overlap are like how if you look into a bright light for too long you see it even after you look away, even when you close your eyes. It's not in front of you, but it still leaves an impression.

Mo has never even seen one of those. She's scared of coming across a tall woman in a bloodstained wedding gown, or a pale little boy with a bad smile, but doesn't notice when her hair is caught in a nonexistent breeze or a room's mood shifts while it remembers something. I don't tell her when it happens, because Mo's the only person who's willing to sleep over in the first place.

I finish sweeping and lean back against the kitchen island. Mo hops onto it next to me. I can tell she's struggling to come up with something to say. She always has something to say, and right now I don't want to listen, but it's nice, or something, of her to try.

"Where did that dress come from?" she asks finally. "I've never seen it before."

It's better than asking how I am doing. There's no good answer. I wonder if she knows better than to ask that, or if she's actually curious about the dress. I'd rather not talk about anything, just moving my mouth feels hard, but I don't want Mo to start chattering away, which is what she usually does if I don't keep up my end of a conversation.

"I don't remember. It's old." My voice surprises me. It sounds normal. "Mom said I might need a dress for some occasion. I look like my old Samantha doll."

"Ha, yeah, you do. I still have my Felicity somewhere. Remember when we would make up whole stories with them? Yours always involved pirates or kidnappings or something. I always wanted to take them to balls. And then we would compromise! Pirate ball or glamorous kidnapped princess."

I just nod, and look down at the puffy skirt. It really does look more like a costume than a dress. Mo looks like she's

going to a funeral instead of our house, in a smooth dark skirt and matching top. Her bright red hair is in a tight braid, not loose and frizzy like normal. She's a few months younger than me, but she looks almost like an adult today. Almost like a woman. I just look like a doll. Quiet, stiff, and blinking.

"We have to go," she says after a minute of silence. "I just came in to say goodbye. I'll see you soon, though. And . . . um, I'm so sorry." She leans in to hug me, and I manage to lift my arms and squeeze her back for a second, before it becomes too much. She's always been the type to put her arms around her other friends, play with their hair, a casual affection that has always seemed impossible to me. I'm never sure how bodies are supposed to interact. I feel like I'm hugging a scarecrow. Or more that I'm a scarecrow being hugged. Mo gives me an awkward pat on the back before pushing her shoulder against the swinging kitchen door. Her skirt doesn't catch on anything.

I go back to the sink and start washing dishes again. The kitchen has always been my favorite room in the house. It's where I watched Uncle Roderick bake cookies and can vegetables, experiment with new recipes. And it's kind in here. Safe. I imagine what I must look like, a girl with long hair pulled back, a torn dress, scrubbing away like a servant girl in a royal palace, and thinking about that girl and imagining her life keeps me distracted from what is actually happening. The soapy water has gone cold, and I finish up without looking at the window again.

three

Some guests stay for a few days after the memorial. I make myself useful, dodging questions about how I'm holding up by doing endless loads of dishes and laundry. I pretend to be a character in a book, sometimes an abused but brilliant servant girl, sometimes a spy at a seedy hotel, sometimes a princess mistaken for a commoner. It's fun. Kind of. It's something I've always done. Girls in books always seem more real than real life, and making believe that I'm in a story keeps my mind off of what I really am, which isn't much.

It takes a couple days, but finally everyone goes back to where they live. Big cities, for most of them. I was born in Brooklyn, but Mom moved us here when I was only a few months old. After my dad died she says she didn't know

how to stop one life (married, no kids) and start a new one (widowed, kid) without going all the way. Without making another huge change.

Uncle Roderick came with her. "I never thought it was going to be permanent," he told me last year, while we were picking blueberries. He'd use them in a pie later, but I was eating mine right off the bush. "We would vacation up here when we were kids, but neither of us had any reason to stay in Vermont. I thought we'd spend a couple years, she'd heal from the loss of your dad, and then we'd go back. But kids root you to a place. It's like we grew down into this earth, instead of growing up from it."

The biggest city I've been to is Burlington, on a school field trip. I learned that Burlington is the smallest biggest—the biggest city in the state, and the smallest city with that distinction. It felt huge to me, people everywhere I looked, stores on top of stores on top of stores. Uncle Roderick talked about bringing me to New York, but we never made it. I don't think I'll ever visit now.

It's morning, the house is empty of everyone except Mom and me, and I'm staring at Uncle Roderick's carved wooden tea cabinet, perched below the spice rack. Dying for a cuppa, like they say in old books from England. I don't know any other eleven-year-olds who drink tea, but Uncle Roderick started making it for me, mostly honey and milk, once I graduated from sippy cups. I know there's a half-full drawer of jasmine in there, and I miss the weight of a heavy mug warming my hands. The comfort of sipping at something hot and sweet. But I can't bring myself to boil water, ease open the rickety drawer, measure leaves into a tea ball, steep it properly. Too many steps.

I pour myself a glass of juice instead and fix a bowl of cereal. Mom shuffles in, still wearing her robe, looking like she hasn't slept for weeks.

"Thank you for being so helpful these past few days, sweetheart," she says, her voice thick with sleep or grief or both. "You'd make a great scullery maid."

"I know," I mumble. My throat closes around any other words. Normally we'd launch into some conversation about what chores you wouldn't want to do in a medieval castle, or I'd go into some dramatic monologue about working my fingers to the bone, but there isn't any laughter in me. And it wouldn't be the same without Uncle Roderick joining in, with a terrible attempt at an English accent or pretending to be better than me because he's a chambermaid. I stir my spoon around the bowl, and Mom slips out to get the newspaper from the porch. There's not much laughter in her either, and I know she only tried for me.

When she comes back she tosses the comics page down on the counter in front of me and makes herself some coffee. She's never been much of a tea drinker, and I'm grateful for that.

I stare at the comics, not actually reading them. Smiling seems like it would hurt, like clay has dried on my cheeks and a twitch of my lips would crack it off. A prickling at the back

of my eyes makes me look up. Mom has the paper spread out in front of her, but she's looking at me like she has more bad news. She swallows hard when I meet her gaze. There are new lines etched around the corners of her mouth, and her eyes are red.

"I know we planned on sending you to camp again in July," she begins softly, and I want to tell her to stop, I know where this is going. But she has that sad half smile on her face that I've seen a lot this past year, so I let her keep going. Mom and Uncle Roderick look so much alike, with shaggy, dirty-blond hair, green eyes, and pointy chins. My skin tans, while their paler skin burns. I have bluer eyes, a bigger nose, dark hair. My dad had dark hair. I keep mine long because it never needs cutting that way. I grab the base of my ponytail and squeeze, the pull on my scalp helping a little.

"Your uncle's insurance covered a lot of his medical bills, but that last place he was in, the hospice, was very expensive.

I don't want you to worry; we're not going to starve, but I'm afraid there isn't much extra cash lying around. I promise I'll do everything I can to help you have a fun summer, but camp is out of the question this year. Hopefully next year will be different. I'm so sorry, Bug."

At camp we sleep in a hayloft and gather eggs for breakfast. We play endless games of capture the flag and hide-and-seek, go on midnight walks, canoe in the lake, everything. I'm not great at making friends, but something about the comfortingly consistent bad food, whole-day games of tag, the rainy days when we climb the rock wall in the gym, brings us all together in a way that school can't. Kids come from all over New England, and it's the only time in the year where I feel part of a larger group. I've gone every July since I was six, and stayed for the entire month the past two years. I loved Uncle Roderick, and I loved camp. Now I don't have either.

"It's okay," I say. It isn't, but it is. I should have guessed, after going with Mom to visit Uncle Roderick in the

hospital. All those treatments and medicines couldn't have been cheap, and he hadn't worked for a long time, not since he got really sick. Mom has always been honest with me, and talking about money is part of that. I can't whine about missing camp when I understand why. Besides, if I show Mom how upset I am it will only make her feel worse, which won't make anything better. The cereal in my bowl is completely soggy now. There's no way I can finish it. I had only eaten one spoonful anyway. I shove aside my barely touched breakfast and unread comics, and tell Mom that I'm going outside.

She pulls me into her arms as I walk past her, holding me tight. I don't want to be hugged right now, but I know that this hug is for her, that I have to show her that I'm not mad, so I squeeze her until she lets go. Only then do I take a deep breath. It's a beautiful day.

We own a lot of the land around my house. The backyard is a big grassy field, and beyond that is a patch of woods I've

explored ever since I could walk. A creek runs through the woods, and I can spend entire days reading on a boulder near the water or splashing around trying to catch minnows. Uncle Roderick would walk through the woods with me and tell stories of the gnomes and fairies hiding just out of sight, or point out edible plants and poisonous berries. We would pack a picnic lunch and find shapes in the clouds, sit quiet and still and wait for snakes and squirrels to come out around us. It never felt lonely. He would sometimes joke about the big-city life he left behind, glamorous and loud and bright, but he loved filling our big house with restored antiques and chopping wood for winter fires.

My bike is stashed under the porch. I pull it out, brush a spider off the handlebar, and climb on. I pedal away from my house, trying to get up enough speed to catch the wind between my teeth. Then I remember Uncle Roderick teaching me how to ride, putting bandages on my knees and elbows when I fell. I remember following him into town on

crisp fall days to visit the farmer's market. I remember him showing me how to change the tire, our hands greasy and black and smelling like rubber and the earth. Something blunt and unstoppable tries to push its way up from my stomach into my throat and behind my eyes. I brake sharply, jump off, and walk back home, leaving my bike sprawled on the side of the dirt road, one wheel still spinning forlornly.

* * *

I go to bed early that night. Too sad to stay awake. I'm fast asleep until all at once I'm not. It's like the night he died all over again, except instead of a sudden *lack,* a cold nothing where there was once a warm someone, now there's . . . something else. My eyes are still shut tight, but someone is in my room. "Her eyes were shut tight," I say in my head like a narrator, wondering what a girl in a book would do. "She knew it was just her imagination." I try opening them, just barely, and peeking through my eyelashes, but it's so dark. Dark enough that if I open my eyes a little more I'll still be safe. I hope. I squint them open a crack more. And see it.

It? Him? Her? A tall, thin, dark shape looming in front of my closed door. Is it a shadow? Is it moving?

I'm silent. I'm so, so silent. It can't know I'm awake. I'm not even breathing. And then I realize that I've stopped breathing. Sleep breaths are long and slow and steady and it knows I'm awake now. I see it, him, move toward me, and quick as anything I flip on the light next to my bed. I don't know if I want to see, but light will help no matter what.

And nothing's there.

It's not the first time I've been scared in my house, at night. But it's the first time I can't scream and know that my uncle will come running.

When I was very little I had a lot of nightmares. Mom doesn't wake up for anything, but Uncle Roderick would be by my side right away, talking me through it. He'd ask what I thought it meant, if it represented something I was afraid of in real life, what the dream was trying to tell me. And in

discussing, it would fade from memory, completely forgotten in the morning.

I want to call for him now and know that he would come in, sit on the side of my bed, and tell me that ghosts are nothing to be afraid of. That they don't even know we're here, that we're not even in the same world.

But he's resting now. At peace. And I can't help but think that this one felt different. It wasn't in another world. It knew I was there, and it knew I was awake. But I don't know what it wanted, and I don't know why it left.

After that I can only sleep in fits and starts, but by morning I've almost managed to convince myself that it was only a dream. And even if it wasn't a dream—even if there was something, some spirit in my room, it wasn't really all that different from the wandering ghosts that are always whooshing around my house. They've never even paid attention to me. They've never hurt me before.

four

Mo called after breakfast to ask if she could spend the night, so I'm waiting on the front porch with Uncle Roderick's worn collection of Edgar Allan Poe stories. I haven't made it to the library in a while, and he used to read this book to me on cold winter evenings. I want to hear his voice again, a little bit, in today's heat.

A shout comes from down the road and I look up to see Mo struggling her way toward my house. She must have found my bicycle by the side of the road, because she's walking it down the driveway with one hand, guiding hers with the other. Her sleeping bag is squished under one arm, and some heavy-looking shopping bags are looped over the handlebars.

Well, "driveway" is what we call this stretch, even though

it's just a dirt road that runs up to my house, which you turn onto from another, slightly bigger gravel road. It only takes twenty minutes to bike between our houses, and we've been doing it regularly for years. I put down my book and launch over the porch railing to help her up the driveway.

"Hey Bug," she calls. "Seen any new ghosts?"

"Just the old ones," I say. She asks that every time she comes to my house, and I always give her the same answer. Last night unfolds in my mind and I suddenly wonder if I'm telling the truth, then shake my head quickly to one side, to knock that thought out of my brain.

Mo unslings the shopping bags and I wheel my bike back under the porch. It's a little dented, grubby, a word for it might be "battered." I like it that way, like something belonging to a scrappy, adventurous youth in some old-timey detective novel. Mo just got a new bike. It was definitely expensive, sleek and rose-gold and it looks just like her, somehow, if a bike could resemble a person. Her

old bike had Hello Kitty all over it and neither one of us is into Hello Kitty, so she covered them all up with patches of duct tape a long time ago. I thought it looked cool, but she said she outgrew it, and I don't think she meant by getting taller.

"Thanks for bringing it back," I tell her. Saying that I suddenly got too sad to pedal would lead to a whole conversation I don't want to have, with sighs and sympathetic looks, so "I . . . got a foot cramp earlier," I lie. "Was about to go get it. But thanks."

"No prob. Um, I don't know if you want to talk about it, or whatever," she begins, bringing her bike up onto the porch. I hold my breath against the rising sharpness in my chest. "But your uncle was the best. I'm sorry."

"Yeah," I say tightly, before she can launch into some memory she has of him. I feel like I'm wearing that old dress again, pulling my rib cage close. "Thanks." The door creaks open wide as soon as we step onto the porch. Mo jumps back and eyes it warily.

"No new ghosts," I tell her, again. I hope I'm right.

"Okay," she says. "But you go in first."

Mo and I didn't get along when we were little, but over the past few years we've slowly figured it out. We didn't have much of a choice. Our moms started a business together when we were toddlers, so we grew up with each other. We definitely wouldn't have been friends if we weren't forced into it, but I'm glad it happened. Most of the time. Now we say we're best friends, and it's true enough, even though memories of when we didn't like each other are always shifting beneath the surface.

All of our other friends were her friends first. Sometimes she invites me to a sleepover at someone else's house, or someone's mom will drive three or four of us to the mall an hour away. Otherwise I play by myself, or with Mo. Or with Uncle Roderick, but I don't want my mind to go there now.

We unroll our sleeping bags in the living room like always. Mo claims the first floor of my house feels less haunted

than the second floor, and she won't set foot in the cellar. I don't blame her.

"Hi, Mo," says Mom, coming in through the dining room. "Do you know if your mom got the last shipment of card stock?"

"Not yet," says Mo. "Also, she says she hasn't found a good deal on envelopes, and you should call her to talk about finding a new vendor."

"Not a problem," Mom says. Her tone is light, but something tighter flashes across her face. It's gone before I can blink. "Will you girls be eating dinner with me," she asks, "or should I be a terrible *in loco parentis* and let you eat popcorn and ice cream all night?"

There are enough leftovers from the memorial to last for weeks, and I don't want to abandon Mom yet. "We'll eat with you," I say, and Mo nods in agreement.

Usually when Mo and I spend time with our moms we come up with new card ideas together. After my dad

died, Mom says that she got frustrated with all the stupid condolence cards people sent, all sunsets and flowery messages about better places and how everything happens for a reason. She started designing her own cards that were sarcastic and funny but also still sad, and started bringing them into little stationery shops around the area. Mo's mom had experience running a mail-order business, and even though her husband's job meant that she didn't need to work anymore, soon the two of them had a whole line of greeting cards in stores across the country. We're not rich, but—as Mom always tells me—we have everything that we need, and some of what we want.

But tonight none of us feel like talking about clever responses to sad things. Mo and Mom argue about some YouTuber that I've never heard of. Their laughs float up to the ceiling, sounding hollow and far away, and I tune it out. One tiny bite of potato salad. One leaf of kale salad. One half of a half of a meatball. Everything tastes like nothing.

A huge mirror hangs on the wall across from me and I avoid looking at it, pushing my food around instead. When I glance up at Mom, her plate is still as full as mine.

"I just don't understand why you would want to watch someone play a game on the Internet when you could just . . . play that game on the Internet yourself," she's saying. "I played video games for hours when I was your age, but at least I was the one playing them."

"Oh come *on,* Sabrina, didn't you ever, like, watch people play? Like if there was a boy that you liked, and he invited you over to watch him play a video game. You did that, right?"

Mom smirks. "What, exactly, do you know about what boys do when they invite you over?" I'm wondering the same thing. Does she suddenly know what dates are like? As far as I know she's never even held a boy's hand.

Mo flushes, just a little. "I mean, not much, but I've heard that that's a thing people used to do. Or still do. Right?"

"Well, maybe," Mom relents. "Sometimes. But that's different—at least we were in the same physical space!"

"I'm just saying, there's something about watching a game being played live. You don't have to join in to enjoy it. And there's, like, live commenting, chatting with people who are also watching, that sort of thing. It's not so different from actually sitting with your friends and watching them."

Mom turns to me. "What do you think, Bug? Are you team real world or team Internet?"

I freeze. Mo knows I never want to watch YouTube videos with her, but she might get frustrated if I side with Mom. "Uh . . ." I stall.

Surprisingly, Mo comes to my rescue. "Oh, she's team dead trees. Bug just wants to read, you know that. Has a teacher ever assigned a book you haven't already read?"

I grudgingly shake my head, and Mom laughs. It's nice to hear her laugh, but I wish it had come from something I

said. A voice whispers to me that Mo is being a better daughter than me, and it forces me to my feet, forces a lightness in my voice.

"Team dead trees all the way!" I exclaim. "Do you want us to clean up?"

Mom crumples her napkin and drops it onto her plate, as if she's trying to hide how much she didn't eat. "Thanks, love, but I'll take care of it. You two should go watch a movie or something. Mo, thank you for coming over."

"No problem," says Mo. "Um, also, could you start calling me Moira?"

Mom pauses in stacking the dishes and seems about to ask a question, but nods instead. "Of course, Moira. Let me know if you girls need anything."

We go into the living room and I plop down on the couch. "'Moira'?" I ask. No one calls her that, ever.

"We're starting middle school soon, and Mo is a little-kid name. You might want to do the same, *Bug*." I twitch. I hate

the name on my birth certificate and never use it. I imagine starting school, introducing myself as—

The lights flicker for a second. Mo jumps, stares balefully at the filigreed-metal lamp, and grabs one of the shopping bags she brought with her. Usually they're full of snacks and DVDs, but when she dumps the bag upside down, jars of nail polish and tubes of lip gloss scatter across the floor, along with other shiny plastic things I don't recognize. The second bag is full of brushes and combs and hair products.

We used to play makeover when we were younger, smearing whatever odds and ends we could scavenge from her mom's stash or Uncle Roderick's collection over each other's faces to see who could look the funniest. I have a sinking suspicion that that isn't Mo's—*Moira's*—plan for tonight.

"What's all this for?" I ask. I tug at my ponytail, hard, then let go, and prickles run up and down my spine, like someone is sitting right behind me. I try not to shudder—if

Moira notices anything ghostly she might go home early. Whatever she wants to do right now is better than being alone.

"Like I said, we're starting middle school." Moira sorts through the pile, putting the nail polish and everything in some kind of order. These are all brand-new, unopened and in bright packaging. She must have gone shopping.

"So?" I ask. "Is there some law saying that you have to cover your face in gunk before you walk through the front door?"

Moira laughs, but I don't think she thought it was funny. "There's no law. But first impressions matter! I heard that all the girls at Maplewood wear makeup and stuff. Well, not all of them, but most of them. Definitely all the popular ones. You want to make a fresh start, right?"

So that's why she's going by her full name. "It's going to be all the same people we know already, they got their first impression of us when we were five. How fresh do you think

this start is going to be?" I can't imagine that starting middle school magically erases your memories of what someone looked like three months ago.

"That's not true, there will be kids from a lot of other schools bused in. And sometimes people change over the summer. Come on, do you want middle school to be exactly the same as the past seven years? I definitely do not."

Maybe she has a point. Do I really want middle school to be just like elementary school? No one bullied me, exactly, but I also didn't have any other good friends. I had a reputation for being a teacher's pet, which wasn't fair. I never tried to get teachers to like me, I was just quiet and focused on my work because it was interesting enough, most of the time. And getting good grades just felt like playing a game, and winning. But I didn't bother to explain that, ever, because I knew it wouldn't help. If Mo didn't sit with me at lunch I would find a corner and eat by myself, reading a book. She'd sometimes invite me to sit with her at a more

populated table, but I always refused. And I'll bet she was relieved. Even when I tried to follow along with the more popular girls I was always one step out of line, whereas Mo seemed to crack the grade-school girl code without even trying.

Like two years ago, Mo's grandmother gave her a stuffed skunk for Christmas. A babyish gift for a fourth grader, but Mo thought it was cute, and started bringing it with her to school. The next day another girl brought in a stuffed bunny. The day after, most of the class, even the boys, had brought in stuffed animals from home. Our teacher said we could keep them on our desks if they weren't distracting, so the next day I brought one in too. Except instead of an animal, mine was a fuzzy representation of the bubonic plague. I don't know why, Mom picked it up in a kooky shop in a tourist town and I thought it was funny.

No one else thought so, and a rumor spread that if you sat next to me you'd get some awful disease. Everyone was

used to calling me Bug, but suddenly that became a joke, "Bug has bugs," that sort of thing. Mo didn't join in, but she also didn't make any big speeches about why it was cool to be different—no matter what teachers and books say, that would have been embarrassing for both of us. The next day I brought in a squirrel puppet, but the fad was over by then and no one but Mo would sit next to me for weeks. That's the only time in my life I considered going by my real name.

"Pick a color," Moira encourages. "I'll do your nails." I grab a bottle at random, "Strawberrylicious," according to the label, and hand it to her. It can't hurt to practice, I guess.

The smell of nail polish uncurls under my nose as she starts carefully painting my fingernails. It reminds me of those playdates when we were little kids. Back then, the colors weren't Strawberrylicious. We would paint each nail a different shade of blue, or alternate Christmas colors, or a rainbow. Most of the time it looked like we dipped our entire fingertips into the bottle. This precise, methodical application is new.

"You might want to ask your mom to take you shopping," she says, brow furrowed as she focuses on each nail. "You don't want to start the school year in the same old clothes, right?"

I haven't really thought about it. "I haven't really thought about it," I say.

"Well, if you want I could go with and help you pick out some cute new outfits," she says. "You can have your own style, of course, but I don't know if it's a good idea to keep dressing like a boy."

She says that like it's obvious, but this is news to me. I look down at my cutoff jean shorts and baggy T-shirt. "Do I dress like a boy?" I ask. "I'm not trying to. I just dress like . . . I don't know. I just wear whatever."

Mo laughs a little. "There are also plenty of boys who dress better than you. We could get you a pink bow tie if you want, that could work. Come on, it'll be fun." She's not trying to be mean, I don't think, but there's no nice way to

tell someone that they're doing something wrong. Which, apparently, I am.

I don't know what to say. I don't want to have a style. Suddenly my old shirt and shorts feel like they're sticking to me. But Mo is still painting my nails. My stomach starts to race, and my heart matches it thrum for thrum. Mo doesn't seem to notice anything wrong, and releases my hands.

"Voila!" she exclaims, in a bad French accent. "A bee-YOU-tiful manicure for ze bee-YOU-tiful young lady. And now, ze face." I close my eyes and force myself to sit still as she starts messing with my face. This is nothing like the smeary paint jobs I remember. I wonder if she's been practicing, or if this is another thing she suddenly understands that I don't.

Her fingers are soft and light, moving delicately from my eyes to my cheeks to my lips, and I keep my breathing shallow and steady. The queasiness in my stomach turns into

something light and tingly. I love having my hair played with, even though I always keep it pulled back in a ponytail, and this is just as soothing. I've read scenes in novels where characters do this kind of thing, and it's always peaceful, and friendly, and eventually transformative. Maybe this whole middle-school-girl thing won't be so bad.

After not long enough, Mo—Moira—puts her hands down and declares me "Feeneeshed." She comes with me to the dining room so we can admire her masterpiece together.

She makes me close my eyes until I'm positioned in front of the mirror.

"Three . . . two . . . one . . . open!"

I open my eyes, and scream.

Moira jumps a mile. "What? What is it?"

My heart's leaped out of my throat but I manage to croak, "Nothing. Surprised. It's okay." I've gotten used to not always recognizing my face in the mirrors of my strange house, but whoever is peering back at me is no one I have ever seen before.

I swallow my heart a little and look at the reflection—*my* reflection—more closely. She's a stranger, but a nice-looking one. I can see my face under hers, but it's like staring at my identical twin, if my identical twin were a pretty-ish girl. My stomach roils again, a stew of surprise and shame and curiosity. I never knew that I could look like that, and I'm not sure how I feel about it. When girls in books or movies get makeovers, they're thrilled with what they see in the mirror. I wonder if that only happens in fiction, or if it's normal to act like you've seen a ghost.

Moira looks at my face in the mirror more critically and I'm suddenly dizzy. This new face is even stranger when I think about it through her eyes. But Moira seems businesslike rather than shaken. "Next time I'd use less blush and a darker eye shadow. But it's a good start! What do you think?"

What do I think, I ask myself. I breathe in deep and blow it out, trying to calm the swirly feeling in my gut. I look

good. I look like not me. I like the face in the mirror, but then I imagine leaving the house like this, people looking at me, kids my age, teachers, and suddenly want to throw up. I hold my breath until the feeling goes away. I can't say all this to Moira. She's so determined to help me, even if it's not the kind of help I know what to do with.

"It looks good," I say. "It makes my face feel weird, though. Stiff. Can I wash it off now?"

"I guess so," says Moira. She looks disappointed. Maybe even a little hurt. "I bought some of this stuff for you, though, so you can practice on your own. You look so pretty this way!"

"Yeah," I say. "Pretty." If someone asked if I wanted to be pretty I'd say yes, of course, who doesn't? But still, I hurry to the bathroom and wash it all off. It's harder to scrub off than I expected, and for a while my face looks like a horror movie mask, but eventually my skin is red and blotchy but clean. Lingering traces of excitement and unease don't rinse down the drain with the blush.

Next Moira makes me watch her put makeup on her own face, so I can see how it's done. A memory rises, sharp as glass, the two of us hanging out in Uncle Roderick's room as he painted his face. He worked as a drag queen when he lived in New York City, and often said he didn't want to lose those skills. We both loved watching him, like it was a TV show. I once asked if I could be a drag queen too. Moira explained that was only for boys but Uncle Roderick said I could grow up to be whatever I wanted. Moira would ask him for techniques, tips, and sometimes he would let her brush blush on his cheeks or spread foundation on his jaw. Maybe if I thought of myself as a drag queen I wouldn't have washed off that makeup so fast. But that's ridiculous.

It must be obvious that I'm not having fun, because Moira finally takes pity on me and changes the subject slightly.

"I'm thinking about joining the band! Flute, or clarinet. Or maybe the yearbook committee, so I can take pictures of everyone!"

"Sounds fun," I say, examining an eyelash curler. Who wants curly eyelashes?

"What about you? Maybe you could try out for the softball team, or the track team."

"You know I hate sports."

"Okay, but have you ever tried? Maybe you'd like them! And besides, it's cool to be a girl who's good at sports. There are other options, though. Like, you could run for student government. Or yearbook with me! But seriously, you should pick *something*."

"Why?" I demand. "I've never been really into clubs and sports and things, what makes you think that's going to change just because we're at a new school?"

Moira's cleaning the makeup brushes with some sort of wipe. There's a pause; she's not looking at me but obviously thinking about what to say. "You don't have to change," she starts carefully, "but don't you want to? All of my other friends are girls I met through, you know, *doing* stuff.

Finding people who are interested in the same kinds of things I am. And there are even more things to do in middle school! New people, new everything. Don't you want that? Something to do after school besides your homework?"

"I don't want anything else to change," I mutter. I'm already picking the Strawberrylicious off my fingernails.

She freezes, then looks up at me. I shouldn't have said that. I don't want to talk about it. But I had been looking forward to middle school too, excited to read new books and learn new things. Suddenly I'm imagining the halls lined with girls who look like movie stars, pointing and laughing.

To her credit, Moira looks like she genuinely feels bad. "I'm sorry, Bug. Your uncle just died and all. But I don't want us to feel left out once we start school. We've got to come up with a plan before it's too late." What she's not saying is that I'd be the one left out. Not her. And she might not stay out there with me.

Is she right? I don't know if she's right. "Can I think about it?" I ask. It all seems like too much. I guess she's trying to make sure I'm ready, but I don't think all this advice is really for me. She's more worried about future-her than now-me.

"Sure," she says, with a slightly forced smile. "You've got the whole rest of the summer, I guess." The weeks stretch out in front of me, slow and hot, the finish line shimmering like a mirage. I don't know who I'll be when I cross over.

Too Bright to Sea

By Kyle Lukoff

What did you think after reading a few pages?

What did you think of the cover?

Would you share this book with your students? Why or why not?

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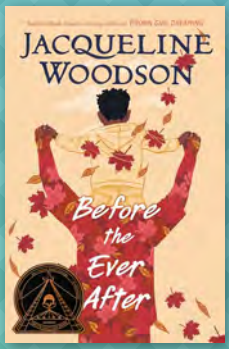

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