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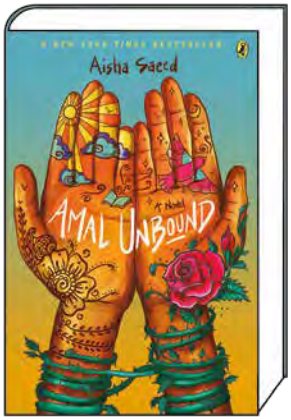

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Amal Unbound

by Aisha Saeed

Amal has big dreams until a nightmarish encounter . . .

Twelve-year-old Amal's dream of becoming a teacher one day is dashed in an instant when she accidentally insults a member of her Pakistani village's ruling family. As punishment for her behavior, she is forced to leave her heartbroken family behind and go work at their estate.

Amal is distraught but has faced setbacks before. So she summons her courage and begins navigating the complex rules of life as a servant, with all its attendant jealousies and pecking-order woes. Most troubling, though, is Amal's increasing awareness of the deadly measures the Khan family will go to in order to stay in control. It's clear that their hold over her village will never loosen as long as everyone is too afraid to challenge them—so if Amal is to have any chance of ensuring her loved ones' safety and winning back her freedom, she must find a way to work with the other servants to make it happen.

I kissed Lubna. I hugged my mother one last time. I had hardly ever stepped outside my home without someone by my side. Now I was leaving alone.

A gray-haired man in an ill-fitting suit was at the door. . . . I followed him toward the waiting black vehicle. I opened the door and sat inside.

So many firsts.

My first time in a car.

My first time feeling cool air pressing against my face.

My first time saying goodbye to everything I had ever known.

Chapter 1

I watched from the window as the boys tumbled out of the brick schoolhouse across the field from us. Our class was running over. Again.

Girls shifted in their seats and sneaked glances at the clock above the chalkboard. My friend Hafsa sighed.

"And finally, I have some bad news," Miss Sadia told us. She picked up a stack of papers from her desk. "I finished grading your math tests. Only five of you passed."

The class let out a collective groan.

"Now, now," she hushed us. "This just means we have more work to do. We'll go over it tomorrow and take another test next week."

"Those questions were hard," my younger sister Seema

whispered to me. We lined up by the chalkboard at the front of the class to get our tests. "I should've stayed with the younger class until fall."

"Oh, come on. You know you probably passed," I whispered back. "When have you ever failed an exam?"

Seema tugged at her sleeves as she walked up to Miss Sadia. It was only in the arms that you could see my old uniform was too big on her. Miss Sadia handed Seema the paper. As expected, Seema's worried expression shifted to a smile. Her steps were lighter before she slipped out of the classroom.

"I'm sorry I can't help today," I told Miss Sadia once the room was empty. This was my favorite part of the day, when everyone left and it was just the two of us. The building felt like it had exhaled, expanding a little bit without all thirty-four of us, crammed two to a desk, filling up nearly every square inch of space. "My mother is in bed again."

"Is the baby almost here?"

"Yes, so my father said I have to come home and watch my sisters."

"I'll miss your help, Amal, but he's right; family comes first."

I knew helping family was what a good eldest daughter did, but this time after school with Miss Sadia wasn't just fun; it was important. I wanted to be a teacher when I grew

up, and who better to learn from than the best teacher I ever had? I loved washing the chalkboards, sweeping the floor, and hearing stories of her college days. I loved watching her go over her lessons and rework them based on what worked and what didn't the day before. I learned so much from watching her. How could my father not understand?

"I could still use your help with the poetry unit next week," she told me. "Some of the students are grumbling about it. Think you could convince Hafsa to give it a chance? You know how she rallies the others to her side. She'll listen to you."

"I don't think she minds reading the poems. Writing them makes her nervous."

"You'd think everyone would be happy to write poetry! Shorter than an essay."

"It's different. The great poets like Ghalib, Rumi, Iqbal—they had things to say."

"And don't you have things to say?"

"What would I write about?" I laughed. "My little sisters? My father's sugarcane fields and orange groves? I love *reading* poems, but there's nothing for me to really write about. Our life is boring."

"That's not true! Write about what you see! Write about your dreams. Pakistan was founded by the dreams of poets. Aren't we of the same earth?"

Miss Sadia's dramatic way of talking was one of the reasons I loved her, but I wasn't convinced. It's not that I wasn't proud of my family and our life. I was lucky to belong to one of the more prosperous families in our Punjabi village, but it didn't change the fact that I lived in a village so tiny, it didn't even register as a dot on a map.

But I promised I'd talk to Hafsa.

This is what I now remember most about my last afternoon at school—the smell of the dusty chalkboard, the sound of the students lingering outside the door, and, mostly, how easily I took my ordinary life for granted.

Chapter 2

I raced down the school's gravel walkway to catch up to Seema and Hafsa. The sun blazed overhead, warming my chador and my hair beneath it.

"I'm buying Miss Sadia one of those bells I see on TV. You know, the kind that rings when class is over?" Hafsa grumbled.

"She doesn't always keep us late," I protested.

"Remember last week?" Hafsa said. "How she went on and on about constellations? By the time I got home, my brothers were out of their school clothes and halfway through their homework."

"But wasn't it interesting?" I asked. "The way the night

stars help us when we're lost and tell all sorts of different stories?"

"Why do I need to know about connecting dots in the sky? I want to be the first doctor in my family. Not the first astronaut," Hafsa said.

Hafsa and I had been friends so long, I couldn't remember a time I didn't know her, but when she talked like this, I didn't understand her at all. Unlike Hafsa, I wanted to know everything there was to know. How fast did airplanes fly? Why did some leave whiffs of clouds in their wake and others didn't? Where did ladybugs go when the rain came hard and fast? What was it like to walk through the streets of Paris or New York or Karachi? There was so much I didn't know that even if I spent my whole life trying, I knew I could only learn a small percentage of it.

"How's your mom?" Hafsa asked. "My mother said her back is hurting."

"It's gotten worse," I told her. "She couldn't get out of bed yesterday."

"My mother said that's a good sign. Backaches mean a boy," Hafsa said. "I know that would make your parents happy."

"It would be fun to have a brother," I said.

"There it is! Look at the door!" Hafsa said when we turned the bend toward our homes. She pointed to the

building that had appeared next to our village mosque. A structure had never emerged quite like this before with no explanation. Two weeks ago, a concrete foundation had been poured onto the field where we played soccer. The next week, brick walls arose and windows appeared, and today there was a door—painted lime green!

"Any idea yet what it could be?" I asked her.

"Yes." Hafsa grinned. If Hafsa could have it her way, she'd be permanently stationed by the crates of fruit at her family's market, soaking up every bit of gossip. "Khan Sahib is building a factory."

I rolled my eyes. Rumors and gossip were a part of life in our village. Some of the talk was ordinary, about the state of the crops or the weather, but often it centered on Khan Sahib, our village's powerful landlord.

"Why would he build a factory here? He has plenty in Islamabad and Lahore," Seema said. "What we need is a clinic. Look how much Amma's back hurts. The doctor in town is good, but this village needs a proper clinic."

"Do you really think Khan Sahib would put up anything to help us?" Hafsa scoffed.

"Maybe it's not him building it," I suggested.

"Look at the fancy green door! Who else has time and money to waste like that? You know I'm right."

Any unexplainable situation was always pinned to Khan

Sahib. He was the mysterious figure I'd heard of all my life but never seen. When I was younger, he loomed large and scary, like a character in a horror story.

"Sure! He's the one who breathes fire when he talks, right?" I rolled my eyes.

"Didn't he pick all the fruit off Naima's guava tree?" Seema winked.

"I heard he's why we've had no rain for months," I continued.

"I don't decide what I hear," Hafsa huffed. "I just report it."

"We'll find out what it is soon enough." I hooked my arm through Seema's. "But in the meantime, let's hope it's a clinic."

Hafsa's house came first on our path, just past the post office. Then came mine. I saw it in the distance. Gray like the others surrounding it except for the roses my mother planted around its border just before I was born; they still bloomed each spring around this time, without fail. It's why spring was my favorite time of year.

My friend Omar pedaled past us in his blue and khaki school uniform. He chimed his bell three times, our signal to meet. The stream. That's the direction he was headed in.

"Oh no." I looked in my book bag. "I left my exam in class."

"Again?" Hafsa frowned.

"Tell Amma I won't be long?" I asked Seema.

Seema hesitated. Our father would be home soon, but she knew Omar didn't chime his bicycle bell three times unless it was important.

"Okay." Seema nodded. "Hurry."

Chapter 3

Omar waited for me by the narrow stream that sliced through the length of our village. This was one of our usual spots, the wooded area next to my father's fields where our towering green stalks of sugarcane met the orange groves that dotted the landscape into the horizon. This area was far enough from the heart of the fields where our workers spent most of their time fertilizing the earth and keeping the groves and stalks trimmed and cared for, but even if they ventured to the edges, the shade trees here were thick and leafy, shielding us from view.

"I brought it!" he said when I approached and sat next to him on the fallen tree bridging the stream. He handed me a book with a burnt-orange cover.

I ran my hands over the raised lettering. The complete works of Hafiz. We had a small collection of books in our class, but it was no secret that the boys' school had a much bigger library to choose from.

"So, what did you think?" I asked him. "Which one was your favorite poem?"

"Favorite?" He frowned.

"Omar!" I exclaimed. "You didn't even read one poem?"

"I bring you what you like. Doesn't mean I have to read it."

"Yes, you do." I poked him. "I need someone to talk about it with."

"Fine," he said, raising his hands in surrender. "I'll read some after you're done. That's how good of a friend I am."

Omar's dark hair looked almost brown under the bright afternoon sun. Looking at him, it hit me yet again how unfair it was for God to give me a friend who understood me completely and create him as a boy.

"Amal, I know he's your friend, but you're not a little girl anymore," my mother had lectured me a few months ago when I turned twelve. "You can't spend so much time with him."

"But he's like our brother," I had protested. "How can I not see him?"

"Of course you'll see him around the house—some

conversations can't be avoided—but walking to school together, talking freely the way you both do . . . people will start gossiping if they aren't already."

Omar and I were born three days apart. He lived with his mother, our servant Parvin, in the shed behind our house. They moved there after his father died, and I'd never known life without him. He was part of the fabric of who I was. I couldn't follow this rule. Neither could Omar. So now we met in secret to talk, to listen to each other, to laugh.

"I told Miss Sadia I wouldn't be able to stay after school," I said. "I'm hoping it's just until the baby comes, but my father said we'll have to see how it goes."

"Once things settle down, he'll change his mind."

"I hope you're right," I said.

"Your father probably got fed up because Safa unlatched a neighbor's chicken coop again. You know you're the only one who can keep up with her."

"Omar, she did not!" I tried to stay serious, but a smile escaped. My youngest sister *was* a constant source of drama in our house.

"See? You know I'm right. Your poor father probably spent the morning chasing chickens and apologizing to neighbors."

"You need to stop with the Safa conspiracies all the time." I told him.

"Ha!" He grinned. "I'm going to have to become a lawyer. Safa will need a team of them with the trouble she gets into."

"She's only three!" I swatted him, but just like that, some of the heaviness lifted. He was right. Besides, my father usually gave in to us if we pleaded enough.

"Speaking of school, the headmaster from Ghalib Academy called. I got in!"

"Omar!" I exclaimed. "I knew it! Didn't I say so?"

"And they're going to cover everything! Room and board, all of it! This could change everything for me, Amal. If I do well enough, I could get one of their college scholarships. Can you believe it? Maybe I'll even get my mother her own house one day."

I hugged him. Omar had been attending the school across from mine, but Ghalib was one of the best schools around, a boys' boarding school a few towns over. Attending it was a lucky break for a servant's son like Omar. He was right—it could truly change everything for him.

"I wonder what the library there is like," I said.

"That was fast." He laughed. "Can I settle in to the school first before you have me hunting down books for you?"

"No way!" I said. "But I bet they'll have more books than both our classrooms combined. And Hafsa told me some boarding schools have cafeterias with all the food you can eat and televisions in all the bedrooms."

"I don't know about that," he said. "But they do have an after-school chess club and a debate team. And the dorm has a computer lab we can use in our spare time. The only thing is I'll have to share a room with another student. Maybe even two students."

"Do you know who they'll be?"

"No. I'll meet them when I go there for orientation weekend, but it'll be strange living with people I don't know."

"Hafsa's already staked her claim on me to be her roommate when we go to college someday."

"Well, at least with Hafsa as a roommate, you'll be up to date on all the inside information about everyone and everything on campus."

"That's definitely a plus." I laughed.

The clink of glass bracelets shattered our solitude.

It was Seema. She ran toward us, her feet bare.

"Come quick," she said between gasps of breath. "The baby is coming."

Chapter 4

The five minutes it took to run to my home on the other side of the field felt like a lifetime. We zigzagged through the sugarcane, taking shortcuts through the maze we knew so well. Our feet crunched over twigs and fallen leaves until we tumbled into the clearing that led to my house.

Flinging open the front door, I raced through our living room and straight into my parents' bedroom. My mother lay in bed. A thin sheet was draped over her. Raheela Bibi, the midwife, pressed a damp towel to her forehead. My mother's eyes were shut. Her jaw clenched.

"But this wasn't supposed to happen for another few weeks!" I said.

"Well, it's happening now!" Raheela Bibi rummaged through her bag.

My mother exhaled and opened her eyes. She looked at me. Her cheeks were flushed and her forehead was pale.

"Amal," she said. "You shouldn't be in here."

It was true; unmarried girls, especially my age, weren't allowed in the birthing area. But how could I stay outside when something was obviously wrong?

"I'm worried," I told her.

"I'm fine," she said. "Babies come early all the time." She smiled at me, but her eyes didn't crinkle with the upturn of her lips. She patted my arm and moved to say more, but suddenly she gasped and clenched her jaw again.

"I'm here." I squeezed her hand.

A hand touched my elbow. Omar's mother, Parvin, had arrived. Wisps of black hair framed her face from beneath her chador.

"Amal, I can stay with her now," Parvin told me. "Will you go take care of Safa and Rabia?"

"But I want to help."

"Taking care of your little sisters is helping. It gives your mother one less thing to worry about."

I wanted to stay, but she was right. And it was too hard seeing my mother like this.

I stepped into our living room. Rabia and Safa stood stock-still in their cotton frocks next to the faded sofa.

"Is Amma okay?" Rabia asked. Her lower lip quivered. Safa bit her nails and said nothing. Rabia was four years old and Safa was three, but with their matching black curls and dimples, people often mistook them for twins.

"Of course she's fine." I pushed down my own fear and ran a hand through Rabia's springy hair. "The baby is coming. Aren't you excited to meet your new brother or sister?"

They glanced at each other and then nodded at me.

"Let's go in your bedroom and dress up your dolls while we wait. We can show them to the baby soon."

Both girls followed me into their bedroom next to the kitchen. Their window overlooked our courtyard, the concrete floor painted peach, where our mother cooked meals when the weather allowed. Safa and Rabia pulled out their dolls and the collection of clothes my mother sewed for them. Soon they were chatting and giggling and getting their dolls ready for a tea party.

I tried to focus on their play and push out the image of my mother's closed eyes and pained face. I knew people kept saying they hoped the baby was a boy, but right now I didn't care. I only wanted my mother to be okay.

The door creaked. Omar stood by the edge of the bedroom, his hand resting on the knob.

"How's she doing?" he asked.

"I don't know. I was only in there with her for a few minutes. But it was scary—she looked so weak."

"Raheela Bibi and my mother know what they're doing," Omar tried to reassure me. "And you are right here if they need you."

"The book!" I turned to him. "I left it by the stream. We ran so fast, I forgot all about it."

"Don't worry about the book."

"It looked expensive."

"I'll get it. It's not going anywhere."

"What if something happens to her?" My voice cracked.

"We don't know anything yet," he said. "But don't worry; I'll be here if *you* need me."

I appreciated his words because he did not promise me all would be well. He did not know.

Neither did I.

Chapter 5

My father paced the length of the living room in his leather sandals while my sister and I sat at the table by the sofa, trying to do our homework. His forehead was slick with sweat; his dark glasses framed his worried expression.

We had a bigger house than many, but right now it felt like it was shrinking in on me. Seema and I kept stealing glances at our parents' closed room while our little sisters played in their bedroom.

The sun had nearly set when my parents' bedroom door finally opened.

The midwife stepped outside and smiled.

My jaw unclenched. My mother was okay. She had to be if Raheela Bibi was smiling.

"Congratulations," she said. "You are a father five times over now."

"How is Mehnaz?" he asked.

"Tired. But she'll be fine. Go on in and see for yourself."

My father walked into the bedroom. Seema and I followed.

The lamp on the nightstand lent a soft glow to the darkened room. The little one, smaller than I expected, lay curled in a blue blanket in my mother's arms.

"What is it?" my father asked. "A boy or a . . ."

"A girl," Raheela Bibi said.

"A girl?"

"Yes." She looked at him. "A perfect, healthy baby girl."

"Can I hold her?" I scooped the blanketed baby out of my mother's arms. I traced a finger against her soft nose, her cheeks, and her curved chin, with a dimple like Safa's. Raheela Bibi was right; she was perfect.

My breath caught when she gripped my finger with her fist. She was so tiny, but her grip on me so tight, as though she knew I would always protect her. Any disappointment I might have felt at not having a baby brother dissipated like powder in a running stream.

"What should we name her?" I asked. "I have a notebook with the ones I like. Shifa is pretty, but I also like Maha. Maaria. Lubna."

That's when I realized the room was unusually quiet.

I looked at my mother. She was crying. I was so eager to see the baby, I hadn't noticed the tears streaming down her face. Until now.

My father stood by the door. His eyes were red.

"I'm sorry," my mother whispered.

"Nothing to be sorry about," he said. "God does what he wants."

Of course I had known they wanted a son. I heard the conversations of our neighbors and the whispers in our own house. But staring at my parents' expressions right now, I saw they didn't look disappointed; they looked crushed.

I hadn't been present when my other sisters had been born. Is this how they'd reacted then?

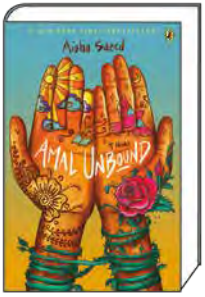
Was it the same when I was born, or was it okay since I was the first?

Sometimes I wish I did not pay such careful attention.

Maybe then I would not have learned that they thought being a girl was such a bad thing.

Amal Unbound

by Aisha Saeed



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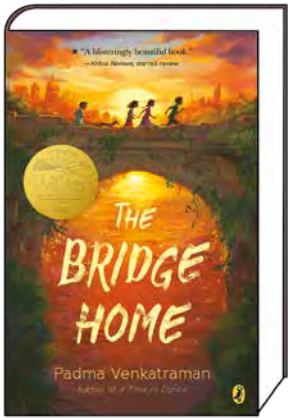
Cut or tear to share!



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The Bridge Home

by Padma Venkatraman

Four determined homeless children make a life for themselves in Padma Venkatraman's stirring middle grade debut.

Life is harsh on the teeming streets of Chennai, India, so when runaway sisters Viji and Rukku arrive, their prospects look grim. Very quickly, eleven-year-old Viji discovers how vulnerable they are in this uncaring, dangerous world. Fortunately, the girls find shelter—and friendship—on an abandoned bridge that's also the hideout of Muthi and Arul, two homeless boys, and the four of them soon form a family of sorts. And while making their living scavenging the city's trash heaps is the pits, the kids find plenty to take pride in, too. After all, they are now the bosses of themselves and no longer dependent on untrustworthy adults. But when illness strikes, Viji must decide whether to risk seeking help from strangers or to keep holding on to their fragile, hard-fought freedom.

"Viji and Rukku together?" you asked.

"Always."

"Viji and Rukku," you repeated. "Always together."

We had no roof or walls to keep us safe, and that probably should have worried me more, but you seemed content.

You pointed at the sky. "Look, Viji."

"No roof means we get the best view of the pretty stars, right, Rukku?" I said.

"Pretty," you agreed.

We lay shoulder to shoulder and watched the stars sparkle, while Kutti slept beside us. Your eyes sparkled, too, and the light inside them pierced through my fog of worry.

1

TOGETHERNESS

Talking to you was always easy, Rukku. But writing's hard.

"Write her a letter," Celina Aunty said, laying a sheet of paper on the desk. Paper remade from wilted, dirty, hopeless litter that had been rescued, scrubbed clean, and reshaped. Even the pencil she gave me was made from scraps.

"You really like saving things, don't you?" I said.

Crinkly lines softened her stern face. "I don't like giving up," she said.

She rested her dark hand, warm and heavy, on my shoulder.

"Why should I write?" I said. "It's not like you have her address."

"I believe your words will reach her," Celina Aunty said.

"We're opposites," I said. "You believe in everything and everybody. You're full of faith."

"Yes," she said. "But you're full, too. You're full of feelings you won't share and thoughts you won't voice."

She's right about that. I don't talk to anyone here any more than I have to. The only person I want to talk to is you, Rukku.

Maybe writing to you is the next best thing.

If you could read my words, what would you want me to tell you?

I suppose you'd like to hear the fairy tale you'd make me tell every night we huddled together on the ruined bridge. The story that began with *Once upon a time, two sisters ruled a magical land,* and ended with *Viji and Rukku, always together.*

That story was made up, of course.

Not that you'd care whether it was true or not. For you, things were real that the rest of us couldn't see or hear.

When I finished the story, you'd say, "Viji and Rukku together?"

"Always." I was confident.

Our togetherness was one of the few things I had faith in.

2

ROTTEN FRUIT

You always felt like a younger sister, Rukku. You looked younger, too, with your wide eyes and snub nose. You spoke haltingly, and you hunched your shoulders, which made you seem smaller than me, though you were born a year before.

Born when our father was a nice man, I suppose, because Amma said he was nice. Before.

Imagining Appa "before" took a lot of imagining. I was a good imaginer, but even so, I couldn't imagine him all the way nice.

The best I could do was think of him as a not-yet-all-the-way-rotten fruit. A plump yellow mango with just a few ugly bruises.

I could imagine our mother picking him out, the way she'd pick fruit from the grocer's stall, choosing the overripe fruit he was happy to give her for free. I could see Amma looking Appa

over, hoping that if certain foul bits could be cut away, then sweetness, pure sweetness, would be left behind.

Because Amma did choose him. Their marriage wasn't arranged.

Somehow he charmed her, charmed her away from her family, with whom she lost all touch. They were ashamed, she told me, ashamed and angry with her for eloping with someone from an even lower caste than the one she'd been born into.

It was all she ever said about her family. Not their names or where they lived or how many brothers and sisters she had. Only that they wanted nothing to do with us. And Appa's family—if he had one—didn't seem to know we existed either.

Sometimes I wonder if they might have helped us if they'd known. But maybe they'd have done nothing, or acted like our neighbors and schoolmates, who did worse than nothing. Who sniggered or made rude comments when we walked past. Comments that upset you so much, you stooped even lower than usual, so low it looked like you wanted to hide your head inside your chest.

On my eleventh birthday, when we came home from school, I was surprised to see saucepans full of food simmering on the stove.

"Amma, you cooked!" I loved evenings when Amma felt strong enough to prepare dinner for us, instead of the other way around. "You even made payasam?" I inhaled the sweet scent of milk rice that wafted through our apartment.

"Not just that." Amma dug out a small money pouch from its hiding place, underneath the rice sack. "Here's two hundred rupees, for you to buy something for yourself."

"Two hundred rupees!" I was so astonished that I almost dropped the pouch before securing it to my ankle-length skirt.

"I've been saving a little of what Appa gives me for food and rent. I wanted to buy something, but I was too tired to go shopping for a gift, and I wasn't sure what you'd like."

"This is the best gift, Amma. Thanks."

"Sweet?" you said. "Sweets for Rukku?"

"Proper food first," Amma said. "For you both."

Amma heaped rice onto our plates and ladled some hot, spicy rasam over the top. She started eating, but you just stared at your food, your hands crossed over your chest.

"Come on, Rukku." I tried to feed you a spoonful of rice and rasam.

"No!" you yelled. "Sweet! Sweeeeet!"

"Don't get angry, Rukku. Please? Eat and I'll tell you a story tonight."

"Story?" You calmed down.

Amma looked at me gratefully.

We'd just finished our dinner when we heard Appa's heavy footsteps. The sound of him staggering up the stairs to our apartment told us all we needed to know.

"Get in your room. Quick," Amma said.

"Sweet," you moaned, but your hand met mine and we crept into our bedroom. In the darkness, we huddled together,

unable to block out the sound of Appa yelling at Amma. We rocked back and forth, taking comfort in each other's warmth.

Appa broke Amma's arm that night, before storming out of the house.

"I need to see a doctor," Amma came and told us. Her voice was tight with pain. "Stay with Rukku. If they see her—"

She didn't finish her sentence. She didn't need to. She'd told me a million times how scared she was that if you set foot in a hospital, the doctors might lock you away in "a mental institution."

You curled up on our mattress with your wooden doll, Marapachi. I smoothed your brow.

The patch of moonlight that slipped past the rusty iron bars on our window fell on the book that our teacher, Parvathi, had given me before she moved away. No other teacher had ever been so nice, even though I was often at the top of the class.

I opened the book. In a shaking voice, I read you a tale about a poor, low-caste girl who'd refused to accept the life others thought she should lead.

"You think we could change our lives, like that girl did?" I asked. "And Parvathi Teacher. And Subbu. Or at least his family. They all left for a better life in a big city."

Subbu had been the only friend we'd had in school. His long face and thin frame had made him look as weak as a blade of grass, but he'd always told off the other children who teased us.

"I miss him, Rukku. Think he ever misses us?"

You answered me with a snore.

I was glad you'd fallen asleep, but I stayed awake, worrying and hoping. I hoped Amma would finally tell someone about how she had been hurt, and that they'd swoop down and rescue us.

But I should have known she'd never tell.

3

BREAKING

The next day, Amma pretended like nothing had happened.

You never pretended.

"Owwa," you announced. You patted our mother's good arm and stroked the sling on the broken one.

When Appa came home that evening, his eyes bloodshot and his breath reeking as usual, he set packages wrapped in newspaper on the cracked kitchen counter. "Presents for my girls."

"How nice!" Amma's voice was full of false cheer.

"Sorry I lost my temper last night." He placed a finger on her chin. "I'll never do it again. Promise."

I saw hope creep into Amma's eyes. Desperate, useless hope.

Suddenly, I wanted to shout at her, more than at him. *Have you forgotten how often he's broken his promises?*

He ripped open one of the packages and dangled a pair of

bangles in front of you. But before your fingers could close over them, he jerked them away.

"Catch!" He launched one bangle over your head, and as you slowly raised your hands to try to catch it, he sent the other flying so fast, it struck you before tinkling to the floor.

You squeaked like a trapped mouse.

He laughed.

How dare he think it was funny to trick you. How dare he mock your trust.

When he tossed a package in my direction, I didn't even try to catch it. I crossed my arms and watched it land on the floor.

"How bad both our girls are at catching!" Amma's voice was high-pitched and tense as a taut string.

"Stupid," he said. "One with slow hands, and the other with a slow brain."

"We're not stupid!" I picked up my package and flung it at him.

Nostrils flaring, he slapped me.

"Please," Amma begged. "Not the children."

You leaped and thrust your doll between me and Appa.

He kicked out at you.

At you.

Furious, I lunged at him. You joined in, and the two of us barreled into him together. He swayed and fell backward, but not before he struck your face.

Amma caught him, instead of letting him crack his head on the floor.

"Let them be," she pleaded.

Appa grunted.

I was sure he'd come at us again, but instead, he crawled into their bedroom and passed out for the night.

You ran a finger around the edges of what felt like a painful bruise blooming on my cheek. "Owwa," you said, paying no attention to your own wound. "Poor Viji."

With her unbroken arm, Amma grabbed a towel. She dipped it into the cool water in our earthen pot and pressed it against your bleeding lip. You struggled until I promised it would help you heal.

"Leave Appa," I told Amma. "Let's go somewhere else."

"How would we live, Viji?"

"We'll find a way."

"We can't manage without him. No one employs uneducated women with no skills." Her voice was flat. Defeated. "Just don't talk back anymore, Viji. I couldn't stand it if he hurt you again."

"He hurts you all the time," I said. "And now that he's started on us, nothing's going to stop him."

She didn't argue. Her head drooped, and when she finally found the strength to lift her eyes to mine, I could see she knew what I'd said was true.

"I can't bear seeing you hurt, but how can I stop him?" She gazed at the pictures of the Gods and Goddesses smiling down

serenely from our kitchen wall. As if they'd suddenly leap into life and start helping.

"Please understand, Viji." She was begging me, the same pathetic way she'd begged Appa. "I promised . . . to be a good wife . . . no matter what. I can't leave."

But after what he'd done to you, I couldn't stay.

As I gazed at Amma's trembling chin, I realized how different we were. Amma trusted that if she put up with things, she'd be rewarded with another, better life after she died. It made no sense to me why any God who made us suffer in this life would start caring for us in the next.

If I wanted a better future, I needed to change the life we had. Now.

The more I thought about our differences, the surer I felt that I could protect you better than she could. She hadn't tried to stop Appa from beating us. All she'd done was beg. I would never become like her, I promised myself. I'd never beg anyone for anything.

At the first light of dawn, while Amma and Appa slept, I woke and changed into my best blouse and ankle-length pavadai as silently as I could. Around my waist, I tied the drawstring purse with Amma's gift of money. Then I crammed a sheet, some towels, and a change of clothes for each of us into our school backpacks. I added a bar of soap, a comb, and the pink plastic

jar of tooth powder to your bag; from the kitchen, I grabbed a bunch of bananas—your favorite fruit—to add to mine.

Our bags were heavy, but I couldn't bear to leave behind the book from Parvathi Teacher. Carrying it along was like taking her blessings with us, I told myself as I forced it into my bag.

Then I woke you.

"Shhup. Don't say a word, Rukku, please. Just get changed. We're leaving."

Sleep weighed down your eyelids, but you did as I asked. Perhaps it felt like a dream to you.

As we shuffled toward the front door, you cast a bewildered glance at our parents' bedroom.

"Amma?" you said.

Memories of our rare happy moments gleamed in my mind, like sunshine slipping into a dark room: the day Amma had helped you make a bead necklace, the night she'd sat by our beds and listened to the story I'd told you.

For a moment I hesitated. But then I glanced at your cut lip—the proof Appa had given me that he'd keep on hurting you as long as you were nearby.

We had to leave, right away, before fear or doubt slowed me down.

4

ESCAPE

You followed me unquestioningly until I turned down a different road, away from our usual route to school.

"School?"

"No, Rukku. We're going to a new place. A nicer place."

"Nicer place?"

"Far from here. You and me."

"Rukku and Viji together?" You offered me your soft, trusting hand.

With our fingers interlinked, I felt braver. I led the way to the main road, where buses to and from the city roared through our village.

In front of the bus stop sign, a woman was already waiting, chewing tobacco as placidly as a cow chewing its cud. A large basket filled with coconuts was beside her.

"Waiting for the bus to the city?" My voice trembled as I

checked to make sure we were in the right place.

"*Aamaam,*" she confirmed. Her eyes roved across my face, which was smarting with pain, and then settled on your cut lip, but she didn't comment.

Soon enough, a bus arrived, raising a cloud of red dust that made you sneeze. The woman balanced the coconut basket on her head and climbed in.

"Come, Rukku."

"No." You dug in your heels.

"Rukku, come!" I stepped into the bus.

"No, no, no," you sang out. "No."

The driver honked to hurry us.

"I'll give you a sweet." I tugged at you. "I'll give you a sweet when we're in the city."

You wriggled free of my grip.

"Get in or get out!" the driver yelled. "I can't wait all morning!"

The bus started to pull away.

I leaped out.

You jumped in.

"Vijiiiiii!" You leaned halfway out of the bus.

Horrified, I raced behind it.

I'd never have caught up to that bus if it hadn't been for the conductor's shrill whistle, calling the driver to a stop.

I climbed in, squishing down my sudden urge to haul you off the bus and run home.

The conductor helped me lead you down the aisle.

"Sweet?" You settled into a seat, and I slid in beside you.

"Not yet." I tried to catch my breath. "Don't have any sweets, Rukku."

The conductor looked at me and then at you, and stuck a hand in his pocket and pulled out a hard green sweet that had melted out of shape.

Green was your favorite color. You gave him a lopsided grin.

"Thanks," I said. "You're very kind, sir."

"No need for thanks. Going to the city?"

"Yes, sir."

He handed me our tickets.

My hand was shaking as I opened the drawstring purse at my waist, partly because I was nervous, partly from shock at how high the fare was. The tickets used up most of our money.

You unwrapped the sweet, popped it in your mouth, and stared at the green rice fields that flashed past the window. I wondered if you understood we were leaving forever. I was never sure what the words *yesterday* and *tomorrow* meant to you. Your sense of time was different from mine.

"Marapachi?" You rummaged in your bag, pulled out your wooden doll, and talked to her for a while. Then you stuck her back in your bag and slumped against my shoulder. The motion of the bus soon made your eyelids droop.

While you slept, doubts slithered into my mind. Had I done the right thing? Where would we go, once we reached the city? How would we survive?

5

SHARDS OF GLASS

You jerked awake as the bus thudded to a halt. "We're here," I said, trying to sound cheerful.

The open-air bus terminal was packed with people shouting, laughing, and arguing. The smell of ripe guavas, piled high on a handcart pushed by a vendor, mixed with the smell of diesel smoke from buses. You held Marapachi close to your chest and stroked her wooden head.

As I wondered which way to go, I heard a voice right behind us. "There you girls are."

I whipped around.

It was the bus driver. He'd crept so close behind that I could feel his hot, foul-smelling breath on my neck. "You girls need a job? Money? I'll show you around the city."

I didn't dare answer.

"What's her name?" He jerked a thumb at you.

For once, I was relieved he hadn't asked you directly. You weren't as suspicious of people as I was, and the last thing we needed was to strike up a conversation with him.

I quickened our pace, but he kept up.

"Come with me." His hand came down on my arm and formed a vise.

"Let go!" I struggled. "Let go!"

A few bystanders glanced our way, but no one tried to stop him.

I tried to kick his shin—and missed.

"Don't you dare, you filthy low-caste brat!" He twisted my arm so hard, I gasped.

"No," I heard you cry. "No!"

Your arm swung back, and with all your might, you flung your hard wooden doll at him.

Marapachi hit his forehead with a satisfying thwack. He cursed, his grasp loosening enough for me to wrench free.

We raced away, deeper and deeper into the safety of the crowd.

When I finally felt safe enough to risk a look back, the bus driver was lost to my sight. Still, I decided we'd be better off if we crossed the road outside the terminal, putting as much distance between us as possible.

We waited for a break in traffic. And waited.

I'd never seen such an endless flood of vehicles and pedestrians.

Other people were darting in and out of the traffic, disregarding the deafening horns. Somehow they weren't getting run over. Holding you close, I stepped into the gap between a three-wheeled rickshaw and a motorbike. The motorbike almost ran over my toes.

"No, no, no!" You held my hand in a crushing grip.

"Move!" someone behind us snarled.

I heard the unlikely tinkle of a cow's bell. A great white cow was fording through the river of traffic, vehicles parting to let it through.

"Good cow." You put your hand on the beast's side as though you owned it. It didn't seem to mind.

Protected by the cow's bulk, we managed to reach the other side of the street.

"Good cow." You ran your hands along its neck.

"Yes, it's a good cow, but that bus driver was bad, Rukku. We've got to keep moving."

We came to a slightly less busy side street. On either side were run-down buildings that reminded me of our apartment. Towels, underwear, and faded saris flapped on clotheslines hung across the balconies.

Turning the corner, we found ourselves on an even narrower street, lined with shacks selling food. In one of them, a man stood behind a rickety counter. You watched, fascinated, as he poured steaming tea from one glass tumbler into another, until a layer of froth bubbled across the rim.

"We deserve a treat," I said. "How about sweet, milky tea instead of the sweet I promised you?"

"Tea," you agreed.

I was worried about how little money we had left, so I ordered us just one to share. As it warmed my hands and bubbles of froth tickled my lips, I knew it was worth the price.

I sipped slowly, then held it out to you. "Careful, Rukku. It's hot."

But before you could wrap your fingers around the slippery glass, I accidentally let go. You squealed, "Ai-ai-yo!"

Horrified, I watched the glass shatter on the ground, spattering tea across the hems of our skirts.

"Pretty." You reached down for a sparkly shard of glass.

"Don't touch!" I grabbed your hands. "It's sharp, Rukku! It'll give you an owwa!"

"Owwa," you echoed sulkily.

The teashop owner scowled at us. "Do you know how much that glass cost?" he asked.

Not that much, I was sure, but just before I opened my mouth to apologize, an idea struck me.

"Sir?" I offered. "We'll work to pay for the broken glass."

"Okay. Clean up the mess." The teashop owner stuck his hands on his hips. "Then go to the kitchen and help my wife."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Viji?" You sounded uncertain.

"Everything's fine, Rukku." I gave you a quick hug. "We've found our first job."

6

TEASHOP

The smell of roasting chillis tickled my nose as we ducked through the narrow doorway into the tiny kitchen at the back of the teashop.

A woman in a wrinkled gray sari turned away from the stove and looked at us. Her body was all sharp angles, but there was a softness in her eyes.

"We broke a glass," I explained. "We're working to pay it off."

The woman mopped her sweaty face with the free end of her sari.

"You'll help wash up?" she asked instead of ordering.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Call me aunty," she invited, with a quick smile. "Not rich enough to be called ma'am." She motioned at a stack of dirty glasses and plates.

I set our bags down beneath a shelf on which I saw a plastic

image of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, seated on a pink lotus. Though it was clear that the Goddess hadn't yet showered the teashop couple with riches, she was well looked after: a fresh jasmine garland was tucked across the picture, and a lighted incense stick was placed beneath it. Next to the Goddess was a picture of a young girl who had Aunty's eyes—whose photograph was also decorated with a jasmine garland.

I walked to the kitchen sink, but Teashop Aunty said, "No running water this time of day. Use the pail." Below the sink, I saw a green plastic bucket filled with water. There was a bit of coconut husk that I could use to scrape the dishes clean, and a tin of powdered soap.

"Don't use too much," she said. "Or he'll be shouting at us."

I liked that she said *us*, though she didn't even know my name yet.

"And we only have one more bucket of water. No more running water until four A.M. tomorrow."

"I thought in the city, people could get water from the tap whenever they wanted," I said.

"The city is the worst place," she said. "But my husband wants to live here, so what can I do?" She jerked her chin at you. "Your sister?"

"Yes. I'm Viji, and this is my sister, Rukku."

"Poor thing." She looked at you with pitying eyes—which I didn't like. But I kept my mouth shut. It could have been worse. She could have called you names and then I'd have started boiling inside like the oil in her frying pan.

"You come from where?"

I rinsed off a glass.

"Ran away?" she asked.

"Yes." There was no point trying to hide it. Our story was clearly written on my swollen face and your cut lip—but I didn't want to tell her the details and risk her feeling even sorrier for us.

Smoke billowed up from the hot oil, and Teashop Aunty turned back to the stove. She rolled some vadai dough into a ball.

Before she could do much more, you came over, pinched off another bit of dough, and rolled it between your palms, just as she was doing.

"She can do that quite well!" Teashop Aunty sounded amazed.

"Rukku's made vadais before." I tried not to let her surprise annoy me. Even the teachers at school—except for Parvathi Teacher—never bothered to find out how much you could do; Amma didn't really know either. "She's good with her hands. And she loves making bead necklaces."

"Rukku likes beads." You flattened the ball into a perfect circle, concentrating, with the tip of your tongue between your lips. "Rukku is a good helper."

"Ah! Very nice!" Teashop Aunty said.

I returned to the dishes as you helped her with the dough.

You started humming tunelessly as you worked. Homesickness pinched my heart for a moment. I thought of the rare weekends when Appa was away and Amma had enough energy to join us so we could cook a meal together.

By the time I was done with the washing, my hands felt raw, but the dishes were clean, and the teashop man grumpily agreed I'd done more than enough.

"You'll be all right?" Teashop Aunty asked, keeping her voice low so that the teashop man wouldn't hear.

"We'll be fine," I said.

Looking relieved, Teashop Aunty pressed two large bananas into your hands and a few vadais, hastily wrapped in a banana leaf, into mine. Then she let us out through the back door, into a lonely alley littered with plastic bags and broken bottles.

7

LOST PUPPY

Dusk was beginning to fall as we wandered out into the narrow street. My courage fell, too, with every step.

Fingering what was left of our money, I wondered how long it would last us. I regretted being too proud to share our story with Teashop Aunty. I should have asked her for help with finding a safe place to stay.

"Find Marapachi," you demanded.

"She's gone," I said. "You threw her at the bad man, remember?"

"Marapachi," you repeated, louder.

"You saved me, Rukku. You were a hero."

"Marapachi!" you yelled.

"We have better things to worry about than your doll," I burst out.

"Amma!" You turned your back to me. "Amma!"

"She's not here either. We just have each other now."

You plopped down, right there on the dusty street.

"Fine. Sit."

"Rukku wants Amma! Rukku wants Marapachi!"

"Shouting's not going to bring them here."

You scowled at me, and I spun on my heel and strode away, hoping you'd follow, but you didn't. I waited at the end of the street for a while, but you seemed quite content to stay where you were.

You won that round.

When I came back for you, you were bending over a skinny puppy with huge dark eyes.

"Get away from that puppy, Rukku. It might bite."

At the sound of my voice, the puppy thumped its tail. You stroked it tenderly, with just one finger.

"Come on. Please?" I said.

You started humming to the puppy. It licked you with its pink tongue.

"I'm really sorry, Rukku."

You made no move to show me you'd heard, though you usually forgave me if I sounded apologetic.

I crouched beside you.

The puppy looked right at me, and his nose crinkled, like he was smiling.

I couldn't help petting him. His coat was smooth. He wiggled and sniffed my hand.

"Rukku's dog."

I sighed. "We don't have enough to eat or a proper place to sleep yet, and you want to adopt this orphan?"

"Kutti," you announced, tapping his head. "Kutti."

"Kutti? That's what we're calling him?"

I knew there was no point trying to get you to leave the puppy behind. And I didn't want to leave Kutti behind either.

Because he'd smiled at me. And because he made you so happy. Your eyes were as shiny as the puppy's wet nose.

"Okay," I said. "But now we need to find a place to sleep."

"Come." You stood and beckoned to the puppy. "Come, Kutti."

Kutti pricked up his ears and stood attentively at your side, like he understood you perfectly.

"I have no idea where to go," I admitted. "You choose."

You broke into the widest grin I'd ever seen and started marching down the street. Realizing with a twinge of guilt that I'd never let you lead before, I followed.

On one street corner, three boys had already settled in for the night, huddled together on a tattered straw mat behind a dumpster. We saw another group of kids still at work, trying to sell newspapers to people who were stopped in their cars at a traffic light.

It felt good to have Kutti trotting close to our heels along the dark streets. He was probably too small to scare away strangers, but surely he'd bark in warning if someone tried to sneak up on us when we went to sleep.

If we ever found a place to sleep.

We walked beneath a huge billboard with a larger-than-life picture of a woman decked in gold jewelry—not just bangles and necklaces and earrings and nose rings, but even golden hair clips.

"Pretty," you said, pausing beneath it. "Pretty?"

GOLD AT SUPER-LOW PRICES AT THANGAM HOUSE, the billboard proclaimed—though the price for the necklace it advertised was a number followed by more zeros than I cared to count. "What comes after the ten thousands, Rukku?"

"Eleven," you said promptly. "Ten, eleven."

"Right." I smiled. "After ten is eleven, and we'll never have tens of thousands of rupees, so who cares what comes next?"

We wandered onto a wider road that led to a river. Two bridges spanned it—one was well lit with traffic rumbling across it; the other was dark and deserted.

We headed to the deserted bridge. Concrete lions stood on either side of what must have once been the grand entrance, and a crumbling concrete wall ran along its sides. The perfect spot to stay overnight, I decided. Probably the most secluded spot we could get in this city.

"Careful," I warned as we picked our way around the holes in the ruined bridge.

"Pretty." You pointed at the river that glittered like crushed glass far below us.

Halfway across the bridge, I saw a makeshift shelter. Someone had made a tent with a tarpaulin. Rocks held one edge of

the tarpaulin in place along the wall of the bridge. The tent sloped down to the ground, where its other edge was held down with an old car tire. A cleverly built home, with one wall, a sloping roof, and two entrances.

"Looks like it was abandoned ages ago," I said. "Want to stay here?"

"Rukku wants to eat." You gobbled the bananas, and Kutti and I finished off the vadais.

Our food was gone before I realized I should have saved something for the next day.

It was beginning to get dark, but I could make out a boy marching up the bridge. He reminded me of a sunflower. Matted hair that looked like it had never met a comb stuck out like petals around a face that seemed much too large for his skinny body. He wore an oversize yellow T-shirt and a raggedy pair of shorts and held a bag and a wooden stick.

"*Vanakkam,*" I greeted him, relieved that he was smaller than us.

"Go away," he said, instead of echoing *vanakkam* in return.

"You're polite, aren't you?" I said.

"If you stay here, my boss will come and . . ." He punched at the air. "Tishoom. Tishoom. He'll show you."

"Tishoom." You imitated him, repeating his nonsense word. "Tishoom. Tishoom."

He smiled at you.

Then he turned to me and said in a tone he seemed to think was impressive, "My boss is coming, with the rest of our gang."

"Your gang?" I peered into the gloom. No one else, as far as I could see.

"Ten—I mean, twenty boys, all ten times taller than me."

"You're a bad liar," I said.

"Owwa!" You pointed at a scab on his knee.

"Don't worry," he said to you, and he sat down cross-legged, pulling his T-shirt over his scraggy knees. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

Kutti sniffed at the boy and licked him.

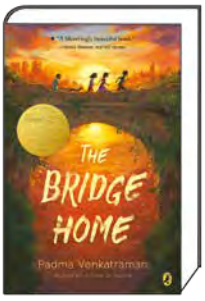
"My name's Muthu," he said. "What's your dog called?"

"Rukku's dog," you said with pride. You sat right next to Muthu, as though he'd invited us to visit. "Kutti."

He patted Kutti tentatively. Then he glanced behind us. "Look! That's my boss."

The Bridge Home

by Padma Venkatraman



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Each Tiny Spark

by Pablo Cartaya

Emilia Torres has a wandering mind. It's hard for her to follow along at school, and sometimes she forgets to do what her mom or abuela asks. But she remembers what matters: a time when her family was whole and home made sense. When Dad returns from deployment, Emilia expects that her life will get back to normal. Instead, it unravels.

Dad shuts himself in the back stall of their family's auto shop to work on an old car. Emilia peeks in on him daily, mesmerized by his welder. One day, Dad calls Emilia over. Then, he teaches her how to weld. And over time, flickers of her old dad reappear. But as Emilia finds a way to repair the relationship with her father at home, her community ruptures with some of her classmates, like her best friend, Gus, at the center of the conflict.

Each Tiny Spark by Pablo Cartaya is a tender story about asking big questions and being brave enough to reckon with the answers.

"When we wake up in the morning, we can choose between fear and love. Every morning. And every morning, if you choose one, that doesn't define you until the end. . . ."

—Guillermo del Toro

EMILIA'S VIDEO #30

The camera light blinks like a winking red eye, telling me it's time to start. I take a short breath. I know each detail of my face is being recorded—every eyebrow movement, every twitch. What if the spinach smoothie I just drank left little green flecks in my teeth? My stomach swirls like the red, white, and blue sign outside of Butch's Barbershop. The one off Main Street. Right next to Delucci's, my favorite restaurant.

"Emilia?"

"Hmm?"

"We're recording," Gus says in a whisper.

What am I going to say? Even though I've done this twenty-nine times, I feel like I should have written a script. I stare straight into the lens. Gus watches quietly behind the camera. Focus, Emilia. Breathe.

And:

Hi, Papi! It's me, Sweet E. Emilia Rosa. Your daughter. You know that. So, how are you doing? I miss you. I had a good birthday. Abuela made flan de coco. You like flan, right? Abuela signed me up for piano lessons, but I'm not very good. She says I just have to practice. I'd rather join the makers club at school. They're going to teach kids how to wire-circuit boards. Mom says it's a great idea. But part of me wonders if I'd get bored because I'm already good at circuit boards. Remember? Mom showed me. It was pretty easy. So, I, well, is it cold where you are? Is it in the mountains this time? I miss you, Papi. Oh, hey! I drew something for you. Here, see? It's like the tattoo you have on your shoulder, only I ran out of green marker. That's why the wings are pink. And that's purple fire coming out of its mouth. Mom said I had creative license to draw the fire whatever color I wanted. Maybe you can use this drawing to get another dragon tattoo? Like on your other shoulder. Right above your Semper Fi

one. Anyway, it's for you. I'm going to scan it to send with the video file. I know it's hard for you to Skype where you are, so I hope you get this soon. And the drawing. Bye, Papi. I love you.

END VIDEO

CHAPTER ONE

I wasn't fast enough. Abuela appears behind me, already dressed with her makeup on, hair in a perfect bun. "Ven," she says, holding two brushes and a flatiron. She gestures for me to follow her into her room. I really wanted to get a few knots out of my hair before she got started.

She sits me down on the footstool facing her full-length mirror. As soon as my butt touches the seat, she hammers away with the hairbrush like she's some kind of blacksmith hairstylist.

My head jerks as Abuela pulls. She takes a skinny comb with a long, pointy handle and splits my hair into sections with hair clips that look like chomping alligators. With one section in her hand, she takes the flatiron in the other. She feeds my hair into the iron and clamps down on the strands. Steam curls out like a dragon exhaling as the iron slides from the top of my head to my tips. Even

though she's never burned me, I get nervous when Abuela gets close to my ears.

I don't have my mom's jet-black hair, but I have her curls. Or waves—my hair swooshes like a rolling tide. But after Abuela's done with it, it's as flat as a pancake. Today she straightens my hair out and puts it up into a ponytail.

"Pa'que se quede liso," she says. I guess she's worried that if I don't put my hair up, it will get wavy later. Abuela turns my head toward the window and keeps working.

There's something comforting about the way the sun enters the room through the curtains in the morning—it's like a *tap-tap-tapping* on the window, telling me it's time to get the day started. A cardinal chirps on the branch of our cedar tree. It flits around, and I'm jealous of the little bird for having so much energy in the morning. I lean over to draw the curtains open and let in more light.

"Quédate quieta, muchacha," Abuela says. "You're moving around too much."

"Aurelia," Mom says, popping into the room. "Déjala con su pelo risado."

Abuela stops tugging and looks back at Mom.

"She's going to go to school with her hair curly and out of control? She won't be able to focus," Abuela says.

"What?" my mom replies. "That's ridiculous."

"Well, what will people think? I'll tell you: that she doesn't have anybody to take care of her. Is that what you want?"

"That's what this is about," my mom says. "It's always about what other people think."

"It's important to put your best foot forward," Abuela says, continuing to brush out my ponytail.

"And I think her wavy hair is beautiful. It's her best foot, and I won't let you tell her otherwise." Mom winks while she scrunches her own hair.

"It's fine, Mom," I finally say.

It's not *really* fine—Abuela's daily hair rituals hurt, and I think my hair is like a lion's mane. And I love lions. But I'm not interested in Abuela and Mom getting into another argument over my hair.

Abuela finishes by putting a large blue bow on top of my head. I get up and move toward my mom, who is still standing at the door. She's wearing baggy sweatpants and a tank top and has her favorite fluffy argyle socks on. Her long, curly black hair falls along her shoulders like a waterfall in the dead of night.

I look back at my grandmother. She's wearing freshly

pressed pants and a blouse with circles and stars on it, her auburn hair perfectly in place without a loose strand. Her round rosy cheeks and thin lips are stained the color of an Arkansas Black apple, and she's wearing the same gold-and-pearl earrings she's worn since my abuelo died.

Between my mother and grandmother, I'm a blend of both. Short, head of wavy auburn hair, eyes large with dark yellow-green colors.

I don't have Mom's complexion. One that, as she once said, shows she is a "descendant of the Yoruba."

"Emilia viene de sangre española," Abuela replied. "She resembles *my* side of the family."

"She may have some Spanish ancestry," Mom said. "But she also has West African blood coursing through her veins. She needs to know *all* parts of her heritage, not just the European one—"

"Bueno," Abuela interrupted. "Remember, most of our family came from Spain. And some from Ireland. That's why your hair is that color, mi'ja."

"Si, pero you can't deny the orishas guide her spiritual journey as well," Mom said.

"Aye, muchacha," Abuela responded, clearly frustrated. "She's baptized Catholic."

"*You* baptized her Catholic, Aurelia," Mom said. Then she whispered to me loudly enough for Abuela to hear: "No matter what, nunca dudes lo que está in your mind and spirit, mi amor. That, and sea como sea, our Yoruba heritage teaches us to respect your elders."

Mom kissed my forehead.

I smiled. Abuela frowned.

"Come on," Mom says now. "Let's eat breakfast."

"Espérate." Abuela stops me before I head out.

She slathers her hands with gel and smooths the hair at the top of my forehead so it's flat against my scalp. I stare at myself in her full-length mirror as the plastering continues. My eyes follow Abuela's arm to the short cylindrical can she's digging into. Actually, it's pomade she's using. Not gel. Pomade is greasier and stays in my hair longer. It gives it a slick sheen, but honestly, I hate it because it takes forever to wash out. I don't say anything, though.

We walk downstairs, past the dining room that leads into the kitchen. Mom and I start our daily ritual of making café con leche, with a little slice of Cuban toast and melted butter, plus a large glass of my daily spinach-peanut-butter-banana-and-almond-milk smoothie.

"Doctor's recommendations!" Mom says, pouring the last of the smoothie into my glass.

"Why do I have to drink that horrible green monster *every* morning? It leaves specks of green in my teeth."

"It's not that bad! Here, take your fish oil pill."

"I hate that thing!"

"The doctor *did* say it's a natural way to help you concentrate."

Mom tries to add healthy foods into my diet *all* the time. She says it will help with my lack of focus. I think she's just trying to cut out sugar. Which I *love*.

As the coffee brews, the sweet and bitter smell wafts my way. Whoever figured out that those opposite tastes could blend together so perfectly in a coffee drink was a genius.

Mom puts her arm around me, and I lean into her shoulder.

"What's up, *Not*-Buttercup?" she jokes.

I perk up and smile.

I recently saw an old movie called *The Princess Bride* with Mom and Abuela. It's about this princess named Buttercup who falls in love with a guy named Westley. At one point in the movie, they're in a forest and these

gigantic rats attack them. Westley falls to the ground while wrestling the rat, but Buttercup doesn't do anything. There's a humongous rat chewing on Westley's shoulder, and Buttercup doesn't even pick up a stick to bash it! She just stands there screaming for Westley to save her. It really annoyed me. Mom and Abuela eyed each other and said they never saw the movie that way.

Mom rubs my shoulder and gives it a squeeze.

"Ready for school?"

"No," I say, looking out the kitchen window, slurping up the last of my smoothie. Mom goes to the toaster and pulls out the warm bread and cuts it in half. Steam rises when she adds butter, and it melts instantly. She moves the knife like she's conducting an orchestra across each slice.

My mouth feels dry, but it's not because I'm thirsty.

"Do you have to leave?" I ask her.

"Yes, baby girl. The conference starts tomorrow."

"But it's, like, a thirty-hour time difference, Mom."

"It's San Francisco, mi amor. Not China. And it's only a little more than a week. Who knows? Something exciting could come of it."

"Like what?" I ask, moving over to help her. I grab a paper towel and start wiping the loose crumbs off the counter.

"We'll see! Anyway, Dad is coming home tonight," she tells me. "You'll get some one-on-one time with him for a few days!"

"And apparently he's okay with your mother leaving even though he's been gone for eight months," Abuela says, stern at the kitchen door. It doesn't seem to faze Mom at all. She's used to what she calls Abuela's "puyas"—side comments meant to get under her skin. Abuela throws shade like a chameleon changes colors.

Mom rubs my forearm and squeezes my hand a little. "Bueno, Aurelia, luckily my husband and I have communicated, and fortunately for both of us, we understand that our jobs may require a certain amount of travel on occasion. As I'm sure you've experienced over the years with his deployments."

Abuela huffs and leaves the kitchen. Mom exhales slowly.

"How do you not get flustered by her, Mom?"

"Patience, mi amor," Mom says. "The older you get, the more important patience becomes."

I glance over at my backpack and think about all the classes I have and how Mom is always there to help organize

my work and how I can't let Abuela help me because she won't understand and suddenly I feel the vibrating in my head that happens sometimes when I get nervous. It's like a whole bunch of little bees buzzing around and it's hard to concentrate.

"Mom, who's going to help me with my homework when you're gone?"

"Dad will!"

The calendar Mom and I go over every Monday morning to help me organize the week sits in front of me. Friday is circled with two little stars and a question mark next to it.

"Oh, Mom! Clarissa is having a party on Friday. Can I go?"

"It's Monday, Emilia. And that's not really relevant to our discussion, is it?"

"So?"

"Well, we're talking about your dad coming home tonight and since it's Monday, I think planning for your *school* week is the priority, don't you think?"

"Mom, please don't start that priority–organizational thinking thing again. I know it's Monday."

"Okay, but you have a math—"

"I know! Geez." I take a breath and exhale. Patience . . . Right.

"Don't make that face," she says.

"What face?"

"The one that looks like you ate day-old bacalao."

Mom drops her upper lip and her eyes sag a little.

"I hate salted cod," I tell her.

"Oye, your ancestors are probably rolling in their graves."

I drop my head onto my mom's shoulder again. When I lift it, she hands me her mug. "Bueno, at least you like café con leche."

I take a sip, and everything comes into focus. There is nothing like café con leche. Nothing.

"C'mon, mi amor. Let's hang out a little before the bus gets here," she says.

Mom pats my back and heads to the dining room, carrying the café con leche. I follow her with the buttery Cuban toast and sit at the dining table, where we've done homework together hundreds of times. Probably thousands. Maybe millions. Abuela moves past us to the kitchen.

"Should we get him balloons or a sign or something?" I ask.

"No, you know he doesn't like a big welcome like that,"

Mom says. "Be there with a hug and tell him you're glad he's home."

"Well, I *am* glad he's home. I just wish you were going to be home too."

"I know, baby. But this is going to be good. Trust me."

"Yeah, yeah," I say, swinging my feet and munching on toast and talking about the week ahead. She likes to go over my agenda for the week, but it's kind of annoying because sometimes that's all she talks about.

"So, you got it?"

"Hmm?"

"Your stuff for the week, sweetheart," she says. "Math test Thursday. You have a vocabulary test Friday. What do you have for social studies?"

"Oh, Clarissa's party! I can go, right?"

"Emilia," Mom says, using my name like a sharp-edged sword to make her point. "I need to be able to go on this trip knowing you're ready for the week."

"Yes, Mom, you've told me, like, a hundred times!"

"And social studies?"

"What about it?"

"What do you have for Mr. Richt's class this week?"

"I don't know, something. Maybe a test."

"Maybe? Do I have to call?"

"No, Mami! Please, can we just talk about something else?"

She lets out a sigh. "Okay, mi amor. What do you want to talk about?"

I ask her about her trip, where she's going to present this cool new translation app she developed.

"Are you going to speak in front of a ton of people?"

"I hope not!" she says. "I hate speaking in front of people."

"But you have to talk about it."

"Oh, I have no problem talking one-on-one," she says. "I just hate talking in front of big crowds. Me da pánico."

"You won't panic, Mom," I tell her. "It's going to be awesome."

"I hope so. It'll be a game changer."

I hear the bus rounding the corner, rumbling like a grumpy yellow rhino that hasn't had coffee yet. Would a rhino drink café con leche? Probably. I wish I had a remote control that could pause the bus for a moment longer.

"It's time to go, mi amor." Mom gets up and hugs me.

"I'm going to miss you," I tell her. Her curls wrap around

my shoulders like a dark rain cloud that blocks out the sun and cools the sky.

"I'll call when I land," she says, kissing my forehead. "And you call me for *anything*. Okay?"

"I will," I say, getting up and heading to the door.

Abuela comes back into the dining room and hands me a waffle wrapped in a napkin. The syrup drips onto the napkin and the paper sticks to the waffle. I try to peel it off, but the syrup has already glued it in place.

"Tienes que desayunar más," Abuela says.

"Ya comí, Abuela," I reply, showing her my mostly eaten toast.

She shakes her head. "Pero that tiny piece of bread and that green milkshake aren't enough," she says. "You have to have a full stomach at school, Emilia Rosa."

Mom steps in and takes the waffle out of my hand.

"Aurelia," Mom says. "We talked about this, remember? Her doctor suggested eliminating sugar to see what effect it has on her inattentiveness."

"And the café con leche you gave her this morning? That has sugar."

"It has almond milk and a tiny bit of agave in it."

Abuela shakes her head, then lets out a humph before taking the waffle from my mom. "Whoever heard of café con leche with *agave*?" she mutters loudly enough for both of us to hear.

Mom steps around her to hug me one more time. "Don't let her get to you," she whispers. Abuela frowns. Mom kisses me on the nose and playfully pats my side. "Love you, baby."

"Love you too, Mom," I say, heading outside. "Have a good trip."

"Thanks, mi amor."

"Bye, Abuela," I say, quickly pecking her on the cheek and grabbing my backpack.

"Have a good day, mi'ja," she responds.

The bus is already in front of our house when I step outside. Its doors swing open, and I turn back to look at Mom one more time.

Abuela calls out and rushes to the bus before I get on. She holds my head, tucks a few loose strands of hair behind my ears, and tightens my bow.

"Perfect," she says.

I think about taking a deep breath, but I just get on the bus.

It feels like my whole life is changing. Like everything that's normal is becoming the opposite. We've been like this for so long—me, Mom, and Abuela. Now that Mom is leaving and Dad is coming home—with Abuela probably in charge—I'm not sure what to expect.

Each Tiny Spark

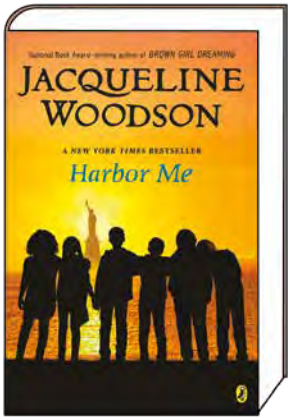
by Pablo Cartaya

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?

Cut or tear to share!



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Harbor Me

by Jaqueline Woodson

Jacqueline Woodson's first middle grade novel since National Book Award winner *Brown Girl Dreaming* celebrates the healing that can occur when a group of students share their stories.

It all starts when six kids have to meet for a weekly chat—by themselves, with no adults to listen in. There, in the room they soon dub the ARTT Room (short for "A Room to Talk"), they discover it's safe to talk about what's bothering them—everything from Esteban's father's deportation and Haley's father's incarceration to Amari's fears of racial profiling and Ashton's adjustment to his changing family fortunes. When the six are together, they can express the feelings and fears they have to hide from the rest of the world. And together, they can grow braver and more ready for the rest of their lives.

Ms. Laverne said every day we should ask ourselves, 'If the worst thing in the world happened, would I help protect someone else? Would I let myself be a harbor for someone who needs it?' Then she said, 'I want each of you to say to the other: I will harbor you.'

I will harbor you.

1

We think they took my papi.

It's over now. Or maybe it isn't. Maybe, even as I sit on my bed in the dying light of the late afternoon, it's beginning again. Maybe Ms. Laverne is looking over the new class list, her finger moving down the row of names. *Maybe her,* she is thinking. *And him. And her.* But it won't be the same. It won't ever be the six of us together again.

We think they took my papi.

My uncle is a musician and a storyteller. He says the hardest part of telling a story is finding the beginning. I've pulled the voice recorder from my closet and have it sitting on the middle of my bed now. When I press play, Esteban's voice fills my room. It is scratchy and faraway-sounding, but still, Esteban is here again and all of us

are sitting in our small circle in a place we called the ARTT room.

Nobody knows where he's at.

Outside, a blue jay perches on the edge of a branch. Ailanthus tree. Tree of Heaven. Ms. Laverne taught us that. It's the same tree the girl in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* saw from her fire escape. The thing about that tree was it could grow anywhere. And keep growing. And that was the *metaphor*: that even when things got really hard for everyone in that story—even when the dad died and the mom had to scrub more and more floors to make money, even when the kids didn't have anything to eat for days and the apartment was freezing—the tree kept growing. The main character, her name was Francie—she was like that tree. Ms. Laverne said that all of us—Esteban, Tiago, Holly, Amari, Ashton and even me—we're like that tree too.

My uncle is moving out tomorrow. He's really the only parent I've ever known. He says, *This is a beginning.* He says, *Now you'll have two houses to go to.* He says, *You're twelve now, Haley. You're ready.*

But I'm not ready.

This afternoon, I miss everything.

I miss my uncle even though he is upstairs packing. I miss the ARTT room, I miss Holly and Amari arguing

and Ashton pushing his hair away from his forehead. This afternoon, I miss Tiago's dreams of the sea and Esteban's poems and all the stories we finally trusted each other enough to tell. I miss the beginning of our story together. And the deep middle of it.

Once there were six of us. Once we circled around each other, and listened. Or maybe what matters most is that we were heard.

Downstairs, my father is playing the piano—soft, sad notes floating up from the living room. The piano is old—found on the street a few blocks away the day my father moved back home. My father, uncle and three other men lifted it up the stairs, then had to remove the door to get it inside. It's an upright—scratched wood and yellowing keys. My father took a whole day tuning it, and now the notes move through the house, dipping down at the end like tears. Rising up like prayer. Upstairs, I can hear my uncle moving from dresser to bed and back again and I know he is neatly folding shirts and sweaters into his suitcase. Most of his stuff is already downstairs. Boxes line the hall by the front door. His favorite chair is draped with a blanket. His guitars are stacked in their cases beside it. Tomorrow, he will move to Manhattan and start his new life. *I'll be the bachelor I was always meant to be,* he said. Then, seeing the look on my face I failed at

hiding, he added—*And I'll be back every single Sunday to spend time with my most favorite person in the world.*

I don't remember a life without my uncle in it.

In two weeks, I'll begin seventh grade. My best friend, Holly, will be there. But there will be holes where Ashton, Amari, Tiago and Esteban once were.

We think they took my papi.

I play the first words of Esteban's story over and over as my father's song lifts up to my room, as my uncle packs above me, as the blue jay perches in the Ailanthus tree. As the world keeps on spinning.

2

That first week of September, the rain wouldn't stop. Rivers ran down along the curbs, and at the corner near our school, cars had stalled in the middle of the huge pools of rainwater. Even though it was still warm outside, our classroom felt damp and a little bit cold. Some of the kids were playing with those spinner things. One boy, whose name I forget, had his head down on his desk. I remember his dark curls, the way they fell over his arm. For some reason those curls spiraling over his arm and down onto the scratched-up desk made me sadder than anything. There were eight of us then. Our small class had come together because the school wanted to try something new: Could they put eight kids together in a room with one teacher and make something amazing? Eight *special* kids.

Even though they didn't say it, we knew there was something different about us. We had all been in the big classrooms before, and our learning felt like a race we were losing while the other kids sped ahead. We made believe we didn't care that we learned differently, but we knew we did. And the school knew we did. The school knew we got laughed at and teased in the big yard and that some days we faked stomachaches and sore throats to stay home. It was only September, so no one knew if this experiment would work. But our teacher, Ms. Laverne, was tall and soft-spoken and patient. We loved her immediately. And the school itself had huge windows and brightly colored walls. My uncle said it was one of the best schools in the city. I had been there with Holly since first grade, so I didn't really have any other schools to compare it to. But if nice teachers and rooms filled with lots of windows made something "the best," then I guess it was true.

By the end of that rainy week, the boy with the curls had moved away and another girl's mom had come in and fussed about her daughter being smarter than *those children* while Ms. Laverne shushed her and guided her and her daughter gently out of the room. The girl looked like she wanted to sink into the floor and disappear. We never saw her again, but sometimes I wonder what it

would have been like if she had gotten a chance to be a part of the ARTT room, if she'd gotten to hear what we heard, see what we saw. After she and the curly-haired boy left, only Ms. Laverne and the six of us remained.

An hour after class started on that Friday, Esteban came in, his head down, his hair slicked wet against his forehead, his Yankees cap dripping with rain. He walked straight to his seat without looking at the rest of us. I watched him sink into his seat so sadly and heavily, it felt like the whole room shivered. His jacket was way too big for him, the shoulders hanging down his arms, the sleeves falling over his hands. I didn't know Esteban yet. I didn't know anyone but Holly, really. But I wanted to go over to him, hug him hard. I didn't care how dripping wet he was. No one should ever have to look that sad.

Do you have a late pass for me, Esteban? Ms. Laverne asked. She was standing at the front of the room, her arm stretched out toward the smart board. I don't remember what was on it, maybe a globe. Our tiny group that year was a fifth/sixth grade class—this too was a school experiment.

Is everything okay? Ms. Laverne's dark brown face was crisscrossed with worry.

Esteban shook his head. *I don't have a pass,* he said, his voice breaking. *We think they took my papi. Nobody*

knows where he's at. He put his head down on his desk, his face turned toward the window.

Ms. Laverne went over to Esteban's desk and bent toward him, her hand on his back. They spoke softly to each other. Maybe they spoke for five minutes. Maybe it was an hour, I don't remember. That was a long time ago. So much can change in a minute, an hour, a year.

3

While Ms. Laverne talked to Esteban about his father that morning, I thought about mine. I thought about handcuffs. I thought about fathers being taken away. I thought about uncles coming to the rescue and mothers gone.

The memory is mostly shadows now—my father's pale hands hanging from silver handcuffs. The cops pushing his head down into the police car. My uncle coming to me and lifting me up into his arms. I was three years old.

When my uncle first came to live with me, I was afraid. It was this vague fear around the edges of myself. Whenever I got real quiet in class, Ms. Laverne knew why. As I watched Esteban that morning, I felt it, the

fear coming around the corner, finding me. Finding both of us.

I stared over at him. I wanted to give Esteban the *same* sign—my pinky pointing toward him while my thumb pointed toward me. I wanted to say, *I know that thing, Esteban. I've looked out the window that same way.*

Ms. Laverne turned from Esteban and told us to read quietly to ourselves. We took our books from our bags and opened them, but I don't know if any of us read a single word. The whole world felt wide open suddenly. Like it wanted to swallow us. I heard him tell Ms. Laverne, *I'm scared. I'm so, so scared.*

When the lunch bell rang, Esteban stayed behind. I wanted to touch his shoulder as I walked out and say, *It won't always feel like the first day. It won't always feel this bad.* But I didn't. I let the words hang in my throat until Holly grabbed my hand and pulled me down the hall with her.

Behind us, I heard Amari say, *E, what's going on? Talk to me, bruh.*

4

If there's one thing I *do* remember as clear as if it happened an hour ago, it's the afternoon when Ms. Laverne said to us, *Put down your pencils and come with me.* It was the end of September and we had been taking a spelling test. Esteban had been absent for days, and when he finally returned, Ms. Laverne asked him if he was up to doing some work and he nodded.

It helps me forget for a little while, he said.

Forget what? Amari asked.

That nobody knows where they took him. And now we're packing up everything, Esteban said. *Because if they took him, maybe they're going to take us too.*

I turned back to my test. I didn't want to think about fathers. Mine had been in prison for eight years by then.

In the last letter we'd gotten, he said he wasn't sure what would happen with his parole. If he got it, he didn't know exactly when he'd be coming home. I remember zero about living with him. Every good thing that happened had happened with my uncle. I couldn't imagine a different life. Didn't want to imagine it. Not for me. Not for anyone.

I was stuck on the word *holiday*. Did it have one *l* or two? My spelling had always been bad, but in Ms. Laverne's class it didn't matter so much because we were all at different levels in one thing or another. *The words you miss just tell me what you don't yet know,* Ms. Laverne always said. *It says nothing about who you are.* For some reason that made me feel better. I was eleven years old. What eleven-year-old didn't know how to spell *holliday*?

Put down your pencils and come with me.

The six of us stood up. Our school uniforms were white shirts and dark blue pants or skirts. We could wear any jackets, shoes and tights we wanted. I had worn blue-and-white-striped tights that day. Holly's tights had red stars on them. When we stood next to each other in the school yard that morning, our stars and stripes echoed the flag waving from the pole above us. We had spent the minutes before the bell rang dancing around it while

Holly sang that old song about having a hammer, *I'd hammer out danger, I'd hammer out a warning . . .*

We stood next to our desks and waited for Ms. Laverne to tell us what to do next. Amari pulled his hoodie over his head, then quickly pulled it off again, the way he sometimes did when he was nervous. Amari was beautiful. His skin was so dark, you could almost see the color blue running beneath it. His eyes were dark too. Dark like there was smoke behind his pupils. Dark and serious and . . . infinite. In that fifth/sixth grade class, I didn't know how to say any of this. I wanted only to look at him. And look at him.

Take a picture, it lasts longer, Amari said to me in such a cranky way, it almost brought me to tears. Ashton smirked, then pushed his hair away from his forehead and held his hand there.

She doesn't want a picture of you, Holly said. *Bad enough we have to look at you five days a week.* She had left her desk and was heading over to the classroom library.

Holly, back to your desk, Ms. Laverne said. *I want you all to take your books. You won't be coming back here today.*

We all gathered our stuff and followed her into the hallway.

Ms. Laverne took out her phone and said, *Smile, people.* In the photo, Holly and I have our fingers linked together, our tights looking crazier than anything. Amari has his hood halfway on and halfway off, and Tiago, Esteban and Ashton are all looking away from the camera. The picture is taped to my refrigerator now. We all look so young in it, our cheeks puffing out with baby fat, our uniform shirts untucked, Tiago's sneakers untied.

We walked down the hall behind Ms. Laverne, her heels softly clicking. I thought about how maybe one day I'd grow up to wear black shoes with small heels that clicked as I walked down a hall. And have students following behind who were a little bit in love with me.

Two small kids came running down the hall, but when they saw Ms. Laverne, they stopped and started walking so slowly, I almost laughed.

Esteban pulled his knapsack onto his shoulder and held it with both hands.

You okay, bro? Amari put his hand on Esteban's arm.

Nah, Esteban said. *Not really.*

Amari moved his arm over Esteban's shoulder. And kept it there.

5

When we got to Room 501, Ms. Laverne opened the door and held it for us. Nobody knew what to do, so we just stood there. The room was bright and smelled like it had just been cleaned with the same oil soap my uncle used on our floors. Back when me and Holly were in third grade, it had been the art room, but then someone gave our school enough money to open up a whole art studio in the basement, so now this was just a room we passed by sometimes and said to each other, *Remember when that used to be the art room?*

Welcome to Room 501, Ms. Laverne said.

Holly ran in ahead and the rest of us followed and looked around.

In the old art room, there were just a few of those

chairs with swing-up desks in a circle, a teacher's desk with no chair, a big clock on the wall and some little kid's ancient painting of a bright yellow sun thumbtacked to the closet door.

Esteban asked, *Are we getting transferred to a new class?* He put his knapsack down between his ankles and hugged himself.

Amari had taken his arm off Esteban's shoulder but was still standing close to him. When Esteban shivered, Amari put his arm back. I heard him whisper, *It's all good, bro. It's all good. Ms. Laverne's not taking us somewhere we don't want to be.*

Ms. Laverne sat on the edge of the teacher's desk and folded her arms. *Every Friday, from now until the end of the school year, the six of you will leave my classroom at two p.m. and come into Room 501. You'll sit in this circle and you'll talk. When the bell rings at three, you're free to go home.*

Why can't we just talk in our regular classroom? Holly asked, hopping up onto the teacher's desk. *I mean, in your classroom.*

Our regular classroom wasn't regular. We knew that. But still.

Down from there, please, Holly. Ms. Laverne waited for Holly to jump off again before she continued. *I don't*

want to hear what you have to say to each other. This is your time. Your world. Your room.

Sounds like you're trying to get an early break from us, Holly said. *Give yourself your own kind of half day.*

Ms. Laverne laughed. *One day, Holly, your brain will be very useful to you.*

Holly looked like she wasn't sure if our teacher was complimenting her.

What I'm trying to do is give you the space to talk about the things kids talk about when no grown-ups are around. Don't you all have a world you want to be in that doesn't have people who look like me in it?

Nope, Amari said.

Yeah, Ashton said. *Not really.*

We like being with you, I added. *In the other room.*

You like what you know, Ms. Laverne said. *You like what's familiar.*

None of us said anything. She was right. What was wrong with liking familiar things?

Nothing's wrong with that, Ms. Laverne said, being a teacher/mind reader. *But what's unfamiliar shouldn't be scary. And it shouldn't be avoided either.*

But I don't know what we're even supposed to talk about, Tiago said. *Like, schoolwork and stuff? And to who?*

Schoolwork, toys, TV shows, me, yourselves—anything you want to talk about. To each other. And it's to whom*, Tiago.*

To whom, Tiago said to himself like he was practicing it. *To whom.*

I think any other bunch of kids would have started happy-dancing and acting crazy because there weren't going to be any grown-ups around. But we weren't any other kids.

I heard Amari say *that's stupid* so quietly that I wondered if I was hearing things. Then he said, *We could be talking in class if we wanted to be talking. You trying to change the art room into the A-R-T-T room—A Room To Talk.*

That's tight, Ashton said. He and Amari pounded fists. *I like that.*

Ms. Laverne clapped once and pointed at Amari. *You. Are. Brilliant.*

I could have come up with that. Holly rolled her eyes. *I could have added an* R *and thrown an acronym out there.* She said *acronym* loudly, making sure Ms. Laverne heard.

Nice use of the word, Holly, Ms. Laverne said. *Okay, so because the art room is now the A-R-T-T room, no one gets in trouble for talking here. You get in trouble*

for taking out your phone. You get in trouble for being disrespectful—

How're you gonna know if you're not in here with us? Amari asked her.

I'll know.

And we all knew she was telling the truth. Teachers knew things. That's all there was to it.

Well, what if I don't have anything to say to anybody? Amari asked.

Ms. Laverne laughed again. *Since when do you not have anything to say, Amari?* She shook her head and waved her hand to include all of us. *I can't believe you all are so resistant. I'm giving you an* hour. *To chat! You get in trouble for this every single day. How many times do I have to say 'No talking'? Now I'm saying, 'Talk!'*

Amari tried to hide his smile but he didn't do a great job of it. *Okay . . . I'm vibing it. The old art room is the new A-R-T-T room, y'all.*

And I bet you can draw in here too, if you want, Ashton said to him.

Ms. Laverne nodded. *Draw, talk. And yes, Amari—the A-R-T-T room is beyond clever.*

Like I said, anybody could have thought of that, Holly said.

Yeah—but I see YOU didn't, Amari said.

And like I said, Ms. Laverne told us, *in this room we won't be unkind.*

She started it—

Doesn't matter, Amari.

I just want to get it straight, Ashton said. *So, school now ends at two o'clock on Fridays?*

He had pale white skin like my uncle, and hair that always fell into his eyes. Even as he asked, he was holding it back with his hand. Once Holly had said to him, *Just cut it already,* and his ears turned bright red. My own hair had always been bright red, but lately it had started getting darker and kinkier. If Holly's mother didn't braid it for me, I just pulled it back into a sloppy ponytail that frizzed all around my face.

Jeez, Ashton! Holly said. *That's not what she's saying. This is so not deep, people.*

I just don't really understand why we're going into another room, Ashton said, *by ourselves.*

I think, looking back on that day now, that's the line that will always stay with me—*another room, by ourselves.* How many other rooms by ourselves have we walked into since that day—even if they weren't real rooms and we didn't know that's what we were doing?

I stood there thinking about my father. In six months or a year—I didn't know exactly when—I'd be walking into another room, the one where my father lived with me. And as I stood there, Esteban was inside the room where he didn't know where his dad was. He glanced at me. That day, no one but Holly knew that my dad was in prison. I felt like I was betraying Esteban. Like I should have been standing next to him, saying, *Hey, it's gonna be okay.* But I couldn't. I couldn't tell the truth about my dad to help him. So I looked down at my skirt and thought about rooms. I wondered about Tiago, Holly, Amari and Ashton—what were the rooms for them? What did they hide inside those rooms? Another room, I thought. We are always entering another room.

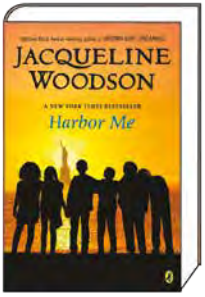
That day, Ms. Laverne pushed us out—from the Familiar to the Unfamiliar.

It felt like an hour passed as she waited for us to say something. I looked at the clock. The second hand made an echoing sound when it ticked. It was five minutes past two. Fifty-five minutes left.

You can do this, Ashton. You all can do this, Ms. Laverne finally said. And with that, she walked away. With that, she let us go.

Harbor Me

by Jacqueline Woodson



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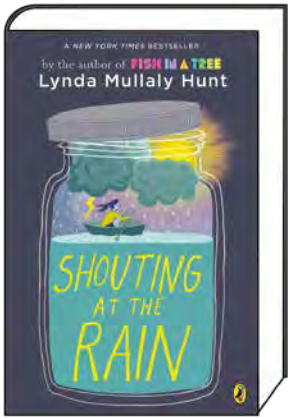

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Shouting at the Rain
by Lynda Mullaly Hunt

From the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Fish in a Tree* comes a compelling story about perspective and learning to love the family you have.

Delsie loves tracking the weather—lately, though, it seems the squalls are in her own life. She's always lived with her kindhearted Grammy, but now she's looking at their life with new eyes and wishing she could have a "regular family." Delsie observes other changes in the air, too—the most painful being a friend who's outgrown her. Luckily, she has neighbors with strong shoulders to support her, and Ronan, a new friend who is caring and courageous but also troubled by the losses he's endured. As Ronan and Delsie traipse around Cape Cod on their adventures, they both learn what it means to be angry versus sad, broken versus whole, and abandoned versus loved. And that, together, they can weather any storm.

Chapter 1

UNTIL NOW

There are two kinds of people. People who like surprises and people who don't.

I don't.

And yet here is Aimee Polloch, my friend since first grade, marching through our front door as loud as a summer crow. "Delsie. I have the *best* surprise."

Uh-oh.

"*So*," she begins, "you know that Michael and I tried out for the summer production at the Cape Playhouse, right?"

"Yeah?" I ask.

"Michael got a great part, but I . . . *I* got the lead! The *lead*! Can you *believe* it?" She goes dead serious. "Wait. *Autographs*. Do you think people will actually ask for them?"

"I think we'll have to get a red carpet leading up to your front door."

"This is *no* joke." She leans forward a bit. "Do you *know* how many famous people started acting at the playhouse?"

"I think you've mentioned it," I say, smiling.

After one giant step, she stands right in front of me. "I *really* need your help, though!"

"*My* help? Why would you need *my* help? You know I'd rather hang glide in a hailstorm than be in a play."

She shakes her head. "I don't need you *in* the play, Delsie. I just need you to help me with my part. The play is *Annie*," she says, wide-eyed.

"The hard-knock-life *Annie*? The movie we watched?"

She rolls her eyes. "It was a play *long* before it was a movie."

"Whatever, Aims. You know theater isn't my thing."

"Well, it's just that I really want to be . . ." She waves her hand in the air like a magician. "I want to be au-*then*-tic."

"So? I don't understand how I can help. Wouldn't Michael be better?"

"No. He can't help me. Not like *you* can. Michael has . . . a *family*."

I feel like I've tripped but haven't hit the ground yet.

"Tell me," she says. "What's it like . . . *really* like . . . to be an orphan?"

The ground seems to move.

She leans in. Talking. Talking and talking. Something about me being lucky while I just stand there caught in

between wanting to disappear and wanting to help her. I feel around for an answer to her question, but I have none.

I've thought about my mother, of course. I've wondered where she went to and where she's been. But I guess Aimee *is* right; I *was* abandoned . . . and I *am* an orphan. But is it dumb to say that I have never really thought about it like that?

Until now.

Chapter 2

THE BEST ONE YET

"Grammy!" I call, running down our stairs. "Are you almost ready?"

She's in her work uniform, hanging over her jigsaw puzzle. She presses a piece in. "I know you have ants in your pants because Brandy is back at Seaside," she says, standing. "No ants in my pants, though. Another season of cleaning all of those guest cottages." Her hand pats the side of my cheek. "Now, run and get our lunches from the fridge. And don't forget our favorite root beers."

I'm to the kitchen and back in three seconds. "Okay. Let's go!"

We slide into the car. As always, she makes a cross on the dashboard with her finger, looks up through the windshield at the sky, and says a prayer for the car to start. When it

does, she pats the dashboard again. "That's a good Darlin'. Starting for your ole Bridget."

She puts it in Drive. "You think it's weird I talk to the car?"

"Only if you think it answers," I say.

She coughs as she laughs. "You hung the moon, you know that?"

That's one of Grammy's best compliments.

At the first stop sign, she looks over at me. "You're like a tick about ready to pop," she says. "Excited to see Brandy, I know."

"I am *so* excited. But a tick ready to pop? Gross . . . No . . . Ew."

"I'll never understand how a girl who loves tornadoes and hurricanes and floods could be scared of a little tick."

"The weather doesn't suck your blood," I say, expecting her to have a comeback, but she just shakes her head.

She flips her turn signal. "So, you talked to Brandy? She and her family staying for the summer as usual?"

"Yeah. She and her mom, anyway."

"Oh my *good*ness, I remember the day you two first met," Grammy says, falling back against the car seat. "Her mom was sweet enough to watch you on a day I had no choice but to bring you along. And you and Brandy, as little as you were, sat side by side in one of those big Adirondack chairs. You've been like peanut butter and jelly ever since."

I laugh. "Grammy. Who wants to be like peanut butter and jelly? That never ends well. For them, anyway."

Grammy shakes her head again as she pulls into a parking spot, and I turn. "Can I go?"

"Yes, but for heaven's sake, look both ways."

As soon as my foot hits the red sidewalk leading into Seaside, I hear Brandy. "Dels!" she calls as she leaps from a picnic table. The place already reeks like sunscreen and burning charcoal, even though it's barely nine o'clock. Summer has officially arrived.

I race across the grass, and we hug and jump around. "Oh my gosh! How are you?" she asks. "I'm soooo happy to see you." Then she steps back. "Wow, Dels. You got tall this year."

"I did?" And then I notice that Brandy looks much older than me, with makeup, a purse, and the kind of clothes you buy in little stores instead of big ones. I feel a little funny about my faded Boston Marathon T-shirt even though it was the greatest tag sale find of the summer last year. But Brandy is smiling, and I am happy to see her.

"I've already pulled out our collecting pails," she says, and that feeling in my stomach melts away. She's the old Brandy.

Since kindergarten, we have collected rocks and shells each summer and glued and painted them to make sculptures.

"But first," I say, pulling at her sleeve, "let's check on the house."

Underneath a huge group of flowering bushes, there is a small stone house that we made the summer before second grade, hoping fairies would move in. That was five summers ago. Now we just check on it first thing.

I drop to my knees and push the branches aside. The house isn't there.

"Where is it?" Brandy asks, crouching next to me.

"I don't know. You think someone took it?"

She laughs. "Well, it wasn't a mobile home, so yeah. Unless the fairies finally showed." She takes a step away.

I crawl through nearby bushes to look for it.

"C'mon," she says. "Let's just head down to the beach."

"Don't you care?" I ask.

"I mean, I wish it were there, Dels, but some little kids probably found it. *So, whatever.*" She tugs at my sleeve. "C'mon. Let's go down to the beach. I have a tan to work on."

A tan? Since when does she care about a tan? I follow, but the little voice that my neighbor Henry always warns me not to ignore—the one people hear in times of danger or when they're about to do something dumb—tells me a cold front is on the horizon. The air is shifting. I'm upset that the house is gone, but I'm mostly worried that Brandy couldn't care less.

We grab the pails, and when she runs, I do, too. The

Fiesters have an old red pail and a blue pail that Mrs. Fiester and her brother used on the Cape a million years ago. They're made of scratched-up metal with rust along the bottom edges. We use one pail for shells and one for rocks so that the shells don't get broken.

"Okay," she says. "Rocks or shells?"

"You choose." I smile, just happy to be back on Seagull Beach with Brandy. I miss her the rest of the year. We chat once in a while, but it isn't the same. We can't wait until her mother and my grammy let us have our own phones. Although I think I am most excited about the app that tracks global lightning strikes.

We spend the morning hanging out on the jetties, collecting things, and having a couple of splash fights with our feet. Finally, we get back to the picnic tables and spread everything out and talk about what sculptures we'll make.

Brandy sorts the rocks by size. "So, don't you think this is babyish to still do?"

"Not if we like it."

"Yeah . . . I guess. And at least no one can see us."

I look up at her. "And if they do, who *cares*?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right," she says.

But I know Brandy. Her mouth may agree, but her brain is thinking something totally different.

Chapter 3

MADRE SEAL

Brandy's mom leans outside and calls to her. "Honey! We have to leave in a few minutes for our appointments."

Brandy yells okay, and I feel sorry for her. "Bummer," I say. "You going to the dentist or something?"

She smiles. "No, my mom and I are getting mani-pedis."

My next-door neighbor Esme gets those, so I know what they are, but I've never had one. It's more likely that Grammy would take me out on a raft in the middle of a nor'easter.

Brandy waves as they go, and I have to swallow an empty feeling I haven't known before as they disappear around the corner.

I'm an orphan. Like Aimee says. No mother. No father.

I never used to think about this. And I never used to worry, either. But now that I've started to, I wonder what

I'd do if something happened to Grammy. Would Henry and Esme take me? Even though they have their own girl?

Stuffing my hands in my pockets, I find Grammy to tell her I'm going for a run on the beach and I'll meet her at home.

"You be careful, now," she says, and she kisses her palm and pretends to blow it in my direction. Since I was little, I've always play-slapped my own face as if getting hit with kisses. But I can't manage it today.

On the beach I walk at the water's edge, watching small stones roll back and forth with the waves. The same way Aimee's orphan question rolls back and forth in my head.

But then . . . I come across something on the beach I never expected.

At first, I think it might be dead, but its dark eyes follow me as I walk in front of it. It looks so unnatural lying on the sand with no legs, looking like it wants to walk. To run, even.

The beach patrol officer is a small woman with a big voice. "Now, stand back!" she shouts to the gathering crowd. "The seal pup is frightened."

I can tell that most of these people are tourists, with their sea of Cape Cod T-shirts bought from that famous "buy one, get twelve free" place. A true Caper wouldn't be caught dead wearing one of those.

People won't move fast enough for the officer. Leaning forward. Taking pictures. "Honey," a mom says to her daughter in a loud whisper. "Just take a few steps closer to the seal and smile."

The officer becomes a wall, stepping into the line of people with her arms out like she can fly. "No, ma'am. Move back now." I admire how she sounds nice but says *don't mess with me* at the same time.

The line moves, but my feet step forward without my say-so. The seal is small. Is it sick? Is it going to die? The officer eyes me, and I step back with the others.

A boy nearby speaks Spanish. I don't remember much Spanish from school, but he uses the word *madre*. *That,* I remember, is "mother."

The officer sticks wooden stakes into the sand and ties neon tape around each to create a giant square of bright tape around the seal. "This is very common," she says. "A mother will sometimes leave her pup on the beach while she hunts. The baby is left here on the sand. Safe. Away from the great whites who hunt *them* each summer."

Relief washes over me. The seal pup is okay.

I look toward the rolling waves and wonder where Madre Seal is. How does she remember where she's left her baby on this beach that stretches all along the southern coast of Cape Cod?

"Please do not cross the tape," the officer calls to the crowd. "If Mom sees people too close to her baby, she may leave her behind."

My mind gets stuck on the two words *her baby*. Not *the* baby or *a* baby but *her* baby.

The officer turns and seems to speak only to me. "But don't worry. The mom always comes back."

I look toward the ocean. If only that were true.

• • •

I walk down the beach away from all the people because they make me feel squirrely. And all the way down Seagull Beach, I drag those thoughts of the abandoned pup.

And I wonder if it wonders.

The wet sand squishes up between my toes as I walk. But soon the quietness is interrupted by excited voices carried on the wind. I turn to see that the officer has moved everyone much farther away from the neon tape. All of the noise and pointing toward the ocean tells me there is something to see, so I sprint back, running where the water meets the sand. When I get close enough, I see what looks like a black ball floating in the water. The head of Madre Seal.

The baby seal scurries toward the sea like a fat black inchworm. Under the neon tape. Toward the waves. In the water, Madre Seal swims back and forth, back and forth, and I can feel her worry about all of these people near her baby. But still . . . she is there.

There.

I am surprised at how relieved I am to see her. As the baby hits the water, Madre Seal leaps and dives. Leaps and dives.

And then the most surprising thing happens. I start to cry. Not the kind of cry that you can squelch and swallow but the kind where your whole body knows how you feel. And it's right then that I realize that when people say you can't miss something you've never known . . . Well, that simply isn't true.

Chapter 4

BROKEN

I run barefoot from the sandy beach, in and out of the small neighborhoods, all the way to our house. I push open the front door and stumble in.

Grammy's watching *The Price Is Right* and leans to the side to look around me when I plant myself in front of the TV.

"Grammy. I have to ask you something."

"Oh my goodness, honey bunch. Are you *ever* going to wear shoes?" she asks, shaking her head. "Go get the cream and bandages and let me fix that for you."

I look down and see my foot is bleeding. I hadn't even noticed I'd cut it.

"*Grammy,*" I say, the shrillness of my voice startling me. "Please. *Please* tell me about my mom. I know you don't like to talk about her. But I need to know what she was like.

Did she sound like *me*? Was she a runner? Did she love root beer?"

Grammy looks like the time she got a shock from plugging in the toaster.

"And who is my dad? What's his name?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, baby. I would tell you if I knew, but Mellie never told me."

That hurts.

"Well, then," I ask, stepping forward, "why did she go? Tell me the *truth* about my mom."

"Oh, Delsie. Why do you want to talk about all that? There's no reason to stir up sad things."

"I know you don't like to talk about her, but I just don't understand why."

"The same reason I don't drink coffee," Grammy says. "Because it hurts my stomach and it makes me feel all terrible inside, and *why* would I do anything that makes me feel like *that*?"

"I know it makes you sad to talk about her. I know. But I think if I just *knew* stuff, it would be better. *Not* knowing is the worst feeling in the world. Not knowing your mom is like not knowing your birthday. Everyone should know that."

Sadness flashes across her face and then she pats the couch next to her. "Come sit with your ole grammy. Let's find out who'll win the Showcase Showdown. A lady bid on

two cars. *Two!*" She holds up two fingers. She's wide-eyed and smiling, and I know I won't learn anything about my mother.

"Later," I say, walking past her.

I have no intention of going back, and I know she won't come looking during a Showcase Showdown unless the house is on fire. And even that's questionable.

My bedroom door squeaks as it closes. I sit on my bed and reach for the picture of my mother in a frame covered in sweet candy pieces and glitter. A picture I have said good night to since Papa Joseph taught me to pray.

My mind whirls like a storm system. Questions break and bruise. Smash and spin.

And I can't shake seeing the seal and wondering how it can be so much luckier than me. My fingertips turn white from squeezing the frame too hard. The words "it's not *fair*" rise up and out of me, and glass bounces on the floor when I throw the picture. And looking at the pieces, I am shattered, too.

The broken pieces remind me of Grammy's puzzles. Although I've never understood the point of puzzles—and why you'd sit for hours trying to put a picture that's been broken into hundreds of pieces back together. Plus, when you have the cover, you know exactly what you'll get in the end.

I guess I am sort of like a pile of puzzle pieces that have been dumped on the floor. But I can't put the pieces

together because I don't know what the picture on the box is. I don't know who I am—or how many pieces I might be missing. And since Aimee shone a light on something that was in front of me all this time, it makes me wonder what else I'm not seeing.

Looking at the broken pieces, I feel broken, too.

Shouting at the Rain

by Lynda Mullaly Hunt

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