

I'm just a ~~white~~ girl

I'm just a ~~black~~ girl

I'm just a ~~yellow~~ girl

I'm just a ~~green~~ girl

I'm just a ~~purple~~ girl

I'm Just Me

M.G. Higgins

CHAPTER 1

Nasveen

I knock on my brother's door. His rap music is so loud, I'm sure he can't hear me. I pound louder. "Jaffar! Open up!"

The volume goes down. He opens his door a crack and glares at me. "What?"

I clear my throat. He never lets me forget that he's older than me. That I'm just his little sister. "I need your help," I say.

He glances at the pamphlets I'm holding. "College brochures? You're only a junior."

"I know. I'm starting early."

He rolls his eyes. "Of course you are."

“I don't have a clue where to go or how to apply.”

“Okay.” He sighs. “Come in.” He takes the pamphlets from me. Shakes his head as he glances at the first cover. “Harvard? No way.”

“Why not?”

He fingers through the rest. “Cal Tech? MIT? Stanford? Nasreen, these are all top universities.”

“So?”

“So our parents aren't rich.”

“Mr. Clarke said I can apply for scholarships.”

“I applied for scholarships and where am I going?”

“But you want to be an accountant. State college is perfect for you.”

“Oh, that's right,” he says. “You're the brains in the family.” He shoves the brochures back at me.

“I just want your advice.”

“And who advised me? No one. Because I’m the oldest and did it myself. Go online and figure it out.” He turns his music up.

I leave, closing the door behind me.

Back in my bedroom, I set the brochures on my desk. I think about asking my parents. But they know nothing about American colleges. As I sink into my beanbag chair, I imagine all the kids at school whose parents will be helping them decide which colleges to apply to. Parents who aren’t from Pakistan and get confused by American rules and language.

Taking a deep breath, I pull my calculus book onto my lap. I enter a few numbers into my graphing calculator and try to ignore Jaffar’s loud music thumping through our shared wall.

By ten o’clock, my homework is

finished. I wish I had more. I start thinking about school tomorrow. The familiar knot ties in my stomach.

Mom pokes her head around my door. "It's time for bed, Nasreen," she says in Punjabi.

"I know," I mutter back in English.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

She stares at me a moment. Then she says, "Good night," closing my door.

My parents have a hard enough time just getting by in this country. I decided a long time ago I wouldn't be one of the things they had to worry about. Just a year and a half. A year and a half and I won't have to deal with the students at Arondale High School anymore.

It's a little too early when I get to the bus stop. I lean against a tree, away from the others, trying to make myself invisible.

When the bus pulls up, I stand at the back of the crowd, my jaw tight, my eyes lowered. Guys jostle and shove each other as they get on.

We're one of the first stops. That's good because I can always find an empty seat. Not so good because it's twenty more minutes until we get to school.

The bus starts moving. From the back seat, Samantha shouts, "Hey, I just figured out why she wears that stupid scarf!"

"Why?" her friend Melody asks, setting her up.

"To protect her head from bird poop. I wish *I* had one."

They laugh.

The bus driver glares at them in the rearview mirror and shakes her head. Samantha and her friends won't say anything else, or they'll get written up. I shrink into my seat anyway. At the next stop, Kyle Spencer sits behind me. My

shoulders rise protectively around my neck.

“Hi, Nasty Nasreen,” he whispers through my *hijab*. I lean away from him, curling my fingers into fists. I review math equations in my head.

At the next stop, someone sits next to me. No one *ever* shares my seat. Great. What do I have to put up with now?

CHAPTER 2

Mia

I wake up in the middle of the night sweating. It's so hot in here! My bed is layered with three blankets and a quilt. I throw the quilt off. Jump up and pull back the frilly curtain covering the window. The window doesn't lift open like the one in Mom's apartment. It cranks. And the crank isn't budging. God, I'm about to suffocate! Then I notice a lever. Lift it up. Turn the crank until the window gapes wide. It's February in Iowa and freezing outside. I don't care. It feels good. I breathe in a lungful of crisp air.

As I crawl back into bed, I remember

the dream I had before I woke up. As always, Mom was in it. I don't remember the details, just the feeling. Fear. Lots of fear. Which makes sense, because I am afraid. Of starting a new school in the morning. Of living with my grandmother, who I hardly know. Of being sent to foster care if this doesn't work out.

Now the room is too cold. I curl into a ball and shiver instead of closing the window. Why bother? I'm not going back to sleep anyway.

At six o'clock I smell coffee. Then bacon. Damn, is she going to cook breakfast every morning? Saturday was pancakes. Yesterday, waffles. I get up. Shower. Stand in front of the closet. Whatever white kids wear in the burbs, I'm sure I don't have it. I throw on my ripped jeans, black T, gray hoodie.

I walk into the kitchen.

Gram smiles at me from the stove

where she's scrambling eggs. "Good morning, Mia. Have a seat." With her straight gray hair, pale skin, and blue eyes, it's hard to believe we're related.

The table is set with plates, silverware. Glasses of orange juice. Toast on a serving platter. Butter and jam. "You don't have to do all of this," I say as I pull out a chair. "I'm fine with a bowl of cereal."

"I know. I just...." She shrugs her shoulders. Her smile wavers, and she looks like she might cry. She turns back to the frying pan.

Wow. Awkward much?

She dishes up our plates with eggs. Sits across from me. Lowers her eyes and clasps her hands on the table. "Bless this food, O Lord. Bless this house and those who dwell within it. Amen."

"Amen," I repeat softly. I think that's what I'm supposed to say. Mom and I never said grace.

She sips her coffee. "Are you nervous about your first day of school?"

Duh. Of course I am. But I've noticed Gram is on the fragile side. I don't want to upset her. So I say, "A little."

"You'll do fine." She pats my hand. Gives me a reassuring smile. Her dimples remind me of Mom. I eat enough to be polite. Then I head to the bus stop. Gram pointed it out Saturday on our grand tour of Arondale.

I count eight other kids waiting at the corner. As soon as they realize I'm waiting with them, they stop talking and stare. I stand back a ways. Try to blend in with the scenery. The bus pulls up. I get on last. Taking a deep breath, I look down the aisle. I'm not used to school buses. But I rode a lot of public buses in Chicago, and I know better than to sit in the back. That's where all the bad crap happens.

All I see are white faces. Then, surprise, about four seats back I glance brown skin like mine, just a little lighter. She's wearing a blue headscarf that hides her hair and forehead. She's staring at her hands. I hope she's not saving the seat for a friend, because it looks like home to me.

I'm Just Me

"Who let you into the suburbs?"

Nasreen and Mia are two very different girls. Both stand out at Arondale High. Everyone gawks and makes assumptions about the Muslim girl with the headscarf and the new black girl—the only African American—in school.

Nasreen has learned to keep her head down. Mia is bold. She's not going to be pushed around. But the bullying escalates. The girls unite and come up with a bold plan to fight back. To regain some dignity. To turn the tables.



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