Onjali Q. Raúf



The food GREAT BANK HEIST

Illustrated by Elisa Paganelli

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For all tummies fighting daily
battles against hunger.

And every s/hero working
tirelessly to end those battles
once and for all.

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CHAPTER 1

Just One More Day ...

"Nelson, I'm hungry! I can't wait any more. Look – my tummy's gone in!"

I looked at my sister, Ashley, as she lifted up her T-shirt and sucked her tummy in just as hard as she could. She knew I hated it when she did that, because it looked horrible – as if her tummy was being sucked down a hole.

"All right, all right!" I said, putting down my pen and getting up from the living-room floor. I would have to finish my homework later.

I was hungry too. School dinners never filled me up any more. For some reason, the

dinner ladies always gave extra-small helpings on the days when the food was really nice – like fish finger and chips days. And was it just me, or were the fish fingers getting more skinny every week, as if all the fish in the sea were on a diet? Breakfast Club was still OK, but the cereal boxes felt like they were getting smaller too …

Ashley stomped into the kitchen with me, her ponytail swinging from side to side. She was hugging her favourite toy of the week. This week it was one of my old plastic cars, which she had decided to call Freddy. No one knew why.

She jumped up onto her favourite chair at the kitchen table, patted Freddy and then looked at me hopefully.

It was time again.

Time for me to play the Pretend Game.

The Pretend Game was when I had to pretend we had food left in the house even when we didn't.

I hated playing the Pretend Game. Out of all the games I had to play at home, it was the worst one. Especially when it was coming to the end of what Mum called "A Really Tricky Month". That's a month where the money Mum got from her job wasn't enough to pay for food as well as everything else we needed. But this month we were lucky. Someone had given Mum some vouchers, and I knew that tomorrow we would be heading down to the best Bank in the world to cash one of them in.

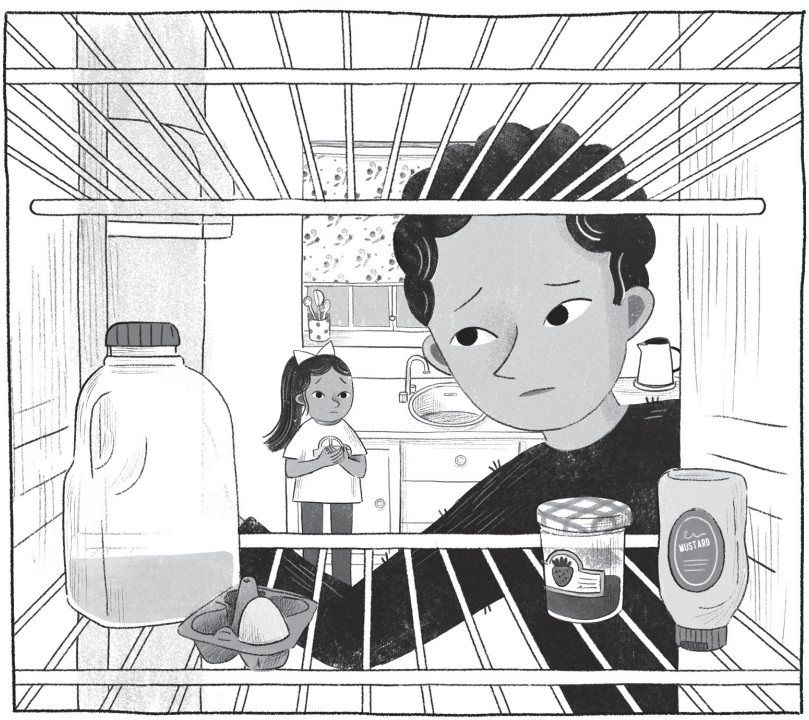
"Hmm," I said as I went over to the fridge and opened the door wide.

The fridge lit up with a warm yellow glow, as if it wanted to show us that it had something inside for us to eat. But the shelves were empty apart from half a jar of jam, a plastic bottle of

mustard that had been there since before I was born, one egg and a tiny bit of milk.

I could have boiled the egg for Ashley, but I knew Mum probably hadn't eaten all day at work, so I wanted to save it for her.

"Nope, nothing interesting in there," I said, closing the fridge door. "Let's try here!"



In the cupboard next to the fridge there were packets of spices and salt someone at the Bank had once given us but which we had never used, a bottle of oil and half a packet of cornflakes. I could have given Ashley cornflakes, but I needed to save the milk for when Mum came home and wanted a cup of tea.

I shut the door, then opened the next one, and the next one, and the next one. And the whole time I pretended there might be something inside to eat – even though I could have told Ashley what was in every single cupboard with my eyes closed.

I wished they were filled with food like my best friends Krish and Harriet's cupboards always were. When I grew up, I was definitely going to have cupboards like they had.

"We have to wait for Mum to get back," I said to Ashley. "She'll be here soon. Maybe she'll have picked something up on the way home."

"But I'm really, really, reeeeeeeally hungry," said Ashley, lifting up her T-shirt and getting ready to suck in her tummy again.

But before she could do it, I grabbed the toy car and ran off with it.

"FREDDY!" Ashley shouted, and ran after me. I didn't really want to play, but I knew if I kept Ashley busy, she'd forget she was hungry. At least for a few minutes.

As I held Freddy high in the air and watched Ashley jump up and down like a human rabbit to try to grab it, we heard the sound of keys in the door. Mum was back!

"Kids?"

"Mummy!" squealed Ashley. She forgot about Freddy, ran to Mum and hugged her tight.

Mum smiled as I poked my head out of the living-room door. I only looked after Ashley for

half an hour every day when we got home from school, but it always felt like ages.

"All right, all right, my little hugging machine," laughed Mum as she gave Ashley a kiss on the top of her head. I could tell Mum was tired, because her eyes were puffy. That meant she had had to work extra hard.

Mum worked as a nurse in a hospital, looking after lots of sick people who had just had serious operations. She had to take their temperatures and measure their heartbeats and make sure they had taken their medicines on time.

"Mum, I'm HUNGRY and Nelson hasn't given me or Freddy ANYTHING to eat," reported Ashley.

Mum looked over at me and gave her sad smile. I hated that smile. That was the other thing I wished for – even more than I wished for all the kitchen cupboards to be full. I wished I would never have to see Mum's sad smile ever

again. The one that tried to hide how bad she felt about us not having enough to eat – even when she worked so hard and hardly ate anything herself.

"Well, come on then, let's see what magic we can find," said Mum. She gave me a pat on the cheek and hugged Ashley as we walked into the kitchen.

After looking through the cupboards just like I had done a few minutes ago, Mum shook her head.

"Just one more day," she promised as she took out the egg, the tiny bit of milk, the jam and a tin of kidney beans that was right at the back of the bottom cupboard. "Then we can go to the Bank and get the things we need. But for now it's time to do a bit of magic with the things we have …"

As we all sat down to a dinner of a tiny omelette, a bowl of heated kidney beans and a



dessert of cornflakes dipped in jam, I felt my stomach swirl and growl. I crossed my arms on top of it to stop it from making any more noises and whispered to myself the thing that Mum had just said.

"Just one more day," I said as softly as I could. "And then you can have everything you need …"