

Evie and Maryam's Family Tree



**GUPPY
BOOKS**

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To Dad, who gave me the story, and Mom,
who gave me the pen

LONDON, UK

PRESENT DAY

1. Maryam

Maryam's right foot tapped like a woodpecker. 'Hassan! Hurry *up*!' she called to the bedroom.

She had just said it two minutes ago and was getting increasingly anxious. Hassan didn't answer, but Nani stirred in her battered, brown leather armchair, asleep in the living room. Nani woke up before dawn when Maryam's parents left to open their shop, but needed a snooze by the time Maryam got out of bed.

Maryam went into her comfort zone for when she was stressed: drawing noses. She sat at the dining room table, her elbows drawn close to her to avoid bumping into one of the many piles of envelopes, receipts and papers stacked on the embroidered tablecloth. She sketched an old man's nose, a long and dangly nose hair creeping out

of a nostril, but quickly erased it in disgust – too weird for anyone to see. The whole corner of the page now had noses of various shapes and sizes, from bulbous to pointed.

She pushed her glasses up on her own nose. Everywhere she looked in her small flat, there were *things*: papers, boxes, ring binders. She snaked her line of sight around these to the digital clock on the sideboard: 8.34 a.m.

It was the same most mornings: Maryam woke to the sound of Hassan snoring in the bunk bed below, got dressed, ate a slice of toast with butter and sugar, and then waited for her brother with her shoes on and her backpack zipped.

She breathed out with a huff and perfected a nostril.

The noses were strange, but not as strange as the paper they were doodled on. The yellowed, lined page was in a faded red folder that she'd discovered in a box in Nani's bedroom. She liked to rummage around in that room – often she'd find nothing but photos she'd already seen dozens of times, but sometimes she'd stumble upon long-forgotten treasures. The folder was entirely ordinary, with two pockets on the inside, and a label written in Urdu on the outside. But the page itself was full of complete nonsense. It read:

Uvri Jrwzr,

*Z yfgv pfl riv nvcc reu kyrk pfl'mv svve rscv kf uvtzgyvi
kyzj cvkkvi.*

The rest of the page was the same – full of unpronounceable words that barely looked like words at all. And behind that page, there were about ten more like it. It was, by far, the most mysterious thing she'd ever found in Nani's collection.

Maryam wished her Urdu was better, but although she could make out some of the letters on the cover, she couldn't get the words. What was strange was that the nonsense words on the pages in the folder were definitely not Urdu. They weren't written in Arabic letters like the label, but in the same letters used for English. She looked across the room at Nani, dozing peacefully. She'd ask her about it after school.

Finally, there was movement in the corridor.

'Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry,' Hassan said as he bounded out of their room. It wasn't completely his fault he always slept in. He was up late doing homework every night because he was trying really hard to do well in his exams. They were still three years away for Maryam, but already loomed large in her imagination. 'You ready?'

Maryam nodded and shoved the folder in her bag. She and Hassan stepped into the living room and each gave Nani a kiss on the forehead. She rolled over and said a sleepy, 'Bye bye, my loves,' with a wave.

Maryam skipped down the steps of their block of flats, running across the courtyard.

'Hassan, I am always, *always*, the latest one.'

'Yeah, but you're the cleverest one, so it doesn't matter!' He yanked on her plait and opened the gate.

Hassan said the last word 'maa-uh', dropping his Ts like he'd started doing recently. It riled Maryam up, but she couldn't stay annoyed at him when he was in a happy mood. They turned down the high street and marched with a stream of other children going to St Mary's Secondary School. Maryam recognised some of them – even knew their names – but she knew they either wouldn't know her name, or would pretend not to if she said hello.

'Hey, Hassan,' she said, almost jogging to keep up with him now. 'I found something weird in Nani's room.'

'Is that news?' he asked, without breaking his stride. 'There's all kinds of sus stuff in that room.'

'No, I mean, like, *interesting*,' she said. 'It's this folder

with a bunch of letters in it, but they're written in complete gibberish.'

'Um, that's called Urdu,' Hassan said.

'Shut up, I know what Urdu looks like,' Maryam said, frustrated. 'It's the same *letters* as English, but the words are completely unintelligible. Like, all consonants and no vowels.'

'Maybe Nani had a Russian pen pal,' Hassan replied. They were approaching the school gates, the stream of teenagers in school uniform getting thicker.

'I don't think it's Russian,' Maryam said. 'I'll show you at home.'

'Sure, see you later,' he said, and jogged off to the Year Ten door.

'See you,' she said, looking at the clock at the front of the school. 8.47. They were late. Maryam entered the main door, ran upstairs and staggered into the form room, panting for breath. Their teacher, Mr Whipple, sat at his desk while the class chatted loudly. *Whipple Wednesdays*. Regular form time was bad enough – Maryam always sat awkwardly, drawing on her own while the rest of the class joked and got increasingly out of control. But on

Wednesdays, they had to do group work, and it seemed that everyone had someone to pair up with but her.

She entered the room sheepishly and made eye contact with Mr Whipple. He raised his eyebrows disapprovingly and tapped his watch, but then went back to his computer. Her glasses were starting to fog up, and she lingered at the door, wiping them and then flapping her shirt to get some air in. The last thing she wanted was to be the weird, sweaty girl. Being the weird girl was enough.

She settled into her seat at her table, where the others – Ted, Leo and Evie – carried on chatting without acknowledging her. Ted was telling a story about how he'd stolen a bag of crisps from the corner shop while the others leaned in, asking questions in awe. Maryam looked down uncomfortably and thought about her mum, at the till of their shop, and her dad, unpacking boxes in the back room, counting every packet of crisps he put on the shelf.

'It was so easy,' Ted said with a smirk. 'If any of you lot are hungry, just let me know. I might make a little trip back there after school and help myself to a chocolate bar.'

She took out her book and a pen, chewing on the inside

of her cheek in anger. Maryam had noticed her parents' whispers and furrowed brows the night before – something wasn't going well, although she wasn't sure what. She thought of Ted, chipping away at what little they had. She didn't know what shop he'd stolen from, but it didn't matter. It might as well have been theirs.

'I'm gonna call you "Pincher" from now on,' Leo said. 'Just pinch some sweet chilli crisps for me next time, OK?'

Evie, sitting across from Maryam, rolled her eyes and said, 'You're so annoying.' Ted and Leo laughed, and Evie sat back in her seat and examined her fingernails.

The small bit of support took down a barrier in Maryam's brain. She drew in a sharp breath, held it in her chest and put her palms flat on the table as she let it out. She looked at Ted, her cheeks flushed.

'You actually are though,' she said seriously. She hadn't intended to insert herself into the conversation, her rage had just sort of taken over her brain and pushed the words out.

The three stopped talking and looked at each other.

'Scuse me?' Ted asked, chuckling.

'Annoying,' Maryam clarified. Now that she'd spoken

up, she figured she might as well keep going. ‘Do you not know that someone owns that shop, and you’re stealing from them?’

There was a beat of silence, and then Leo finally said, ‘Ooh, sick burn!’ in a mocking voice to Ted, who laughed, and then carried on talking. Maryam briefly caught Evie’s eye, but she quickly looked away and got up to speak to a friend at another table. Maryam felt partly relieved that it ended there, and partly disappointed that no one could even be bothered to get into an argument with her. She opened her mouth to say something else, but all of the options that ran through her head sounded weak.

Maryam looked down at the blank page in her book and started doodling, trying to move her brain on, trying to distract herself from what had just happened so the tears wouldn’t come. But they did, and she felt a fat drop roll under the frame of her glasses down her cheek, which she quickly wiped away. No one at the table seemed to notice, but she knew they’d be talking about her at break, doing mean impersonations. She pretended to need something from her bag, hiding her face under the table for a few moments so she could compose herself. She took out

the red folder and pulled out the page she’d been drawing on that morning.

Uvri Jrwzr,

*Z yfgv pfl riv nvcc reu kyrk pfl’mv svve rscv kf uvtzgyvi
kyzj cvkkvi.*

It looked like a greeting, maybe the opening of a letter. It was signed off as:

Pfli wizveu,

Brkyp

Brkyp seemed to be a name, but she’d never heard it before and couldn’t begin to pronounce it. What was this doing in Nani’s room? Nani would at least be able to read the Urdu label on the front of the folder – maybe that would give her a clue. Suddenly, Mr Whipple was clapping, and the class clapped back, and she shoved the folder back in her bag.