If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything.

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PRESENT DAY

1. Maryam

Maryam handed Evie a blue plastic bag and gestured at the rainbow-coloured sweets, crisps and chocolates. 'Go for it.'

Evie's eyes grew wide as she looked to the pile and then to Maryam. 'Wait, seriously? I can just . . . take anything?'

Maryam nodded proudly. She'd never invited anyone into her parents' shop before. In fact, she generally tried not to hang around the shop just in case someone from school *did* pop in. This was the first time she'd realised that she had access to something great: free junk food.

'It's past its expiry date,' Maryam said. 'We can't sell it, so you might as well have it.'

Evie filled her bag like she hadn't eaten for a week and had just been set loose at an all-you-can-eat buffet. The

bell on the door jangled as it opened and she jumped, then dropped her bag guiltily.

'Hello, Evie,' Dad said, walking into the shop, carrying a box of stock to Mum in the back room. 'Are you having a feast?'

Evie flushed pink and looked at Maryam, unsure whether what they were doing was allowed.

'Yup!' Maryam answered for her. 'Not much take on chocolate recently.'

'It is summer,' Dad said. 'People don't want chocolate when it is hot.'

Evie cast her eyes over the pile and swiped a chocolate bar for her bag.

'Let's go, Evie,' Maryam said, grabbing a bag of barbecue crisps for herself and heading for the door. 'Bye, Dad.'

The minute they left the shop they felt the full force of the blazing sun, and both of them instinctively put their hands up to shield their eyes. They moved slowly, as if walking through steam, not speaking until Evie had finished her gummies and tossed the bag in a bin. Then, she said, 'So, we should hear about the fellowship this week.'

Maryam scanned her mind for what Evie might be talking about, and then remembered: Evie had entered the play they'd written about the connection between their families in some sort of competition. Maryam had liked working on it together, but hadn't given it a second thought since the end of the school year.

Evie seemed to sense that it wasn't at the front of Maryam's mind and said, 'You know, the *Bill Jeffrey Youth Fellowship*? It's actually a pretty big deal.'

'Yeah, I know!' Maryam responded defensively. 'It's super exciting.'

But actually, her mind was on other news that was coming soon. By the end of the week, she'd know whether she was going back to St Mary's for Year Eight, or packing up all her worldly possessions and moving to Hanley School.

Hanley was what posh people called a public school. It was old – over 500 years old, according to its website. If you'd told Maryam a year ago that she'd be waiting for a response from Hanley, she'd have assumed you had mistaken her for someone else – someone who did not linger outside the door of Nando's to catch the Wi-Fi. But

that was before Mr Whipple had read her final report about her and Evie's family histories and put her in contact with The Opportunity Project ('TOP'), a charity that helped 'disadvantaged young people' secure places at top schools. TOP had supported her with her application to Hanley – the essays, prepping for the interviews, everything.

She'd sent the application off at the end of the summer term, and she should know soon. Her hands tingled with excitement and fear just thinking about it.

They got to the corner of Evie's street, which sloped steeply uphill. Maryam didn't fancy walking up it in this heat.

'I think I'll say bye here,' Maryam said.

She walked downhill towards her estate. Her street had no shade to escape to, and by the time she entered the code in the blue front gate, beads of sweat were gathering at her hairline. The courtyard was full, which only happened at the height of summer, when everyone's flats became unbearably hot.

Maryam trudged upstairs, went inside, grabbed a peach Crusher from the freezer, and popped it open, waiting for the syrupy liquid to melt so she could slurp it.

Apparently nobody liked the peach flavour, and a dozen of them left over from the shop lined the freezer. If Maryam was being honest, it tasted a bit like soap, but it was OK when it was frozen and helped her cool off.

Restlessly, she wandered to the living room, where Nani sat in her chair with a cup of tea in her hands. Mum fiddled with an oscillating fan in the corner that suddenly started up and blew a stream of air back and forth across them.

Maryam sank down on the sofa and looked at the dung beetles on the screen. A man's voice spoke soothingly about their immense strength. The brown leather of the sofa felt cool for a moment and she waited for the stream of air to come back her way.

Her older brother Hassan came in with his own frozen bottle of peach Crusher in one hand and a pile of post in the other and sat next to Maryam on the sofa, tossing the letters on the coffee table. He turned on a miniature fan and held it directly in front of his face. 'Aw yeah, *The Secret Lives of Insects*. Get in!'

'You know, you should not drink cold things when you are hot. You should drink hot things,' Nani lectured.

Hassan rolled his eyes at her and flipped through the junk mail before pausing on a letter in a cream envelope. He reluctantly held it out to Maryam.

'It's for you,' he said, 'from Hanley.'

The air and sound seemed to go out of the room. Everyone stopped the little slurping noises they'd been making; they even seemed to stop breathing. Mum muted the placid voice of the man on the telly, and Hassan turned off his little fan. Only the big fan carried on with its whirring noise as they each turned their eyes to the envelope – thick and expensive-looking – in Hassan's hand.

Maryam froze, her gaze fixed on the envelope, but her hands paralysed in her lap like a statue. Hassan was still holding the envelope out to her, now waving it in front of her face to check if she was conscious.

Slowly, she took it. The envelope was thick. Surely that was good news?

'Go on, then,' Mum urged and she got up from her seat.

Maryam wiggled a finger under the seal and prised it open messily, her finger shaking. She unfolded the papers inside, which were of the same heavy, cream-coloured

stock as the envelope. Her heart pounded, and she hesitated to cast her eyes further down the sheet – she was easing herself into what the letter said. Maryam scanned the first paragraph, looking just for the key words. She saw *We would like to congratulate you* and let out the breath she hadn't realised she was holding.

She then started reading more carefully – the admissions committee was 'extremely impressed with her application, one of over 4,000 they'd received that summer' and were 'of the belief she would thrive as part of the Hanley community'. She flipped to the next page, which said she had been admitted onto Hanley's Scholars Programme, with one hundred per cent of her tuition and board paid, and then skimmed to the final page, where she was asked to confirm acceptance of the place.

She looked up at Mum, who was standing behind her and had read the letter over her shoulder, and saw tears in her eyes.

'You did it, Maryam,' she whispered. She pulled Maryam in close and hugged her hard, murmuring in her ear, 'This is going to change everything. I'm so proud of you.'

'It's no surprise,' Nani said from her chair, smiling at Maryam with glinting eyes. 'Of course you would do anything you set your mind to. But I thought you go to a good school now? Why go so far away?'

Mum's words rang in Maryam's ears: everything was going to change. A mix of emotions swirled inside her, making her feel like all her blood had rushed to her head.

Mum dismissed Nani's question with a flap of her hand. 'It is totally different. This is the school that *the prince* went to. The *future king*.'

Hassan had a look of disbelief on his face, but then composed himself and shook his head. 'Maryam Ahmed MP has a good sound to it. Just don't forget the little people when you're at the top.' He switched his miniature fan back on.

Maryam giggled, but she did like the sound of it. She, Maryam from her drab council estate, was going to go to an actual *boarding school* with actual *future leaders of the country*. It was a change she was ready for.