

How to Find What You're Not Looking For

by Veera Hiranandani

Not
designed
will match
cover



Kokila

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Dedication to go here

How to Be the Lazy One

It's harder than you think.

First, lie on your messy bed wearing your Wonder Woman pajamas that are too small because you've had them since you were nine. Then, watch your older sister, Leah, pin up her hair for dance class. She sits in her black leotard at the small white vanity, her back straight as a board, a magazine cutout of Paul Newman taped to the corner of her mirror. She uses at least fifteen bobby pins for her bun. Count in your head while she sticks the pins in.

One, two, three. She's rushing because she has to be on the #4 bus by 9:00 a.m. for pointe class at Madame Duchon's Dance Academy. She dances there every day except Sunday. You're not even sure how she spends so much time at dance and still does well in school.

Leah seems to do well at everything.

Not you. You're the lazy one. You're just trying to keep

up, but along with all the other things Leah does, she helps you keep up.

Four, five, six.

Ma wishes Leah didn't take dance on Saturdays because of Shabbos, but Leah says it makes no sense for her not to dance if Ma and Daddy work all day at Gertie's, their bakery. Then Ma says Leah's right and that maybe they should be more observant and not work on Saturdays. Daddy says the bakery wouldn't survive if they closed on Saturday in this town and that's more important. They argue about the rules like that sometimes, how Jewish we're supposed to be.

Seven, eight, nine.

On pin ten, Leah suddenly stops and puts her hands over her face. Her shoulders start to shake. You lean forward in your bed, confused, to get a closer look.

Leah hardly ever cries. You're the crier. It's the only way anyone pays attention to you. You cry when you're sad, or mad, or when you watch *Lassie*. Sometimes you even cry when you're extra happy. You get it from Daddy. He's a crier, too.

Leah manages to keep a smile on her face most of the

time. If she's upset, she gets serious and walks away, her shoulders straight, her head held high.

But today, on a warm Saturday in early June, as the sun tumbles through the window and the birds chirp and the smell of Ma's Sanka floats in through the bottom of the bedroom door, Leah sobs into her hands, and it terrifies you.

"Leah," you say, jumping out of bed and over to her side. "Don't cry. What's the trouble?"

She turns to you. She picks up a tissue off the vanity, presses it to her eyes, then blows her nose. "If I tell you a secret," she says. "Will you promise to keep it forever?"

"Forever?"

"Yes, forever," she says. "It's the biggest secret I've ever had, and if you don't think you can promise, I won't say it."

Keeping a secret is not your favorite thing to do. Secrets make your stomach hurt. You can count the secrets you've kept on one hand. You once took a report card out of the mailbox and hid it in your schoolbag for a week. But you got caught. Sometimes when you hang out with your friend Jane, you make it seem like you have other friends. But you don't. Occasionally you steal

cookies from Gertie's and keep them in a coffee can in your room. You've never had to keep a really big secret before, and certainly not forever.

Leah's cheeks get blotchy, and her eyes start to fill again with tears. "Oh please," she says. "I have to tell someone, and I need it to be you."

Leah saying she needs you—is there anything more special than that? Maybe if you know her secret, some of her specialness will spill over onto you. She bites her lip and grabs your hand.

"Okay," you say, taking a deep breath. "I promise."

She holds up her pinkie and wraps it around yours. "Oh, Ari, something crazy has happened."

"What? What's happened?" A flush of sweat starts collecting on your top lip.

"I've fallen in love," she says, your pinkies still linked together, her eyes still locked on yours. You let go of her pinkie and take your hand away.

"You've fallen in love? How? With who?" you say.

She gets up and starts to pace a little, so you sit down on your bed. You want to give her room.

“I’ve never felt this way about anyone. It’s like I can see my future,” she says.

She looks scared when she tells you this, and it makes you feel a little scared. You haven’t known anyone in love before. You’ve watched the soap opera *Days of Our Lives* with Ma, and it doesn’t look like much fun. It seems that people start having lots of problems when they fall in love.

If you think about it, you’ve been noticing some odd things about Leah, like the way she hums a tune everywhere she goes, even when Ma makes her clean the bathroom on Sundays. She wears her best clothes every day. She leaves a trail of Chanel No. 5 behind her, and she never used to wear perfume. She always seems to be thinking of something else.

“Who is he? Do I know him?” you ask her.

As she walks back and forth, she tells you that the boy she’s in love with is not a boy at all. He’s a young man about to graduate from college. He already enrolled in graduate school this fall because he wants to keep studying and doesn’t want to get drafted into the Vietnam War. She met him six months ago at Rocky’s Records in

town. He's from India, but he lives here now and works at Rocky's after his classes because he loves music.

And he wants to marry Leah.

"Married? Now? You can't be serious," you say as your heart pounds in your ears. You don't know what any of this means, and you don't want anyone to take Leah away from you. How would she have any time to be your sister if she got married? It makes you want to give her secret back.

"I'm eighteen. Ma got married at eighteen," she says, her eyebrows turning angry. "Lots of girls get married at eighteen." She presses her hands to her cheeks as if she's trying to hold herself in.

"I suppose so," you say, still thinking she's lost her mind. But it's true. You think of Betty Campbell and Donna Marino, two girls who got married right after high school. They had their pictures in the local paper, and they looked like the plastic dolls Daddy keeps at the bakery to put on top of wedding cakes.

You remember feeling a little sorry for them, just going straight to the boring grown-up world with no in-between. You thought Leah wanted an in-between.

“When are you going to tell Ma? And Daddy?” you ask her.

Leah shakes her head. “Honestly, I can’t even imagine it. I need more time. Remember, you can’t utter a word. But this isn’t just some silly crush on a boy. This is serious.”

“You’ll have to tell them eventually,” you say. Leah doesn’t reply. “Are you really going to get married? To a boy from India? Is he Jewish?”

“He’s not a boy,” Leah says loudly, and anger washes over her face. She takes a deep breath. “And of course he’s not Jewish.”

“Well, I don’t know.”

“He’s Hindu,” she continues in a smaller voice. “I’m worried about what people will think if we get married.”

You nod slowly. Leah is the one who’s supposed to follow the rules. It’s no secret Ma and Daddy want her to go to college and marry someone Jewish. She was already enrolled at Southern Connecticut State for the fall, though if it’s anything like your town, there won’t be many Jewish boys there.

Leah sits back down at the vanity.

“But I’m also worried about what will happen if we don’t. I really love him,” she says and starts to dab her face with her pink powder puff, erasing the streaks her tears left on her cheeks. “Sorry, I don’t mean to be a drag.”

“It’s okay,” you say and go over to her. You put a hand on her shoulder. “You’ll figure it out.” But what you really mean is that she’ll figure out that she’s not in love or thinking about marrying anyone.

How to Keep a Secret

About a week later, neither of you is worried anymore, because it's almost summer vacation and it feels like you're in a movie—Leah's movie—and your beautiful, smart, talented older sister trusts you with her secret love story.

You've never been close to being in love, and that's just fine. Yes, you're only eleven, and all the boys you know are kind of mean or smelly or both. You can't imagine ever feeling that way about any one of them. Who would ever love you like that? You aren't that pretty. You aren't that smart. You certainly don't feel smart at school, especially when you write.

Writing is to you what dancing is to the clumsiest person in the world. Daddy says your hands need to get stronger, not your brain. But you think he's wrong. You think it's your brain. You heard your tutor last year telling

Ma that she thought you had something called a *learning disability*. Ma sent that tutor away.

Still, Ma makes you knead bread dough to make your hands stronger. You like helping at Gertie's. There, your hands work the way they're supposed to. It hasn't made your writing any better, though. Ma calls it chicken scratch. It's not just hard to write, it's hard to think of what to write. Sometimes you can't even read your own writing. It's like a secret code.

As you walk into the bakery, you feel the afternoon heat surround you like a heavy cloud. It's hot outside and even hotter in the bakery. You don't know how your parents do it.

In the afternoons, you usually help Ma with cookie dough, and then Ma walks home with you at five to get dinner going, but Daddy's in the bakery from four in the morning until seven at night except Mondays, when the bakery is closed. Daddy has the strongest hands of anyone you've ever known, and his handwriting is beautiful. He writes the daily special on the chalkboard every day in perfect curly cursive.

Daddy stands across the room, forming bread dough

into loaves. You can tell from the brown caraway seeds that look like ants in the mass of sticky white that it's rye. Daddy's hair is plastered on his forehead, and he moves slowly in the heat. He looks up.

"Have any homework, Muffin?" he says.

"Already did it," you reply, which is almost true, except for the questions you had to answer for your reading. You did your math, though.

Ma and Daddy always let you have a little break before they put you to work, so you grab a cold cola from the fridge and collapse on the stool near the pastry table. Just touching the cold glass of the cola bottle makes you feel better.

After a few minutes, Ma comes over. "Why are you always reading those ridiculous comic books?" she says to you as you flip through the latest *Wonder Woman* while sipping your soda.

You want to say to her that you don't read ridiculous comics. You read *Wonder Woman*. You've tried *Superman*, *The Flash*, even *Aquaman*, but nothing is as good. Something about the pictures helping the words go together in small chunks feels like the puzzle piece your

mind is missing. If only all schoolbooks could be like comic books.

Before you figure out your answer, Leah comes bounding through the swinging doors. She often stops by after dance on her way home. Ma doesn't make her help as much as you. She says it's because Leah's older and busier, but you think it's because Ma doesn't want Leah to get used to working at the bakery. She wants her to do other things.

Usually, Leah's still in her dance clothes, but today she's in a red-and-white miniskirt, and her hair is down. She must have gone home first and changed.

"Ma, how can you stand it in here? Let's turn on the fan. We'll all melt," she says, waving her hand in front of her face. She goes over and turns on the big fan in the back and opens the door a few inches.

"Well, look at you," Ma says and runs her eyes carefully over Leah. "A secret date?"

Leah doesn't miss a beat. "A secret date, I wish," she laughs, then changes the subject. "Ari, want to walk with me to the Sweet Scoop?"

You nod and quickly close your comic book. The last

place you want to be on this sweltering afternoon is the bakery.

“Can I?” you say, turning to Ma.

She eyes you carefully and then looks at Leah again. Does Ma know what Leah’s up to? She’s always telling you she has eyes in the back of her head. When you were little, you used to move her hair aside, looking for those eyes. Also, your sister is a great liar, which makes you wonder if she’s ever lied to you.

“But I need you to help me with an order of oatmeal raisin,” she finally says.

“Ma, give Ari a break,” says Leah. “It’s so hot.”

You don’t like making oatmeal raisin cookies. The batter is lumpy. You also hate raisins. You prefer making chocolate chip or black and whites.

“Let her go, Sylvia,” Daddy calls. “She’s here almost every day.” He’s the softy.

“Fine, go,” she says, waving her hand without looking up. You and Leah don’t wait for her to change her mind, and rush out the door.

Leah has been bringing you with her to meet Raj at Rocky’s and go on his break with him. That way it will

look less suspicious. This is the third time you've gone with her.

The three of you have a routine. You get Raj at Rocky's and then go to the Sweet Scoop. After you order your ice creams, you all walk through Stallings Park, the smaller park on the edge of town that is loud and filled with young people sitting on blankets, playing music on their transistor radios, and sometimes smoking cigarettes. Ma told you and Leah if she ever catches you smoking, she'll never let you go anywhere without her again, even though Ma sometimes smokes a cigarette after dinner.

At first you were nervous and decided that you wouldn't like him at all. But Raj was so nice to you, you couldn't help liking him. He kind of looks like Elvis, but with darker skin, and always buys you a double fudge ripple cone. It doesn't feel like anyone is taking Leah away from you. In fact, you get to be more a part of her life than ever.

Today, as the three of you walk through the park, Leah says, "Can you believe Ma used to bring me here when I was little? Now the families go to East Meadow." East Meadow Park on the other side of town is bigger and

quieter, with more flowers and no teenagers. Occasionally, a grown-up, usually a man in a suit carrying a briefcase, cuts through Stallings to get to the train station and squints his disapproval at a blaring radio.

“I always went to East Meadow when I was a kid,” you say.

Leah looks at you and laughs. She rumples your curls. “You’re still a kid.”

You frown at her and duck away from her hand. You want to stick your tongue out at her, but then she’d be right.

“I’m almost twelve, which is practically thirteen. I’m basically a teenager, just like you.”

“First of all, you’ve got a while before twelve,” Leah says. “And second, I’m seven years older than you. Don’t be in a rush, Ari. Nothing’s wrong with being a kid.” Her eyes travel away from you and back to the park. Her mouth falls out of its smile, and she suddenly looks sad. *Then why are you rushing*, you want to ask her.

“I like it here,” Raj says, slicing through whatever Leah is feeling. “It reminds me of a park near my flat in Bombay. My cousins and I would play cricket there.”

Leah takes Raj's arm, her eyes sparkling. "Tell me more about your family. I want to know everything about you."

You roll your eyes, walk a little bit ahead of them, and plop down on a bench. You lick your melting cone and wonder what kind of game cricket is. Does it involve actual crickets? You want to ask, but it seems like a question a little kid would ask.

"We're going to take a walk, okay?" Leah calls out. This is also part of the routine. They usually leave you on a bench for a little while to eat your fudge ripple while they wander behind a cluster of oak trees. A few days ago, you saw them feed ice cream to each other and kiss. You turned away, your cheeks on fire. Now you know why they go behind the oak trees. A part of you wants to spy on them, and a part of you wants to run far, far away.

After a little while, the three of you stroll back to the store, but they don't hold hands in case they run into anyone they know. You like listening to their conversations. They discuss all sorts of things. They talk about music a lot: The Beatles, The Doors, Jimi Hendrix, The Rolling Stones, Aretha Franklin. They argue about which band is

their favorite. Raj likes The Doors the most. Leah thinks The Beatles are groovier.

They talk about serious things, too, like the war in Vietnam, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech against the war in New York City that spring, and the protest marches for civil rights and peace that they want to be part of. Today they talk about the uprisings happening around the country, and you wonder what they mean. Leah says she understands why Black people are so upset. Raj says riots aren't the way to change things, that nonviolent protests are more powerful, like what Gandhi did in India, like what Dr. King is doing now.

"But don't you think that the Black community has no choice but to fight back and defend themselves against hundreds of years of racism and violence? What if peaceful protests aren't enough to change things? Have you read Malcom X's autobiography? And look at what the Black Panthers are trying to do," Leah says. "It must take so much courage." Leah crosses her arms. You've never seen her speak this way to anyone. Other than Dr. King, you don't know who she's talking about.

"But how can we really understand, Leah?" Raj says.

“We have to do more. We’re both not part of the majority. How can we not understand?” she replies.

You watch Leah’s face, then Raj’s. Are they mad at each other? You can’t tell.

“I think I have a different perspective rather than a better understanding,” Raj says. “When I came here, I felt like the best thing to do as an immigrant was try as hard as I could to blend in so no one would notice the color of my skin. Does that make me a coward?”

Leah gets quiet. She shakes her head and reaches out to squeeze Raj’s hand quickly before letting go. You feel more confused than ever. You think about protests and riots and what they are for. You wonder what Raj means by blending in. You didn’t know Leah paid so much attention to the news.

You also learn more about Raj. You find out that he grew up in Bombay, a big city in India. That he has two much older brothers, one still in India and one who lives here. You find out that his favorite flavor of ice cream is pistachio and that he loves pizza.

Another thing you find out is that they go out every Tuesday night to a pizza parlor two towns over so no one

sees them. Ma thinks Leah is in her pointe class. You know lots of secrets, now, which started off feeling special, but the feeling is getting heavier and heavier as each secret stacks upon the other. What Leah and Raj don't talk about in front of you is their future.

After this trip to the park, back at Rocky's Raj gives Leah a present, the new Beatles album. She jumps up and down and throws her arms around him. Everyone in the store looks at them. You don't like the way people stop and stare. You want to pull Leah away, but she doesn't seem to notice.

Then Raj goes back to work, and Leah and you walk home.

"I know I promised to keep your secret," you say after you get far enough away from the store. She faces you, clutching the Beatles album against her chest.

"Yes, you did," she says, wagging her finger at you, a panicked expression on her face.

"I still promise," you say. "But when are you going to tell Ma and Daddy?"

You read the title on the album: *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. You wonder what it means. Were the

Beatles changing their name? Your hands feel sticky with ice cream. You press your thumb and forefinger together, and they stay stuck that way.

“I’m just so happy. I don’t want anything to ruin it. I feel guilty about being so happy.”

“Why would you feel guilty about being happy?” you ask.

“Because there’s so much wrong with the world,” she says and starts walking again.

There is, according to the newspapers. But you look around your town. You see someone driving by in a blue Chevy convertible. You see people walking down the block in sunglasses, sipping soda pop, riding their bikes, happy to be out on such a nice Saturday. This world seems okay.

“Do you know what happened at Rocky’s last week? A guy came in and heard Raj talking. Then he asked John, the manager, why he had foreigners working there and not Americans. He asked Raj if he was here legally. Raj said he was a US citizen, and the fellow demanded to see proof and wouldn’t leave! John had to threaten to call the cops until he finally left.”

“Gosh, that’s terrible,” you say. Now she’s walking so quickly, you can barely keep up.

“But our love is stronger than the racist establishment.”

“The racist establishment,” you say, trying out her words. Lately, Leah says things that feel so grown-up and strange, like they belong in someone else’s mouth. Leah stops walking, so you stop. You can see her cheeks becoming red, her chest going up and down like she’s out of breath. The air is sticky and still.

“I’m not naïve, Ari. I see the looks people give us when we walk down the street. It’s not going to be easy for me and Raj.”

“So maybe you shouldn’t get married?” You’re starting to feel like you’re walking into a pool that’s getting too deep for your feet to touch the bottom. A worry for Raj and Leah, in a new way, a way you hadn’t even thought about before, is nagging at you. Other people won’t like them together, not just your parents. You shake your head. You’re ready for Leah’s secret love-story movie to end and go back to just Ariel and Leah—the way it used to be.

“But then they would win,” she says.

“Who would win?” you ask, but Leah doesn’t seem to hear you.

“It’s not just what Raj faces. We know about prejudice,” Leah says.

“We do?” you ask, and again that feeling of the pool getting deeper takes hold of you. Now Leah is a few feet ahead. “Hey, slow down,” you call, because it’s too hot to walk this fast.

She stops and faces you again. “Of course. I once heard Ma and Daddy tell their friends how the bank wouldn’t give them a loan because they didn’t think a Jewish bakery would do well here. Daddy had to convince them that his baked goods were for everyone. He even brought them a box of cookies to prove it.”

“I didn’t know that,” you say, and it makes you wonder what else Leah knows that you don’t.

“And Ma and Daddy’s friends from synagogue, you know the Feldmans? They tried to sign up for that golf club in Milton and they were told that membership was full, but then the Cunninghams joined a week after.”

“But that’s not fair,” you say, and it feels like Leah has

ripped the cover off something ugly and confusing, something you don't want to see.

"And remember what that awful boy did to you last year?"

"I don't like to think about that," you say and bite your lip. But you do think about it, a lot. You and Chris Heaton had both wanted the last empty swing. You got there first by a second, but Chris insisted he was first and told you to get up. You refused. Then he leaned in and touched your head.

"Where are your horns?" he asked.

"What?" you said, brushing his hand away.

"My dad told me Jews have horns," he said and touched your head again. "Like the devil."

"Get away," you said and then touched your own head wondering if there was something you had never noticed, before.

He kept asking where your horns were, getting louder and louder. He wouldn't stop. So you picked up a small rock and threw it at him, but it hit him in the face.

You had just wanted to stop him, not hit his face. He stared at you, frozen, holding his cheek. Then he ran off

and told the playground monitor, acting like you had shot a cannonball at him. You got in more trouble than he did, detention for a week, and all he had to do was talk to the principal.

At home, Ma and Daddy had explained what the horn statement meant—how it had to do with a wrong translation in the Bible saying that Moses had horns instead of light around his head when he came down from Mount Sinai. Ma said it was still used as a slur today and that some people actually believed it was true. It felt like someone had slapped you when she told you this. How could anyone believe such a ridiculous thing, as if you were a different kind of person or maybe not even a person at all?

Ma had been furious and wanted to talk to the principal. “That boy should be suspended! We can’t let this go,” she had said. But you begged her not to; you were afraid it would only make Chris worse. Daddy agreed. “Let’s not make a fuss, Sylvia,” he had said. “We don’t need that kind of attention. Think of the bakery.”

Back then, you had wondered what kind of attention Daddy meant. Now you wonder what really changes people. You had tried stopping Chris with the rock, and it

did stop him, but you don't think it changed him. Should you just have let him take the swing? Should you have sat there silently, refusing to leave? You don't know if that would have changed him, either. When you play it over in your mind, you never come up with a good answer.

Suddenly you hear someone calling you. You look up to see your friend Jane coming down the street with her mother. The two of them live on the floor below you. You ride the bus together to school.

"Why, hello, girls," Jane's mother, Peggy, says, taking off her big round sunglasses. "Where are you coming from?"

You and Leah glance at each other.

"The Sweet Scoop," Leah says.

"That's where we're off to. If June is starting off like this, we're probably in for a long, hot summer," she says, fanning herself.

You both nod.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Jane shrieks, jumping up and down. Everyone looks startled.

"What on earth," Peggy says, putting her hand to her chest.

Jane points at the Beatles album. "How did you get that?"

I thought Rocky's was sold out. They said they weren't getting more until next week."

Leah looks down at her hands like she forgot what she was holding.

"Oh, this, well, I—"

"She put it on hold the day it came out," you say. "But you can come over and listen if you want."

You see Leah's shoulders drop in relief.

"That would be far-out! Thanks! See you in school tomorrow, Ari," Jane calls as she and Peggy head to the Sweet Scoop.

"That was clever of you," Leah says after they walk off. "Imagine if we saw them with Raj?"

"Yeah, Peggy would have definitely said something to Ma." Peggy and Ma were sort of friends; at least they liked to chat in the laundry room on Sundays, but Ma didn't seem to have time for many friends.

Leah's face changes, and she gets that hard look with her eyebrows knitted together. "Eventually, someone is going to see us and tell Ma and Daddy. I want them hearing the truth from me first," she says. "I'm just going to do it. I'm going to invite Raj over."

“Oh good,” you say and give Leah a little hug. You aren’t sure how Ma and Daddy are going to react to Raj, but at least you won’t be the only one to know anymore. You both walk home, and your whole body feels lighter, like Leah just took something out of your hands and decided to hold it herself.

How to Eat Dinner

When you get back home, Ma's whirling around the apartment with a rag and a bottle of Mr. Clean. Sunday is "do everything else instead of working at the bakery day" for Ma. Daddy opens the bakery from noon to five and always comes home for an early dinner. You and Leah are supposed to clean the hall bathroom, your room, and bring the laundry downstairs to the basement washers. Leah makes you do it all with her right after breakfast so she can have the afternoon to relax. Sunday's the only day she doesn't dance, so you understand.

Sunday is also the best time to ask Ma for something since she's usually distracted and impatient to get her work done. Leah doesn't waste any time.

"Ma, do you need any more help?" she asks.

Ma doesn't look up as she wipes down a cabinet. "Too late for that. Almost done."

Leah walks over to the stove, which is empty. No pot of boiling soup on a hot day like this. She goes over to the fridge, opens it, and closes it. "What are we having for dinner?" she asks.

You perk up from the couch, where you'd collapsed as you looked for the comics in the Sunday paper.

"Just making some egg salad. Too hot for anything else," Ma says and stops cleaning. She wipes her forehead with the back of her hand.

You slump back down. Ugh, egg salad.

"Could I have a guest over next Sunday evening?" Leah asks, not looking at Ma. She busies herself with rearranging the fruit bowl.

"A guest?" Ma says, pushing back a bit of hair that's fallen out of her bun. "Who?"

"A boy I like."

As you flip through the newspaper pretending not to watch them, you notice that Leah calls Raj a boy, not a man.

Ma waves the green towel she's holding. "Ah, so there is a boyfriend. I thought so, the way you've been going around lately, all gussied up," she says. Then she grabs the

orange fly swatter hanging on the doorknob and starts going after a fly buzzing around the fruit.

“There’s nothing wrong with trying to look nice,” Leah says. “So can I?”

Ma’s eyes narrow on the fly that has now landed on top of the refrigerator. She takes a big swipe at it. “These flies. They’re all over as soon as the weather gets humid. So can you what?”

“Have him over to meet you.” Leah’s voice shakes a little. She’s had a few boyfriends come over—one Jewish boy she met at Temple Beth Torah, and one boy from school who was not Jewish. That was last year. Ma and Daddy didn’t like the boy who wasn’t Jewish, and told her that.

Ma said they didn’t like him because he didn’t thank them after the meal. But you don’t remember the Jewish boy thanking your parents, either. Honestly, your parents didn’t like either of them that much.

“Who is this boy? Another gentile?” Ma was now suddenly wiping down the kitchen counter furiously.

“Ma, nobody uses that word,” Leah says and looks at

you with a big question in her eyes. You shrug. What can you do? Now the fly lands on the bowl of fruit.

“Oh, you’re a goner now.” Ma lines up the swatter.

“He’s not a gentile,” Leah tells her.

Ma brings the swatter down hard on an apple. “Gotcha!” Then she turns her attention back to Leah.

“Oh? Well, I guess so.”

“That’s swell. Thanks, Ma!” Leah says and hurries out of earshot before Ma can ask any more questions.

Later, back in your room, you sit on your bed while Leah brushes her hair at the vanity over and over. If you brushed your curly hair after it dried, you’d look like you’d stuck your fingers in an electric socket. That’s why you keep it short. But Leah has smooth waves, not tight curls like you.

“If they just meet him,” Leah starts to say. She begins brushing faster and faster. “Maybe they’ll let go of their ingrained prejudice. And who uses the word *gentile* anymore? I guess it’s better than goy. Maybe Hindus are gentiles? Does it mean anyone who isn’t Jewish?”

“I have no idea,” you say and place *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely*

Hearts Club Band on the turntable. You lower the needle carefully. You hear a scratchy sound, and then it sounds like a band warming up. You and Leah look at each other, puzzled, but then the song bursts from the little speaker, and you both smile. The new sounds carry you away as you listen to song after song. It's like every track opens a door and shows you a whole new world.

As the music plays, you think about what Leah just said. *Gentile. Goy.* You know those words. Sometimes your parents use them to describe someone who's Christian, but only to each other or you and Leah, never in front of anyone else.

When the first side of the record ends, you get up to flip it over. "What's ingrained prejudice?" you ask.

"You'll see" is all Leah says. "I want to hear the other side."

You sigh and put the needle down but lower the volume. You plop down on your bed again and stare at the bumpy white ceiling. "So if you won't answer that then tell me why you think we moved here."

She stops brushing. "What do you mean?"

"We don't go to synagogue that much, just on holidays

and sometimes on Friday nights. Ma and Daddy didn't send us to Hebrew school. We only see Aunt Esther and Uncle Isaac's families in Brooklyn every few months, and they hardly ever come here. But Ma and Daddy want you to meet Jewish boys. And I guess the same goes for me if I ever date anyone."

"Oh, stop, you will," Leah says.

"I don't even want to think about it," you say and roll onto your back, hugging your knees into your chest. Then you roll back up into a sitting position. "But if they care so much, wouldn't it have been easier to stay in Brooklyn, where there are more Jewish people and we didn't feel so, I don't know—"

"Separate," Leah says and goes back to brushing.

"Yeah. Do you feel that way?" You haven't thought about it much before, how you feel about religion or about being Jewish. It was something you just were.

"I guess, sometimes. It depends. I don't feel that way with Raj. In my opinion, religion shouldn't matter so much. I mean, if Raj and I get married," she says and gets quiet. You wait. You wait some more. She sits back in her chair, thinking.

“What were you going to say?” you finally ask.

“Nothing. You ask too many questions, Ari. Can we just listen to the music?” she says.

“Tell me,” you say. You won’t ever stop asking Leah questions. Who else can help you figure out the world in the same way?

But Leah just goes over to the record player and turns up the volume. The music fills the room, and it’s too loud to talk anymore.

The following Sunday, after you’ve all straightened up, put in the laundry, and Ma has Mr. Cleaned the whole place down, the smell of roasting chicken takes over the apartment. Leah asked Ma specifically to make chicken. She told her it was because she makes the best roast chicken in the world, but she told you privately that Raj doesn’t eat beef. She said lots of Hindus are vegetarians like his parents, but he eats chicken and fish.

You wondered if being vegetarian for Hindus was like keeping kosher, the way some Jewish people do, like Aunt Esther in Brooklyn, and the way Ma and Daddy don’t. You’re just relieved Leah made sure chicken is served, because you wouldn’t want to be in the room if Ma spent

all day making brisket and Raj wouldn't eat it.

You're watching Ma take a steaming tray of roasted potatoes out of the oven when the doorbell rings.

"I'll get it," Leah says, bursting out of the bedroom in an orange minidress you've never seen.

"A little short, don't you think?" Ma says, wiping her hands with the dish towel, but Leah doesn't respond and opens the door.

Raj is standing there with a bouquet of roses, looking as handsome as a movie star. You walk over and inch behind Leah. They lock eyes, and it makes you feel embarrassed.

"Thank you, they're just lovely," she says, taking the flowers. Ma is still in the kitchen. Daddy is reading the paper on the couch not facing the door. "Daddy, Ma, come," Leah calls. Ma takes off her apron. Daddy gets up. Then they see Raj, and both of your parents stop in their tracks. Daddy, probably realizing he's being rude, starts to move again, clears his throat, and shakes Raj's hand.

"Hello," he says. "I'm Mr. Goldberg. Nice to meet you."

Ma comes over, finally. "Mrs. Goldberg. I'm sorry, what was your name again?" she asks, not holding her hand out.

"I didn't say. It's Raj," he says. "Raj Jagwani."

“Let me go put these in water,” Leah calls in an odd singsongy way and walks the flowers over to the kitchen, leaving Ma, Daddy, and Raj all staring at each other.

“Hi,” you say, giving him a little wave. Ma and Daddy turn to you abruptly as if they’d forgotten you were there.

“You must be Ariel,” Raj says and smiles. He holds out his hand. “Leah has told me a lot about you.”

You smile back shyly, acting as if you’ve never met, just the way Leah told you to. You shake his hand.

“Okay,” Leah says, coming over. “Why don’t we all sit down here before dinner and have a chat.” She gestures to the couch. Everyone walks over and sits down in an awkward silence. Then Leah asks if Raj would like something to drink.

“I’m fine,” he says. But Daddy asks for a seltzer. Leah rushes off to get him one. When she comes back, she mentions Raj is a business major at the University of Bridgeport.

“Well, young man,” Daddy says. “The best way to learn about business is to run one of your own. College can’t teach you that.”

“That’s true,” Raj replies.

Leah squirms in her seat. Ma looks at her nails. The silence falls like wet snow again.

“I’m going to check on the chicken.” Ma stands up and heads toward the kitchen. She calls you to help her.

“Did you know about this boy?” Ma whispers when you’re standing next to her over the stove.

“No,” you say.

Ma studies your face. “Never mind,” she says. “I truly don’t know what Leah is thinking.”

“He seems nice.”

All she does is hand you the salad bowl, pick up the platter of chicken, and bring it to the table.

You all sit down at the table, and the food gets passed around while Raj compliments the apartment. There’s some talk about how hot it is for this early in the summer. Then Leah says Raj will be entering the graduate business program at New York University this fall.

“Your parents must be proud,” Daddy says.

Raj laughs. “I hope so. They wanted me to be an electrical engineer. That’s what my father does. But I’d like to run my own business one day.”

“So where exactly are you from, Raj?” Daddy asks.

Leah sits up straighter and looks tense.

“We live in Danbury,” Raj says.

“No, no,” Daddy said. “Before that.”

Raj refolds his napkin before placing it on his lap again.

“I was born in Bombay. We came to the US a few years ago for my father’s job.”

“You speak English very well,” Ma says and passes him the potatoes.

“I learned growing up,” Raj replies, taking the platter.

“Oh.” Ma wipes her mouth. “I didn’t realize they taught English in India.”

“Yes” is all Raj says.

“And I assume you speak Indian as well?” Ma asks.

“Not Indian, Sylvia. Hindu,” Daddy says.

You don’t think that’s the right answer, either. Leah and Raj eye each other for a second.

“Actually, Hindu is my religion. I also speak Hindi, Sindhi, and a little Urdu. But mostly English now.”

“My, so many languages,” Ma says. “Very impressive. I do think that if people are going to live here, they should learn our language.”

You think of how Ma and Daddy speak Yiddish all the time to each other.

Raj gets a hard look in his eye. You feel bad for him, having to answer so many questions. You notice that Leah touches his arm.

Then no one talks for a bit, and all you can hear is chewing. It makes you want to plug your ears.

Ma swallows and dabs her mouth. "Will you go home after your program?"

"Home?" Raj asks.

"Back to India," Ma says.

"We just became US citizens, so I suppose Connecticut is home now. We visit my grandparents in Bombay as often as we can, but it's a long trip."

"I can imagine," Ma says. "One of my friends traveled in India a couple of years ago. She brought back the loveliest jewelry, but the food made her very sick."

"How do you know it was the food?" Leah asks.

"That's what she said," Ma says.

Raj takes a long sip of water.

"So your plans are to stay here permanently?" Daddy asks.

Raj squints. “Yes, that is the plan. It would have been a lot of trouble to go through if it weren’t.”

“Trouble?” Daddy asks. “Isn’t it an honor?”

“Daddy,” Leah says in an extra-calm way. “I’m sure Raj just means that they wouldn’t have naturalized if they weren’t planning to stay. Isn’t that right?” Leah glances nervously at Raj. She’s starting to look as if she might faint.

“Can someone please pass the salad?” you call out loudly. All eyes suddenly shift to you, again as if they’d forgotten you’re even there.

Raj grabs the bowl near him, hands it to you, and smiles. “I think we can all agree it is an honor to live in this great country.”

After that, Leah tries to steer the conversation to the bakery and gets Daddy to talk about bread making, something he can talk about for hours. It turns out Raj is interested in baking and explains to Daddy how naan is made in a clay oven. Daddy tells him how to make pumpernickel, and they both seem to enjoy the conversation, though you, Ma, and Leah start to glaze over because you’ve heard Daddy talk about bread too many times.

Raj makes Daddy laugh, though. Even Ma smiles when he tells a story about the first time his family tried Wonder Bread and how it stuck to the roof of everyone's mouth. You like the way Raj's forehead crinkles up when he laughs. It's going well, you think. Of course they like Raj.

After more smiles, dessert, and the shaking of hands, Raj leaves. As soon as the door closes, Ma turns to Leah.

"What were you thinking surprising us like this?" she says. Then she tells Leah she doesn't want her seeing Raj anymore.

"I knew it!" Leah yells and points at Ma. Leah never yells. "You're prejudiced."

"Prejudiced? It's the world, not us," Ma says. "I'm thinking of your future."

"Ma, the world is changing. Did you see what happened this week? The Supreme Court ruling, *Loving versus Virginia*?" She goes over to the stand in the living room where Daddy stuffs the newspapers and comes back with a copy of Tuesday's *New York Times*. She puts it on the kitchen counter and taps the page.

“Look,” she says. You walk over and look. Ma and Daddy do the same.

Justices Upset All Bans on Interracial Marriage, the headline says. Then Leah reads the first sentence of the article. “The Supreme Court ruled unanimously today that states cannot outlaw marriages between whites and non-whites.” She stops reading and faces Ma again.

“I see,” Ma says.

“What does it mean?” you ask Leah.

“It means that it’s legal everywhere now for different races to marry,” says Daddy.

“But it wasn’t illegal in Connecticut,” Ma says. “And that’s not what this is about.”

“Oh no?” Leah says. “You should have seen the way you both stared at Raj when he walked in the door. I had to pick your jaws off the floor. And you should know what prejudice feels like, living in this narrow-minded town.”

“This narrow-minded town has given you opportunities I only dreamed of. I don’t have anything against the color of his skin.”

“Leah, you know we’re not like that,” Daddy says.

“So the first thing you noticed about Raj was his reli-

gion? I know that strangers look at us funny in the street. You don't want me to be with him because of his religion *and* his skin color."

Ma takes a deep sigh. "Leah, listen to me," she says. You're all still standing around the kitchen counter, the newspaper open in front of you. "This is not about him. It's about what it means to be Jewish, about having a Jewish family someday. Isn't that important to you?"

"It's okay that you have a little crush. He's very charming. But that's all it is," Daddy adds.

"Yes." Ma smiles at Daddy. "I'm actually glad you had him over for dinner. You saw for yourself that it wouldn't work. It'll be easier to let it go now rather than later."

"This isn't a little crush. I love him."

Ma rolls her eyes. Daddy looks away.

"I think he's nicer than Leah's other boyfriends," you offer, but no one even glances in your direction. They go back to staring each other down. "He brought flowers," you try again.

"Leah, you have no idea what love is," Daddy says.

"See," Leah says, looking at you with her hands on her hips. "This is why I didn't want to tell them."

You open your mouth, but you don't know what to say. She walks over to the roses.

"Well, if you don't want me to see him anymore, then you don't get to enjoy the flowers." She grabs them out of the vase by the tops of the stems so she doesn't prick herself and shoves them in the garbage. Then she hurries off to the bedroom you share and slams the door.

Ma and Daddy stand there for a moment. Ma starts speaking in Yiddish to Daddy. She speaks it better than Daddy, but he knows enough to keep up. They learned from their parents, but they never taught you and Leah. You think it's because they wanted to keep it for themselves, a secret language. You only understand some words. You hear Ma say farblondjet, then meshuggener. Those words you know. It means they think Leah and Raj are all mixed-up and crazy.

Ma marches to her bedroom, still muttering to herself, and Daddy follows, leaving you alone in the living room.

You walk over to the flowers in the garbage and pluck out the largest rose. You put your nose in the center of the flower and breathe. The smell is sweet and comforting, the petals silky smooth to the touch.

It seems a shame that the rose will die in the garbage. You once did flower pressing in school, so you know to break off the top part of it. Then you put it between the pages of one of the big art books Ma and Daddy keep below the coffee table. After you press it closed tightly, you open the book again and see the print of the red petals staining the pages like watercolor paint. You decide to close it again and hide it on a shelf in the coat closet. Maybe you'll tell Leah about it later, or maybe you'll just keep it for yourself.