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from *Boomtown Girl*

An eleven-year-old girl, Nikita Nandakumar, daughter of the local stationer, is riding her bicycle home from school. She will stop at her father's store to tell him the day's news: twenty out of twenty on English dictation; ninety-eight percent on the first algebra test of the year; and in geography her map of India, with all the rivers and tributaries labelled neatly and correctly, was passed around the class as an example, Miss Daniels said, of the kind of work that God rewards.

The sun beats down on Nikita's head as she pedals along Kadu Road. Dressed in the blue skirt, white blouse, and navy tie that make up the uniform of St. Alphonsa's, she is five feet tall and thin as a broomstick. Twin braids, their ends tied with blue nylon ribbon, lift off her shoulders in the wind. Already she can smell jasmine and chrysanthemums from the approaching market, dusty gunnysacks of onions, groundnuts roasting in their shells over coals. The smells are familiar and at the same time thrilling. Appa will show her off to his customers, who will in turn praise and applaud her. As the compliments flow she will busy herself arranging or unpacking things in the shop so everyone will see that she never wastes time: that if she is not busy studying she makes herself useful.

She dismounts in front of Nandakumar Stationers, one of four shops, along with Aarthi Tailors, Guru Provisions, and City Books, housed in a row of squat brick buildings that were once the maharaja's stables. Four chipped concrete steps lead from the pavement to the glass display case, two meters wide, running almost the entire width of the shop. Nikita squeezes through the gap between the case and the left wall. Appa is leaning against a shelf and counting

out sheets of graph paper. He flicks each one upwards with his left thumbnail, kept deliberately long for this purpose. "Why so excited?" he asks her in Kannada.

She lists her accomplishments. He sets aside the paper and kisses the top of her head. "Excellent, little one. Amma will be so happy."

"Am I a good student?"

"You have doubts about this?"

She grabs his arm with both hands. "Answer me! Do you think I'm good?"

With his free hand he tries to tickle her. She squeals and squirms. Her eyes are fixed on his face, begging him to say that she is as smart as Naresh, her brilliant older brother, who was killed in a car accident a year and a half ago. At times the memory of him still makes her weep; at other moments she feels nothing, as if Naresh were a stranger and not the lanky brother who slept in a cot two feet from her own, who carried her on his shoulders and taught her tricks to learn multiplication tables and square roots. Now that he is gone she knows it is up to her to get high marks in every subject, to bring home silver cups and shields and make her parents proud.

Two customers are stepping up to the display case. "You're a little too good sometimes," Appa says as he shakes her off. Nikita picks up the graph paper and pretends to be absorbed in recounting the sheets. She glances at the visitors: an old woman and a girl. The old woman is a regular at the shop--a kindly sort, always dressed in the same mustard silk sari, who is said to know German and have lived in Europe, and who leaves in her wake a pleasant smell of camphor. But the girl is a stranger, definitely not from Savitrinagar, and, judging by her fair skin and green eyes, not even from India. She has a delicate, sombre face framed by dark curls. As Nikita stares the chin lifts, and the green eyes brighten as her gaze scans the shop--its narrow

shelves crammed with notebooks of every size and rule, Nataraj pencils, Camel erasers, tubs and tubes of Fevicol paste, paintbrushes, oil pastels, and colored pencils--and comes to settle on Nikita.

"Listening, Niki?"

Nikita starts at the sound of her father's voice. "Are you," he says, "using a two-hundred or one-hundred-page notebook for maths?"

"Two hundred," Nikita replies. She steps forward. More of the stranger comes into view: violet shadows under the green eyes, a sleeveless frock that ends well above the knees, and sandals showing off toenails painted not pink or crimson, but black.

The old woman, who has been talking to Appa in Kannada, now speaks to Nikita in English. "This is my granddaughter. Her name is Paddy. She'll be joining your school tomorrow, no Paddy? Do you remember which section you're in?"

"Six C," Paddy says.

"My class!" Nikita whispers.

Paddy winks at her, as if the two of them have been plotting for a long time to be in the same class. Nikita winks back.

"How nice for us, Paddy," the old woman is saying. "We can just ask Nikita what all you're going to need. The school store was out of stock of everything."

Nikita starts to run back and forth between the shelves and the display case, collecting and adding to the pile Appa has started: ten two-hundred-page ruled notebooks, one for each subject, HB2 pencils, fountain pen, bottle of blue ink, and brown paper. Textbooks, she tells Paddy's grandmother, are available at City Books.

Paddy points to the brown paper and speaks in an excited voice. The words sound like English, made incomprehensible by her American accent.

"Eh?" Nikita says.

Paddy speaks louder. "Is. That. For. Art?"

"For making books covers," Nikita replies, "so your books won't get dirty."

"I've never done that. And I've never written with a fountain pen."

"It is good for your handwriting. Writing with ball-point is very bad."

"There are all kinds of things you're going to have to learn here, Paddy," the old woman says as she places the items one by one into a cloth bag. "Nikita, will you help her at school, please?"

Nikita nods happily.

"My daughter is a very good student," Appa says in his slow, careful English. "At least three hours every day she spends studying--no, Niki?"

Paddy's green eyes widen. "*Three hours?*" she says.

"Not every day," Nikita mutters, for she doesn't want Paddy to think she is so studious that she doesn't like to play or chat. "What is your favorite subject?"

"Art," Paddy says.

It is the first time Nikita has heard someone declare art to be her favorite subject. Paddy obviously doesn't know that everyone here will say that she's not a serious student, that she doesn't like to study, for what is there to study in art? Either you are naturally good at it or you are not. Those who belong to the first category produce beautiful pictures in their sketch books during the weekly forty-five-minute art period, when Miss Gowri writes topics like "mountains," or "cricket match" on the blackboard. Those who are not talented, like Nikita, draw stick figures

and laugh at their own lack of talent. Nobody considers art a subject like maths, science, history, or geography, where you have to take notes and read and learn so many rules and facts. Nikita knows, from her uncle who lives in Chicago, that the American educational system is very lax, that students don't wear uniforms, that they are given very little homework, and that they learn in tenth standard what Indian students learn in fifth. Paddy, Nikita thinks with a mixture of pity and glee, is obviously going to have a hard time.

"Your favorite subject, Niki?" the old woman asks.

"Maths," Nikita says proudly.

"You know," Appa says in Kannada as Paddy is led away, "something very sad happened to that girl. She has lost both her parents."

Nikita covers her mouth with her hands at this news. Appa tells her that the old woman, Mrs. Padukone, had a son--Paddy's father--who moved to America, married a white woman, and died soon after Paddy was born. Recently her mother died as well, which is why Paddy has come to Bangalore to live with her grandmother. "Some people think," Appa continues, his voice growing hoarse, "that everyone who goes to America becomes rich and happy. They forget that bad luck can strike anybody."

Nikita knows he is thinking of Naresh, but at this moment she cannot bring herself to feel sad. Instead she shivers in excitement. Paddy will have to learn the school rules and the names of all the teachers; she will have to be taught factoring and triangle theorems. Who better to help her learn these things than Nikita?