

SHORTLISTED FOR THE COSTA
FIRST NOVEL AWARD 2007



Gifted

Nikita Lalwani

'A sparkingly funny and poignant study of a young maths prodigy struggling with her gift and a difficult family'

Gerard Woodward,
Observer, Books of the Year

Gifted
by
Nikita Lalwani

Copyright © Nikita Lalwani, 2007

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from Gifted

To find out more please visit www.penguin.co.uk

I

Mahesh is sitting in his office, marking. He looks up at the arc of the window as a train rushes past, its urgency left behind in diesel scent and echoing clacks. The dank hush of autumn is settling into his room like a foregone conclusion. It is the eleventh season of its kind in his experience in the UK. The fourth of its kind in this room. Mahesh looks up. There are charts and pictures on the wall. The map of the world sits at an awkward angle, blue ocean disappearing behind the iron bookshelf. Books bulge in huge rows, pressing together files and papers, orange foolscap running in chunky alternation with black, white and grey. In the left corner of the room, by the whiteboard, the bumpy illustration of Gandhi peers out at him. In his mind there is an annoyance that delicately attacks his thoughts every few minutes.

Why did Rumi write that in her exercise book? This is the question that hooks into his conscience periodically: a tiny dental tool piercing soft gum. Why did she write it?

I went to play with Sharon Rafferty and Julie Harris and Leanne Roper in the woods. They let me play softball which is like rounders but with only two bases. Sharon said 'let's go and get the softball and racquets from my house. When we got to her place we stood outside the gate and Sharon said 'I just have to check you can come in Rumi because my mum doesn't like coloured people.' Then she went in with the others and I waited outside.

Thank goodness she came back and said it was OK. Then we went in and had pop ices and got the racquets. Mrs Rafferty was sun bathing in the garden and looked red. We took the racquets and played softball in the woods.

‘Coloured’. The word had made him think of a crayon spreading a thick grainy brown over a round face, the kind of awkward pictures Rumi used to draw under duress when she was younger.

Again he looks at Gandhi, wizened and unflinching, in the corner of his room. What would they make of this back in college, cocooned as they had been in the company of ideas? Trotskyites, Gandhian Communists – they had found plenty of names for themselves back then, chewing betel, relishing the bitter stain on their lips and debating whether class war was compatible with non-violence. What would they think of this name? What would they think of the conversation he had attempted with Rumi after reading it?

‘Do you like your school, Rumi?’

‘I don’t like the bullies.’

‘What do you mean, bullies?’

‘People who aren’t nice to me.’

‘Do not let these things affect you. You are ten years old now.’

‘What?’

‘You should be like a tiger in the jungle. Like Shere Khan in *The Jungle Book*.’

‘What do you mean, Daddy?’

‘If someone hits you, then hit them back. If they hit you once, hit them twice.’

The words had come out of his mouth, as honest as a shotgun, and he had looked away when her eyes jumped. If you are shocked, so am I, he’d thought. But you are not going to be a victim. That I will not allow.

What would they think of this – the Hyderabad college collective – this world that he had chosen to inhabit, placing a solitary, all-important offspring right at the centre? Come to that, what about Whitefoot, his current friend, colleague from the PhD course at Cardiff, Marxist himself – what would he think?

Another train goes past, carrying a heavy rattle inside it, dense as a migraine. The tremble of the room seems to jolt the Gandhi picture slightly. He can see a square of evening light on the glass, obscuring part of Gandhi’s face. Coloured? Why did she write it?

It is four p.m., an early end to his day. He has marked four papers, and the room has lost most of its light. Mahesh screws the lid on to his fountain pen and places it in the outer pocket of his blazer so that the brushed steel is visible against the brown polyester mix. The pen had been a present from Shreene, bought with cash carefully siphoned from her first few pay cheques, when she had begun to work after the birth. It is almost exactly the same age as Rumi. After ten years it still feels smooth to the touch, cool, not a single visible scratch or dent on the whole body of the piece. There is still that sensation of guilty pleasure at this luxury when he thinks about what it signifies, a tool of learning and wisdom – but a flamboyant one. He buttons up and puts the exam papers to one side, releasing the blind at his window before he locks up for the day, tucking two MSc dissertations under his arm to look at when he gets home.

Five years earlier, Rumi had come home one day and announced that Mrs Gold wanted to come round and meet her parents. She was just five years old, in her first class at school. Mahesh and Shreene had arranged to leave work early on the appointed day, and were home by three thirty. Shreene began to fry some *bhajis*, while Mahesh descended into a deep silence, waiting in his shirt and tie in the living room. When Mrs Gold walked in, Rumi was holding her hand.

‘What a lovely walk home we’ve had together, Mr and Mrs Vasi,’ she said, letting Rumi go in ahead of her.

Rumi squirmed and went suddenly quiet, looking up at her father. Mahesh stared at the teacher’s peroxide coiffure – whipped and sprayed into rounded peaks and troughs, like a butterscotch dessert. He was confused. Mentally he fought against relaxing, a natural response to the large smile exuded by Mrs Gold.

‘Is it possible to talk to you and your wife together?’ she asked.

Shreene had brought in the snacks and joined him, sitting with her hands in her lap, still formal in her work-wear, tights and heels. There was an alertness about her: she kept looking covertly at

Mahesh, as if to say, 'Give me the signal and I'll go ahead with whatever it is we need to do.'

'What is it you wanted to talk about?' Mahesh said to Mrs Gold, feeling the accented curves of his voice as though for the first time. 'Is something wrong?'

'No . . . far from it, Mr Vasi. I wanted to give you some news that I think will make you very proud parents.'

'And that is?'

'Rumi is a gifted child!' Mrs Gold declared, unleashing the words with a thrilled upward turn of the mouth.

Mahesh looked at Shreene, who was biting at the dry skin on her lower lip – a sign that she was tense. He looked at Rumi, who was staring at the floor, waiting for him to decipher the words. And then he cast his gaze back towards Mrs Gold, and her radiant lines of teeth. 'You mean she is doing well at school?'

'I mean more than that, Mr Vasi,' said Mrs Gold. 'I mean that she is special. Different. Gifted.'

At this, Rumi started to fidget, scratching her nose and kicking her feet, looking from side to side, first at her mother, then at her father, her movements uncertain, exaggerated by the silence. Mahesh noticed that she had a scratch on her knee just below the hem of her corduroy dress, above the tight line of white sock gripping her calf. Shreene twitched her forehead at her daughter. Mahesh smiled at Mrs Gold again, and softened his voice, aware that his daughter was listening to each word as he spoke. He tried to keep the pressure out of the sentences he began to create.

'Myself and my wife take . . . Rumika's education very seriously. We are pleased that she is doing well in her studies and that her hard work has paid off. I am an academic myself –'

Mrs Gold shook her head, interrupting. 'With due respect, Mr and Mrs Vasi, I'm talking about something else. I am talking about a gift. Something that only comes along now and then. Rumi is a gifted mathematician!'

They were plunged into silence once more. Rumi moved her legs back and forth, pushing them rhythmically against the velour

of the sofa. Mahesh registered vaguely that she was repeating the movement in batches of four, then pausing, like a physical chant. He watched her support one of her chubby little cheeks with a hand, which she made into a fist, balancing her elbow on her thigh. She was still staring at the floor.

'I am also a mathematician and I am glad that she is doing well in this subject, as you say. I have placed emphasis on it because it is my area of speciality,' said Mahesh, trying to maintain an amiable expression on his face.

'We at Summerfield believe that Rumi deserves to have this gift nurtured,' said Mrs Gold. She leant in, pulling her skirt together so that the pleat at the front disappeared neatly inside itself. She paused significantly, as though she was about to say something serious, possibly untoward. Rumi also leant in automatically to listen, her swaying legs forcing themselves to halt, pressing a temporary dent into the sofa front. Even Shreene moved her body forward, raising her eyebrows expectantly.

'Have you heard of a place called Mensa?' said Mrs Gold.

Mahesh felt exasperated. He had seen all the same adverts as her. The ads for this place she named with such careful tedium, as though she was rolling a diamond round her mouth. 'Mensa'. He'd seen their childish IQ tests, fooled around with filling them out in the Sunday papers. He knew what Mensa was, for goodness' sake. What did she take him for? And why was she so surprised that he and his daughter could string numbers together with reasonable panache? They were hardly shopkeepers.

He was 'peed off', as they said here: irritated. He tried to think of more slang, enjoying the taste of righteousness, dousing each word with it. He was 'hacked off', 'cheesed off', 'not pleased'. What did she think? That he was some third-rate charlatan, preening his feathers under the banner of academia? He felt a rumble in his stomach as the *bhajis* fermented, rising as though to validate his sense of pique. Oddly, the sensation cheered him. He felt like making a grand statement to this woman, one that Rumi would witness, about how it was possible through strength and discipline to

create your own destiny using the power of thought: through marks, percentages, papers, exams, numbers that had added up, in his case, to a big sum in small hands – a scholarship across the ocean.

He surveyed Mrs Gold's darting eyes. She was watching his wife as she sipped her tea. Shreene was returning her gaze, looking round the room at intervals. What preconceptions did she bring with her – this queer-spoken woman with her little smiles and polite contradictions? He was not going to make a grand statement. It would only confuse things. But, if he could, he would tell her everything. He'd tell her he'd got into all their universities – all the bloody jewels they treasured so exclusively in this country: that he had been offered a place at their Cambridge and their UCL. He had ended up in Cardiff because they had offered the cash – several thousand pounds of it, a sum that no one could deny for its totality. Full fees. They had wanted him here, a foreigner with no more than five pounds in his pocket and a slip of a wife, bare-toed and shivering. That was how he had got off the plane with Shreene in 1972, newly wed and aware, dignified by the patronage of their red-brick institutions, sure as a compass, leading the way for them both.

He had not been among the thirty thousand Asians haemorrhaging out of the ugly scar in Uganda's belly that same year, seeping into the dark spaces of Britain, afloat in the soiled bathwater of Amin's shake-up: the crawling masses who had fallen into the pockets of Leicester and Wembley. He was not going to be dissolved into the rivers of blood, among Enoch Powell's armies of bacteria, defecating in people's nightmares on the landscape of their precious country.

He was Dr Mahesh Vasi, PhD, a man who had begun his maths career repeating times tables under a large tree in Patiala with fifteen schoolmates, embossed with dust and driven by the pure heat of numbers. Now he was here, working just over an hour's commute away, speaking to a room of one hundred students each week, employed in name by the University of Swansea, sub-set of the University of Wales itself. What about that, then?

Mahesh cleared his throat and considered how to proceed. He uncrossed, then recrossed his legs with an air of what he hoped was leisurely contemplation. He still had to learn how to relax, uncoil the ritual desire to please. It was a shameful habit, nothing else, he told himself.

Shreene offered Mrs Gold the plate of snacks. The vegetables shone through the batter with glistening heat: dark purple aubergine skins and green courgettes, pushing their thick curves through the fried covering. 'Please – have one,' she said, smiling and pressing a paper napkin into the teacher's hand. 'Do you like spicy food?'

Mahesh took the opportunity to interject. 'I know Mensa very well, Mrs Gold. I'm happy to go there with Rumika and see what it is like.'

In the two weeks that followed, running up to Rumi's entrance exam for Mensa, Mahesh enforced a routine that was not dissimilar to the one he had made Shreene follow in the first year of their marriage during her pregnancy.

He had been very attracted to the volcanic quality of his new wife back then: the huge blue eyes (an exotic aberration of colour in her family, which she regarded with much pride) that seemed to yell out of their sockets when she was angry, the trickle of black curls that lay sensually against the moist olive of her forehead. But he had worried about the stereotypical elements of their union – the fact that they were essentially strangers, having met only once before marriage, conception occurring within a month of wedlock, as hoped for by their parents back home.

At that time they had lived in a student bed-sit, the kitchen breathing and squeaking its gaseous smells into the room where they slept. Money was tight: Mahesh was working in the university post office to supplement his sponsorship, and he was militant about saving. 'If we earn two pounds we save one of them,' he was fond of saying. 'I will not be someone who struggles to find coins for the heater. If we choose to go without, so be it. It can never be forced upon us if we have our own savings.'

At weekends Shreene went with him to the university sports club to shower in hot luxury; during the week she made do with the decrepit shared bathroom on the floor below. She spent the day trying to bring some sense of what she understood as family life to the single room they lived in, deflecting her loneliness with the necessity of housekeeping, finding her place among the steel trays and folded *saris* that she had brought from her parental home.

He came home late in the evenings, weary with the remote universe of his PhD, and would begin what Shreene (first jokingly and later with a bitter regularity) called 'the police-camp procedures'. He had taken her out of the rich bustle of her world: interrupted the round stretchings of *chapattis*, the powdery rainbow of her spices, and punctured her pride at exactly seven thirty each evening, forcing her to sit down at their hobbling plastic table, and run through the events of the day. He could not subscribe to something as transient as a daily newspaper, but he requested that Shreene make a single trip every lunch-time, to read the paper in the local library. She was free to read whichever she chose; all he asked was that they have a one-hour conversation dissecting it before dinner each day. When Shreene retaliated, her proud eyes steaming with humiliation, saying that this was not the way she was used to being treated – that she had not bargained on being insulted like this by her husband – he spelt out very clearly the positive outcomes that made this a logical course of action:

1. He would be able to converse with her on matters other than the drama and intrigue of their extended families. This could only be beneficial in the long run.
2. It would improve her English, thereby enabling her to work as soon as the baby was born. She was a Delhi University graduate; her degree had covered literature, philosophy and fine art, albeit in Hindi. There was no reason why she should not be able to contribute to the household's income. In fact, it was imperative that she did, considering that soon there would be three people in the family.

3. The trip to the library was both thrifty and empowering. It would thrust her into the world, thereby forcing her to interact with locals – again, beneficial for her assimilation into the society they were now living in – rather than succumb to the temptation to hanker for and idealize the society she inhabited back home.
4. The trip outdoors would be good exercise for her, especially in her current state.
5. The whole regime would prevent her losing her mental abilities through lack of usage, especially during this critical period in her life – pregnancy.

This last point particularly angered Shreene. But she bit back her indignation and proceeded as he deemed fit. For a while it seemed almost to work – she would list the plane crashes and hijackings, the earthquakes, the bombs and the shoot-outs in Ireland. If she wasn't able to pronounce the names of the places, then she made sure to give an indication of the numbers involved in each case, gathering the digits in her memory to create a vast array of weaponry. Sometimes she made up events, in unnamed places, a plane almost going down in the Indian Ocean due to a tiny error on the part of the pilot, or small riots in a mosque on the border with Pakistan; a slow news day led to an esteemed guru rousing thousands of disciples in Gujarat, like a latter-day prophet.

Those tales invariably found their way back to the subcontinent. Mahesh forbade her to dwell on her past, but sometimes when she came up with these fabrications he found her unbearably cute. He battled with his heart, which was softening like a marshmallow on a fire, and tried to maintain perspective. 'Are you sure?' he would ask, curbing a smile. And so they continued, until Shreene began to crack, splintering into tantrums, losing control. Eventually, one day, dissatisfied with the figures, Mahesh asked her to give an opinion on Heath's plans for dealing with unemployment. She erupted. There were screams, plates were banged on the worktops, teeth were gritted, and she trashed the ritual once and for all.

‘We’re never going back, are we?’ she said, propositioning him with the words, urging him to deny them. ‘This is all I have to look forward to now. You told me it was just for the PhD but I’m never going to see my family again. You lied to me, didn’t you? This is it!’

‘What has that got to do with anything?’ asked Mahesh. ‘And, anyway, surely we make the decision that is most appropriate when the time comes? Why call it lying?’

‘When you interviewed me for marriage you asked me if I wanted to live abroad,’ said Shreene, swallowing. ‘I told you then, “No, I am Indian, my heart is *desi*.” Just three years, you said.’

By the time Rumi was five, though, and the Mensa equation was assembling before them, Shreene was a fully established working woman. The police-camp procedures were a distant memory for Mahesh, doused with the innocence of their early years.

Inevitably Rumi had to observe a more intensive timetable than other children at her school, and this had to be implemented at home, outside school hours. But in spite of, or maybe because of her youth, at five, she had been a willing student. She displayed genuine excitement when it came to the numbers game: the figures he threw at her found their mark time and time again, and she would bat them back with a ravenous energy that simultaneously thrilled him and unnerved Shreene.

For those two weeks, Mahesh picked Rumi up from school every day at three forty-five on the dot, and at home, after refreshment and a few basic yoga exercises, they began the preparation. As well as a basic diet that was nutritionally balanced, Shreene provided Rumi’s favourite foods at set intervals. These included a small number of biscuits, Jammie Dodgers or custard creams, and a jam doughnut or chocolate ice-cream late in the evening. Every two hours they took a short break of fifteen minutes, stretching or taking a walk together round the block. The journey began with their exit through the back gate. Their home was at the centre of ten similar houses that stretched up the left of a hilly road, terracotta blocks, chequered with creamy beige sealant, and graphite-coloured

roofs with tiny pipe chimneys, repeating in vision and matching the houses on the opposite side.

Mahesh watched Rumi's pigtailed bobbing in front of him as they walked together in the evening dusk, and felt close to his daughter. At the top of the hill, the tributary of their footpath joined a wider pavement, set against a main road with occasional traffic pushing through. As Mahesh progressed like this, tracing a steady circuit past the houses, registering the trio of shops across the road each time (newsagent, launderette and general hardware), immersed in the rich smell of pollution and domestic greenery, he felt bound to Rumi in the mystery of silence, hypnotized by the question-and-answer sessions they had been through. Every question had an answer. For every one he asked, after she had thought, battled, tried things out, she would come up with it. This was their interaction. Even Shreene was focused during this period, attuned to the schedule and ready to prepare Rumi for bed with her bath and night-time milk, stirred through with crushed almonds.

On the day itself, he wanted Shreene to come with them but she bowed out, claiming she would only mess it up for him if he wanted to get into serious conversation with anyone. Much better for him to take Rumi alone. He drove Rumi to the community centre where the local branch of the society was meeting that month. Shreene had dressed her in a matt satin frock, found in a second-hand shop: grey background imprinted with large red flowers that looked like poppies. It had a floppy bow that tied in the middle of Rumi's back. Mahesh looked at his five-year-old daughter, sitting next to him when he stopped at the traffic lights, and had a brief moment of panic. Did she look as if she was going to a wedding? Would they appear uncouth? He dismissed the thought with a blink. If there was one thing he did know, it was that these things mattered least of all. It was important to hold on to this. The simplicity of the proceedings.

However, no one had prepared him for the possibility that he would be driving back within minutes, seconds, even, of entering the hall. They were late, true enough, and this had confused him,

made him wonder why he had not been sure of their timings. (Had he done this on purpose? Mahesh wondered later. If so, what did it mean?) But, still, no one could explain the chill that went through him when the person at the microphone had stopped delivering his address to look at the two of them at the back of the hall. Rumi had squeezed his hand as the five rows of people turned round, the speaker calling to them to sit at the front. But Mahesh hadn't sat down among the sea of white faces. (Why the colour? He couldn't explain it now, even.) Instead, with a tight grip on Rumi's hand, he had turned and left the room so swiftly that it was only when they were getting into the car that she managed to speak.

'Where are we going, Daddy?' she asked, as he buckled her in, feverishly adjusting the mirror and pulling his own seat forward.

We'll do it ourselves, he said, in silent response, feeling unnatural heat saturate his forehead. He shivered. We don't need them, he thought, while he reversed, checking the mirror in case Mrs Gold should show up, late herself.

2

Rumi glanced at her watch. She was 10 years, 2 months, 13 days, 2 hours, 42 minutes and 6 seconds old.

Leaning against a Portakabin near the school gate, looking out for her father through the high fence, she wondered how much longer it would be before he arrived. A shiver went through her: the numb bite in the air unsettled her carefully arranged obscurity, ruffling her senses, so that she felt in danger of being noticed. She gathered herself, and stood as quietly as she could. The howls and shrieks of the playground were being funnelled slowly down the main path and out through the gate. She was waiting away from the entrance, where the school was pouring its inhabitants down on to the road, because it would be too embarrassing if anyone saw Mahesh pick her up.

She felt as if she had a continual reminder of her own embarrassment now that she was ten, a swinging arrow that rose to point very high, very quickly, like the arrow on a *Blue Peter* charity appeal. She didn't understand why, but she knew that the sight of her father getting out of his car, his beige raincoat belted tightly at the waist, the black beard contaminated with grey wires, eyes as serious as the end of the world – the thought of this in front of everyone – shamed her. And if he spoke, in that slow way, as though something very bad had happened, the voice he reserved for being serious, if he spoke like that in front of everyone, she wouldn't be able to bear it.

'Your dad's so scary,' Sharon Rafferty had said once, when she had been doing Julie Harris's hair at lunch-time in the playground. 'Does he ever smile? He's like a Dalek.'

Rafferty had only seen her father from a distance, at parents' evening, but it had been enough to make him part of her vocabulary.

It was as though he had leaked a funny smell, and now he was fair game for mockery.

Rumi frowned and scratched the bump on her nose made by her glasses. Her father was a teacher, or a 'lecturer', as they called it at the university, but her schoolmates didn't know that. So it had to be something else. They made her feel useless. Not just Rafferty and Harris, the popular ones, but all the girls in her class. It wasn't just that Rumi was barely allowed out to play – maybe once a week, for a couple of hours, if that – it was that she always had to ask if she could join in when people like Rafferty and Harris, who lived nearby, were playing, as though it was a special favour. Lately, since they had all started hanging about near the local shop instead of going to the woods, it had got worse. They hadn't played softball since that first time with Sharon, Julie and Leanne. It made her mad. It was more than embarrassing. It was a horrible feeling.

If the whole friends thing was like a Venn diagram, she wasn't even inside the outer circle. It was not like India, where everyone had wanted to play with her, or asked to know everything about her. In the whole of Cardiff, no one wanted to talk to her (you couldn't count your parents in this, and even if you could count your brother, Nibu couldn't speak properly yet), except Simon Bridgeman and Christopher Palmer, also dismissed as 'brainboxes'. Even they could only speak to her outside the school boundaries or they ran the risk of being ridiculed, as though she was a girlfriend or something. She was lonely. But it wasn't only her father's fault. If she stood at the gates right now, for example, she knew she would embarrass herself just by being there, freakishly dressed in a lacy frock and thick woollen tights, her long hair falling out of the gold slide that Shreene clipped into the right-hand side daily.

Rumi was not allowed to choose her clothes. For budgetary reasons, according to Mahesh, she had to wear outfits that had been made for her during the India Trip, two years previously, stitched in various sizes so that she could grow into them. That was the only bad outcome of a trip that had been otherwise, without doubt, the best time she had experienced in her whole life. But the clothes

meant that she was cold most of the time and, unable to wear jeans or dungarees, derided constantly for her particular form of fashion; the thick NHS glasses and the shiny wardrobe of Indian synthetics completed the long list of reasons to be embarrassed. In the cut-and-thrust of playground survival, these things mattered. They all want to be identical, she thought. Identikit identi identi denters irritating girls. Identical dentiski. Skident. It hurt. And Rumi had removed herself from the pool, preferring instead to plan the world through the triumphant and logical completion of books like *Peak Maths*, a series in which she was at least seven books ahead of anyone else in her year.

She looked at her watch again. Now she was 10 years, 2 months, 13 days, 2 hours, 48 minutes and 4 seconds old. She sang the numbers song in her head. It was almost a lullaby, one she had known since she was a child, the tune working like a step graph with a line that rose and rose, then flattened out when it got to sixteen, ending with a comforting monotone. The wind continued to chop at her, throwing her off balance, but she clung to the melody like a life-jacket, letting the numbers warm her with their familiarity. 1 and 1 are 2. 2 and 2 are 4. 4 and 4 are 8. 8 and 8 are 16 – and 16 and 16 are 32. The figures continued in her head, as she extended the song for her own purposes, loving its simplicity. They were wholesome, even numbers, created through doubling alone. 32 and 32 are 64 . . . 128 . . . 256 . . . 512. Five hundred and twelve was a lovely number. Really friendly. It made her think of her dad's big, warm, open hands, the lined palms in which she used to put her face on Sunday mornings when he and her mum were in bed. He used to pretend those hands were crocodile jaws waiting to gobble her up. That had been when he wasn't so obsessed with mental arithmetic and getting the right answer. He had played silly games with her, fresh and lazy with weekend yawns.

The car appeared round the corner, hovering at the traffic lights. She picked up her bag and walked quickly to meet it, keeping her gaze on the ground.

Now that Nibu was in the university crèche, no one was at home

to look after Rumi so every day she was supposed to go to the library and work from four until six o'clock on twenty problems set by her father. From Rumi's point of view there were many pluses to the proposed new regime. First of all, it exponentially increased the probability of her walking home with John Kemble, the most fancied boy in the class. Her own status meant that there was no chance of talking to him unless they were on their own, when he was apt to be much friendlier. Kemble lived near the library, so in future, depending on whether they were at the gate at around the same time, Rumi had a good chance of walking with him for at least six minutes. She considered it. Well it was probably a 2 in 7 chance. Or maybe 3 in 14, otherwise known as 3 over 14. If you thought about it, 1 over 14 would be point 0714 so 3 times that came to point 2142. She frowned. Hadn't realized it was that small, she thought.

Today, however, it was the first day of the new plan so Mahesh was going to take her there himself, to the library in Maelfa shopping centre. He ran through the rules again on the way there, as he drove through the darkening afternoon with his habitual caution. Rumi listened, her face against the window, watching rain droplets slide into each other. She knew the rules by heart by now.

1. The most important rule. No speaking to anyone. Not even if she should recognize someone from school, who might be in the library. In fact, should the latter happen, she should be especially silent and turn away, avoiding eye-contact.
2. No reference to her library routine to be made at any point – not to classmates or teachers, or anyone else who might ask her where she went at home-time.
3. No leaving the library after she had entered it at four p.m. She was to stay at her desk, working on the problems, and use the library lavatory if need be. No wandering around the shopping centre, or the small park nearby. She was to stay at the desk and that was that. Mahesh had threatened to make spot checks at any

time: he would return early or at random to check on her. That was to be her deterrent.

4. The librarian to be the only exception to this rule – spoken to in emergencies. In that instance Rumi was to give the librarian the telephone numbers and contact details that had been written in the back of her maths exercise book.

5. She would not carry money on her person. (That was easy enough, thought Rumi. She didn't have pocket money, like other children.) And she would not carry food either: according to Mahesh, hunger sharpened the mind, allowing deeper concentration. She would wait to eat her evening meal with the family at eight thirty. But she would carry a single ten-pence coin in her anorak pocket for a telephone call, to be used only in an extreme emergency when there was no other option. (Rumi wondered what kind of scenario this special emergency might be – presumably if the librarian died or was abducted.)

6. All time in the library to be spent on maths, that being the purpose of this period of preparation. No loss of focus, and especially no time to be wasted in the reading of novels, even though it might be tempting. It was important that Rumi should enforce self-discipline. This was a planned period of sustained study, after all, in which she would build stamina for the coming year: the start of secondary school.

They arrived at the shopping centre. The library was just to the side of the entrance, the dirty russet bricks visible through the windscreen as they parked beside it. Mahesh locked the car and took Rumi in, smiling at the librarian as they entered. Although she knew the space well, the multiplicity of the rows and desks, the anonymity of the people, each sitting alone, enclosed in the padding of silence, made her feel nervous.

'Come on, now,' said Mahesh. 'Let us choose your desk.'

They found an area towards the front, directly in the line of vision of the loans desk. Rumi set up her maths-tools box and

unloaded her bag, while Mahesh went to speak to the lady who was arranging books behind the counter. After a couple of minutes he returned. 'Are you ready?' he asked, inclining his head in her direction, as a gesture of support.

Rumi nodded, not knowing how to react.

'I will leave now and return at six,' he said, tightening the belt of his coat. 'Or maybe earlier – who knows? There may be a spot check – or there may not.'

She nodded again, wondering whether she was supposed to do or say something.

'Today is good practice for you,' he said, smiling encouragingly. 'From tomorrow you will be making the journey here alone, so if you need to talk to me about the rules we can do that this evening after I have marked your paper.'

She watched him walk out, the room ballooning round her, the ceiling rushing up and away, making her head spin.

For many weeks, after that first afternoon, the routine worked as planned. Her father usually picked Nibu up from the crèche, then came and got her between six and six thirty. He would start by surveying her exercises, checking the number of new workings on the page, moving on to his daily conversation with whichever librarian was on duty. After that they all went together in the car to collect Shreene from the British Telecom centre where she worked. Sometimes, depending on how well the sums had gone, they stopped at the baker's for the reduced end-of-day cakes and Rumi would get a cream éclair as a treat.

Rumi did not mention how much she hated the new routine because she knew it was good for her, if she was going to be serious about her maths. After all, she was the one who had asked to do the O level next year. 'I can do it too, Dad,' she'd said, incensed by the idea that the boy on the telly had been two years younger than she was.

But that didn't take away the sodden misery of the whole thing. Rumi took her assigned place across from the librarian each day,

crossing her legs in a laboured tension as she sat in the dead air, scribbling out the useless sums on the page, remembering to move her feet after a good half-hour only to discover they had been stabbed a hundred times with pins and needles while she wasn't looking. She stared at the librarian between each portion of time, with a dull observatory interest, like a surveillance camera twisting to follow its target – watching her stamp the books and rearrange the index-card box. But the librarian did not watch her back. Eventually, in the fifth week, Rumi left her desk and read fifteen pages of an Enid Blyton book at the back of the room, then returned. The librarian did not comment. In fact, she didn't seem to register Rumi's absence. Eight weeks in, and Rumi had created a new routine, which included breaking several rules each day.

It began with her arrival. After she had set up her kit on the table she went to the back of the library and read a Malory Towers or Pippi Longstocking book for half an hour. She enjoyed this part, despite the out-and-out ban on fiction, but it was always a pleasure soaked in guilt. There was something dirty about it. Then she went for a distracted walk in the shopping centre for about twenty minutes, stopping to look in the toy shop at bright plastic contraptions that Nibu might like, checking in with the budgies and the goldfish at the pet shop, examining the numerous gadgets and seeds in the hardware and gardening shop. After this, it went downhill. She often stood outside the library door watching litter being hurled about by the wind, feeling her gut do a similar dance. It was the lying that got her down. They make me lie all the time, she thought. She felt anger at the lack of cash, the single ten-pence coin smouldering like an insult in the pocket at her chest. And she was angry about the hunger she often felt, churning its way through her thoughts, like a roadrunner through the desert, sounding a constant buzz of discipline, a never-ending reminder. She imagined running away and joining a place like Malory Towers or the Chalet School, learning to ski, staying up all night for midnight feasts. Then she would pull herself together, and force herself to walk inside for an hour of maths, plus ten minutes' break.

In the tenth week, things changed, with a single incident – one that released so much guilt that it stained its way through her, like the ink from the broken biros in her pockets. She was sure her mum and dad could see it in her face, although they never said anything.

It had happened during the maths section of the evening. Under the burning tube lights, she attacked the numbers with speed and ferocity, as though she was playing Space Invaders, devouring the figures with the hunger in her belly and spitting out the remains. She worked feverishly, chewing pen tops down to sharp points. Then she had looked up – looked at the bored librarian at her desk, at the old man reading the paper – seen the thin tall rectangle of black sky through the doors and trembled with loneliness. She pinched her arm, like they did in stories, to make sure she was there, and got up. She walked out of the library and straight to the sweet shop round the corner.

There, she loitered by the entrance, pretending to look at magazines, as though she was deciding which one to buy. Two people came in, a mother and daughter, both wearing stripy scarves. Rumi manoeuvred her way to the penny-sweets section on her left and stared intensely at the marshmallows and white candy cigarettes. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the pair at the counter, talking to the woman at the till. The girl was very little, about six years old, scarf covering her mouth and half of her nose. The mother ordered a quarter of pear drops and bent down to wipe the child's nose. Rumi's right hand dived into the box of cola bottles and scooped a batch into her anorak pocket. She stood very quietly, hand shaking in her pocket against the wet zip, then turned and walked out of the door, holding her breath. She was a criminal. This was something that could not be reversed.

She ate the cola bottles in the foyer of the library, chewing the sticky rubber and swallowing it in big chunks before she could taste it properly. Then she sat back at her desk and worked madly to catch up. When Mahesh arrived, a few minutes later, it was a shock to see him towering above her, with Nibu squealing and smiling in

his arms. If he had left his office any earlier, he would have caught her. But he never got there before six, in spite of the threat of spot checks.

Soon she was stealing sweets every day, alternating between the four shops that sold confectionery in the shopping centre, entering a fantasy world like the one in the book about the chocolate factory, where goldfish gobstoppers lived alongside giant jelly strawberries and white mice. And she enjoyed relying on her wits, using her cunning to slip sweets into her pocket when the moment was perfect – a momentary chat about the weather between two grown-ups at the front, a gap in surveillance when the attendant left to find a fishing magazine for an old man. If she waited for long enough the moment always came. Although she had worked out that the probability of being caught was relatively high, given that none of the shops was populated with more than two or three customers at any time, she was still unprepared for the day when a hand clamped itself on her shoulder, making her jump, her own hand unclasping to scatter a mess of sherbet lollies and red liquorice bootlaces over the floor.

‘Show me what’s in your other pocket, young lady,’ said the shopkeeper, a sturdy woman with a face like a tortoise, the lines and grooves giving her a fearsome authority. Rumi pulled out her pocket, showing the dusty material with a shaking hand, her head hurting, as though she had been punched.

‘I’ll let you off this time,’ said the woman, sniffing as she collected the sweets together. ‘If you want to buy anything, join the queue and pay like everyone else. If not, push off.’

Instead of leaving then and there, Rumi had turned to look at the ‘queue’, which consisted of two boys at the counter, who were staring at her. She picked up a single sherbet lolly, a single white mouse to join it, and stood behind them, heart thudding ominously, as though it was threatening to bash its way right through her ribs and out of her body. I’ll show her, she thought, paying for the sweets with half of the emergency ten pence and replacing the five-pence change in her anorak. I can pay. I’ve got money.

After getting caught, the glamour seeped noiselessly out of the world beyond the library, and the shopping centre had a deflated quality, reminding Rumi of her own wrongdoing. She fell into a slump of self-loathing and mentally chained her body to the desk in the library, banning herself from leaving the seat even to go to the toilet – crushing her thighs together with a disciplined mania whenever the desire to urinate came upon her. Instead of physical adventures, her mind wandered through a series of daydreams, mostly revolving around moving to India.

She'd arrange it in the next India Trip, she thought; make her parents agree to it somehow. And then it would be announced in Assembly, how she was leaving them behind – Rafferty, Harris, the lot of them. She'd get her hair cut in advance, with a big fringe that spiked up a bit, and somehow get hold of a ra-ra skirt. When the list was read out at the end for football, table tennis and all that extra-curricular stuff, she'd raise her hand.

She'd get up and say, 'Yes, I have an announcement. I'm moving to a country where people laugh and have fun and aren't cruel and rude and don't make a joke of you, and where they are more intelligent than people here, especially at maths like me. And I'm never coming back. And also, by the way, my mum and dad say that British people stole all these stones from people in India, the rubies and diamonds in the precious buildings, before they stopped ruling it, and that represents how they stole the sparkle out of Indian people's lives. So it doesn't make much sense for me to live here, to be honest, because I don't agree with it. I'm going back to where I came from.'

She knew that she would have to make sure she was in a place where she could look at Simon Bridgeman and Christopher Palmer during this last bit, to give them a signal so they didn't take it personally. Or maybe she'd warn them in advance, so that the shock of what she was about to reveal, about their own history as British people, didn't upset them too much.