

Betsy, Tacy, Sejal, Tib

Sejal Shah

In the books I read growing up, there were always words I couldn't quite imagine. I remember, with a specificity that surprises me, the foreignness of certain colors: *kelly green*, *strawberry blonde*. These were books about girls with doting fathers and best friends named George, books about an adopted boy named Jim and his sister, Honey. A series about two best friends from the same street who made room for a third. No one felt alone past the second chapter. A series about twins, one good and one slightly more interesting. Like every girl, I wanted a twin or a best friend. Like every girl, I wanted both. Another series: four girls away at camp—it was in truth a boarding school, but I could scarcely imagine such a thing. That's what I mouthed to myself, then: scarcely. I tried these words on in my head, alone in my room, the bedside lamp on, folded under the covers, escaping into the pages of a book. And isn't that what all writers want? Falling into a book, each one a kind of Narnia, and feeling that exquisite edge of aloneness, honed almost to happiness.

Nearly everything that happened in my life when I was twelve took place at home, or at some close distance from

home. My mother would say to me, “Will you get the matching blouse from my drawer? It’s *popti*-colored. Parrot green.” In my head, this was the same color as kelly green, but I never found out. I never knew for sure. There were certain colors that bloomed normal on the palette of Indian saris, hanging in rows in the guest bedroom/youngest daughter’s closet. The way I’d seen in all of my friends’ houses, too—the saris couldn’t fit into the parents’ closets. Saris and American clothes would not coexist in the same shallow closet of these first houses.

How these series come back to haunt me now, with their sense of ownership over the world, with the ways in which they defined a world. *Kelly green*. With all the ways in which they owned words. *Strawberry blonde*. We read these books, but there was no one like us in any of them. Did we think of writing our own? I want to see us. To see the girl I was, the girls we were, back when we lived at home.

Something like Nancy Drew: *The Secret of the Old Clock*, *The Clue of the Leaning Chimney*. *The Mystery of the Girl Who Lives at Home*.

Sejal Shah lived alone with her parents on Pelham Road in western New York State, in a city that had seen better days (“Lion of the West”), that had housed stops on the Underground Railroad. She became a late only child, her older brother having jumped ship for college, Brown University, where many of the students were colored, mixed

race, radical, or in some other way Third World, yet wanting to begin their training to be doctors, investment bankers, nonprofit organizers, painters, members of the educated elite. Sejal, when not solving mysteries (“The Case of the Unfinished Homework”) or staying away from those less fortunate and more maligned than herself (resource room kids, kids born in India who now faced the horrors of gym class and enforced classroom pairing), spent her days in the company of Esprit-wearing white kids (Jessica, Tara, Amity, Kathleen), trying to avoid the ball in volleyball, running fast in track. They were incredulous over the obvious: Three others in town shared her first name, two of whom shared both her names. It was necessary to use middle initials so as not to confuse the library system and the eye doctor’s office: Sejal A., Sejal B., Sejal N. Shah (there was no C.). On the weekend, Sejal A. was joined by her trio of friends. They were all girls with glasses: Sonal, Mini, and Rupali. As you might expect, there were also two boys: Nitin and Manish. Nicky and Max. Even their parents called them by these names, the nicknames an improvement for their junior high lives. Their secret Indian lives—this is what bound them, the Secret Six, together.

During the week, they tried to look like everyone else. On the weekends, they stopped trying. On the weekends, they headed to each other’s houses. The girls took turns hosting sleepovers, figuring out which boy they liked. All of them parodied their parents’ accents; then they repeated the joke about how their parents ordered a cheeseburger

without the burger at McDonalds and asked to talk to the manager, Ronald McDonald, when they were not understood; then they taught each other how to use curling irons to fix their bangs without accidentally making awkward cowlick angles. In each other's kitchens, they ate Hot Mix (Rice Krispies, potato sticks, peanuts, lemon juice, and murchu); practiced moonwalking; kept secret track of who got her period first, watched their mothers making chaa and finding the crushed red pepper to sprinkle on pizza, and their fathers debating something or playing carom. In each other's bedrooms and bathrooms, the girls experimented with hair-removal systems—that noxious cream, Nair, which only sometimes worked, and hydrogen peroxide (sure, some Indians have blonde hair, Sejal tried to tell her brother). In each other's bedrooms, Sejal and Mini gingerly tried out Sally Hansen Natural Cold Wax Kit for Face/Leg/Body/Bikini. Sonal and Sejal tried hot wax with cloth strips and gave themselves minor burns across their legs. Their sensible mothers had warned them about how using a razor would only mean the hair would grow back thicker. Finally, the girls gave up and found the plastic bag of Bic disposable razors one of their fathers used. Then it was time to find Band-Aids and introduce the real topic of conversation: tampons—just how exactly did that work?

In each other's houses, they could relax. No explanations were necessary about why their mothers did or did not wear saris, about what that dot meant (how were they supposed to know?), about the difference between Hindu and

Hindi, about why their parents were stricter than American parents, about why they always took their shoes off in the house. They were four girls and two boys. They could have fit neatly into a book.

Boy #1 was the nice one. Boy #2 played the drums. Girl #1 went to school west of the city. She was the only Indian in her school, no small cross to bear in the early '80s. Sonal's mother, Nalini Auntie, was best friends with Sejal's mother, Shobhana Auntie. Girl #2 went to Catholic school—a whole different world from the other girls' schools. Mini wore a uniform, and her school had dress-down days. She and her sister were also the only Indians there. Girl #3 lent Sejal her dress for the eighth-grade formal (“A Night in Paris”). It was a silky gray dress with puffed sleeves. Without Rupali's help, Sejal might have been forced to wear a dress her mother liked. Sejal's mother often said, “School is not a fashion parade!” and Sejal, Sonal, Rupali, and Mini would laugh, because all of their parents said it. And *of course* school was a fashion parade. The girls had to know what to wear—this mattered even more if you looked different. Rupali's father, Sumant Uncle, always drove the kids to the multiplex. The girls watched their little sisters and stayed at the movies for hours, slipping from one theater to another, thrilling at seeing even the last fifteen minutes of a movie they didn't like, just to stay a little longer.

Three of the four girls had at least one parent who had grown up in Africa. Sejal wondered if her own parents and her friends' parents somehow felt more comfortable with

each other than with other Indians. They, like the girls, had grown up outside of India. They had to approximate India, too. They were play-acting, too: outdated gestures, films, food. Some of them must have read the Famous Five books by Enid Blyton, a British series, but all of the kids in that series were white. Sejal and her brother read comic books: Archie, Veronica, and Betty right next to stacks of Amar Chitra Katha books. Arjuna's dilemma over whether or not to fight his cousins on the battlefield held their interest as much as Archie's never-ending struggle between Betty and Veronica. It was a tough choice: Betty was blonde, but Veronica was rich.

I remember us, think back to us, to the dilemmas of any middle-school girl: the mysteries of the notes we wrote each other. Four girls, and someone was always the odd one out. Of the strategies we deployed to catch the boys' attention: HCP = hard, cold, polite. Alternating with F+F: friendly and flirtatious. Those were the only strategies we had. We also tried to learn how to throw a football, how to hit a baseball, how to play pool, how to swim. Who had the words to talk about that other mystery: how to be American, how not to be American?

I wonder if the other girls felt the way I did. That we needed a series portraying fathers who said no dating till college (or ever), with characters eating *pani puri* and *prasaad*,

emptying out dresser drawers for the cousin who had come to stay for three months or two years. Did they also wonder when peacock blue, henna red, and *popti* green would appear in those books? When the names Shalini, Neelu, Ajay, and Sunil would appear? There would be no need to describe the color of the characters' hair: All of them would have black hair, maybe with brown highlights as they got older. And maybe I would have to remember to mention the green and blue and hazel contact lenses the girls began to wear as they got older. I see them still, see all of us still, wearing our glasses. How awkward and beautiful we were, in our fake Izods, in our Sears. How mysterious and cruel we were, how kind and belly-laughable.

I wanted them all: pulp paperbacks, spines broken, or hardbacks in plastic jackets, the slip of paper on the inside page with all of the library stamps: date after date after date. The covers of the older series were painted the brown and red of the late 1970s. Muted colors—olive; that weathered Margaret Thatcher blue-gray; lilac-heather on the hardbacks of *Anne of Green Gables*. It is how I think of those summer evenings, those Sunday afternoons. The days Sonal and I used brown paper grocery bags to bring back a stack of books from either of our town libraries. How we stretched out in her room on Avocado Lane, reading, before roller-skating down the driveway, before it was time to set the table for dinner.

The Gujarati Girls Go to (Hindu Heritage Summer) Camp, The Gujarati Girls Go Skiing, The Mystery of the Prasaad Plate (A Gujarati Girls Mystery), The Gujarati Girls Go to Panorama Plaza (to see the latest Molly Ringwald movie—Gujarati Girls Mystery #13), The Gujarati Girls Get Malaria (also titled The Gujarati Girls Go to India).

My friends now laugh (it seems almost like a novel) at the stories about how I grew up, how we grew up. We took cup baths, never used the dishwasher except as a drying rack, saved tin foil, almost never ate out. Is that world gone? We were more Indian once, I know this. We were something else once. I feel this as a nearly physical ache, this knowledge, because it means I am something else now.

Still, I am telling you this story, I am telling me this story as a way to remember how we laughed, how we read, how we knew *our* friendships were different. How we knew our lives were more interesting than Nancy Drew's. I don't know if I was the only one who wanted to see our faces in what we read, to see our split-level houses, our CorningWare dishes and Duralex glasses, our fake wood coffee tables with their stacks of *Time* and *Reader's Digest* (not a *New Yorker* anywhere)—our particular blend of suburban Rochester and middle-class Gujarati—but I am the one who became a writer. I am writing this, on a Wednesday afternoon in Western Massachusetts,

thinking ahead to when I will see them, my Gujarati girls, next. Wondering if those books, were I to see them now—if they would mean the same thing to me. Betsy, Tacy, and Tib. Trixie Belden. The Girls of Canby Hall. Anne of Green Gables. Nancy Drew. Sweet Valley High. How could they?

The Gujarati Girls Grow Up

Sejal Shah, Manisha Patel, Sonal Dubey, and Rupali Grady were headed to another wedding. “Don’t worry,” Sejal said confidently, “I see the way over here to the left.” And she led the way to the door and opened it.