Meg Richardson

Short Story

**Moneywhiz**

If you know what you’re doing, which we do, you can go pretty fast on a bike carrying two Grade 6 girls, their school bags, two cricket bats and a violin. The ride from school to Moneywhiz takes us twenty-three minutes if we don’t stop for fish cakes or freeze pops, or to talk to the private school kids who hang out in the park by the beach. We work at Moneywhiz every day after school and on the weekends. On Tuesdays and Wednesdays we have cricket practice and we have to hurry. Our shift starts at 4:30.

Rubina bikes the big uphill at the beginning. Her legs are longer than mine. She stands up on the pedals and I sit on the seat with one cricket bat in each arm and my violin case strapped to my back. We aren’t allowed to bike on the highway, so we take the dirt road by the sugarcane fields. When they burn the fields, we tie our knee socks around our mouths like cowgirls. They smell like our feet, but it’s better than the smell of burning sugarcane. Then we go past Welches Beach. Sometimes the tourists take our picture. We have to get used to it because after we’re done with secondary school, we’re going to be famous and everyone will want to take our picture. At the gas station, we switch. Rubina sits on the handlebars with the cricket bats in her lap and I sit on the seat and pedal. I can’t stand up on the pedals yet, but Rubina is teaching me.

Our cricket bats are nicer than anyone else’s at our school. We go to public school, but we’re going to St. Winnifred’s next year. St. Winifred’s is the private secondary school. Rubina applied for the scholarship and I know she’ll get it. My mother can pay for me to go. She is a lawyer in the States and she’s rich. Everyone at St. Winnifred’s will have nice bats like ours, and our cricket team might go to Toronto. In Toronto we’ll see the kinds of trees with leaves that change colors in autumn.

Our cricket bats are from Moneywhiz. My bike and my violin and our sneakers are too. Moneywhiz is our pawnshop. Technically it’s not ours. Technically it belongs to corporate, but we feel like it’s ours. My dad is the country manager for Barbados. He’s in charge of the store in Bridgetown and the one in Oistins where we work. Rubina’s dad is the Oistins store manager. Our dads like to say that me and Rubina run the show and we do. I swerve my bike into the parking lot.

“Yeehaw!” says Rubina and jumps off of the handlebars. I need her to teach me to do that. I lock my bike. Rubina walks on the curb and holds her cricket bat the way tightrope walkers hold sticks to help them balance.

“Well if it isn’t Miss Jackie and Miss Rubina,” says Remy when we walk in the door. Remy is our favorite guard. We think he’s cute. He carries two knives and a gun. When he’s not at Moneywhiz, he’s in the army, but he’s never killed anybody. His girlfriend Sherra brought cupcakes to the store for my birthday and for Rubina’s birthday last year. “You girls behave in school today?” Remy asks. We nod. “Of course you did. Now get in there and get to work,” he says, and we do.

Dad is counting bills behind the counter. They make a flip, flip, flip noise. Rubina’s dad, Audley is showing a power drill to a group of men. Rubina’s dad and my dad are best friends too. My dad can surf. That’s how he met my mom. He taught her how to surf while she was on spring break during law school. He’s so strong that you can see the veins in his hands and his arms. His hair is blonde and it looks spiky like sea oats, but it’s actually soft. He hates sunblock, so his skin is always dark red. Audley has almost no hair. He is strong too, but his voice is soft. He’s at least twice the size of my dad. They look like Pooh and Piglet when they walk together. They always wear gold chains, even when they go swimming or take showers. I’ve never seen either of them without their chains, and I’ve seen them almost every day of my life.

“Hey Jackie! Hi Rubina,” says Dad. I give him a hug. “Good to see you honey. Now go get dressed quick. Me and Audley gotta go to a meeting with corporate about the new software, so you girls are in charge until closing.” I pump my fist and Rubina does a little dance. We love being in charge. “Scoot,” says Dad, and we scoot. We lock the door to the storeroom and peel off our cricket uniforms.

“I bet our cricket uniforms next year will be awesome. Don’t you think?” I say.

“Yeah. Hurry, okay?” Rubina says, and hands me my Moneywhiz shirt. Everyone who works at Moneywhiz wears a black polo shirt with the Moneywhiz logo on it. They’re made of shiny, slippery material. Our shirts are size extra small, but mine is still too big for me. I hate the way it sticks to my chest. Rubina started wearing a bra almost a year ago. Mom says I should wait awhile until I wear one. Mom lives in Miami and I only see her once or twice a year, so awhile means a long while when it comes to Mom. Rubina says I’m lucky that I don’t need a bra yet. She says they’re uncomfortable, but her shirt curves over her chest and looks silky and elegant. I would wear something uncomfortable to make my shirt fall over my chest like that. My shirt has two embarrassing little bumps poking out of it. Dad told me not to cross my arms when I’m talking to customers, but I’m sure that customers would rather deal with a girl crossing her arms than a girl with weird bumps under her shirt. Rubina dabs some of her lip gloss onto me and then onto herself. I comb my fingers through my hair and twist it into a bun. Rubina pats her braids.

I used to wear my hair in braids too sometimes. When we were five, a few days before starting primary school, Rubina came over to my house with beautiful star-shaped beads at the ends of her braids. They clacked together when she turned her head. The story goes that I cried when I saw them, and I didn’t stop crying until Rubina’s mom gave me braids with stars in them too. I watched *Home Alone* two and a half times while she did them. On my bathroom mirror I keep a picture of me and Rubina on the first day of Grade 1 with matching braids, matching plaid jumpers, and matching lockets from Moneywhiz. For years after that, Rubina’s, mom braided Rubina’s hair and my hair for the first day of school, until this year. White girls in Grade 6 don’t wear braids unless they’re from the U.S. and on cruise ships. Sometimes Rubina is jealous of my hair and sometimes I’m jealous of hers, but besides that it doesn’t seem like a big deal to me that I’m white and she’s black unless a grownup brings it up.

Dad knocks on the storeroom door.

“Look, this ain’t prom, girlies. Me and Audley can’t be late for this software meeting. Let’s move it.”

“How do I look?” I ask Rubina. I hunch my shoulders to hide the bumps on my chest.

“Ravishing,” Rubina says.

“You look ravishing too,” I say, though I don’t know what that word means. We make our entrance.

“Took you long enough,” Dad says.

“Sorry,” we say together.

“Don’t say sorry. Just don’t be slow next time,” Dad says.

“Bye. Be good.” says Rubina’s dad. We nod. We are always good. The dads pull out of the parking lot and we are in charge. It’s a slow afternoon. When we were little we had all sorts of ways to entertain ourselves in the shop. We had competitions to see who could fit the most watches on our arms. We strummed the guitars. We snaked the gold chains around on the countertops. We wrote each other letters in the doll-sized envelopes that the jewelry goes in when it’s been pawned. We held the diamond tester up to the bars on the windows and the washing machines and made it shriek. We never found any secret diamonds.

We don’t play most of our old games anymore, especially not when we’re in charge. We try on the jewelry, but that’s it. Rubina puts on a big ring with a fake emerald on it. She twirls her hand and examines it from different angles.

“Mom said I can get a French manicure for my birthday if I want to. Do you think I should?” she says. Rubina’s birthday is five months before mine. I usually get more presents than she does, but she gets them first, so it’s fair.

“I bet a lot of the girls at St. Winnifred’s have French manicures, so it would be good practice,” I say. Rubina takes off the ring and stops twirling her hand.

“Would you shut up about St. Winifred’s?” she says, with the kind of look she gives to boys at school who we hate, but almost never gives me. The door dings. A man and his son walk in. We slap on our smiles. The man carries a bathroom scale and a stack of video games. He has to pay his water bill, he tells us. Great, we say. We’re here to help. We give him Bds$30 for the bathroom scale and Bds$80 for the videogames. The little boy looks sad as he watches me line the video games up on the shelf behind the counter. They’re cool games. Rubina gives him a peppermint patty from the dish on the counter. We’re not allowed to eat the candy from the dish but we can offer it to customers. The boy says thank you but he still looks sad. He’s not much younger than us. The door dings shut and we’re mad at each other again.

“Don’t you tell me to shut up,” I say. “It’s really rude.”

“Then don’t talk about stupid stuff that nobody cares about,” says Rubina.

“Are you insane? I was talking about St. Winifred’s. Last time I checked, we both cared an awful lot about St. Winnifred’s. Did I miss something?”. I’m not used to being mean to Rubina but, I try to sound as nasty as I can.

“I don’t care about it anymore. Okay?” she says quietly. An old woman walks in the door and we put on our smiles again. She touches a few of the laptops and sings to herself. The song doesn’t have words but it sounds mournful. She opens and closes a few dryers and keeps singing.

“Can we help you?” Rubina asks sweetly. The woman shakes her head. She stops singing and coughs a lot. Then she leaves.

“Rubina, why don’t you care about St. Winifred’s anymore?” I say. I don’t want to sound as mean as I did before.

“Because I’m not going there next year. I’m going to Murphy,” Rubina says, straightening the videogames on the shelf. She doesn’t look at me.

“*Murphy?* You can’t go to Murphy!” I say. “Why would you do a stupid thing like that? Don’t you care about me? We have to go to the same school. We always have. Murphy is full of drug dealers too. Do you want to be a drugdealer?”

“No” she says. I wait for her to keep talking and she doesn’t.

“I’m super confused.” I say. Rubina’s row of videogames topples over and the games fall to the floor with a quiet crash.

“Frick,” she says. “I was alphabetizing them.” I help her pick them up. Rubina takes a deep breath and says, “Jackie, I have to go to Murphy. Okay? I didn’t get a scholarship. I applied for all six of the scholarships, and the letters came in last week. All in separate envelopes. They couldn’t have just said ‘we regret to inform you’ once. It had to be six different envelopes.” I open my mouth to say something, and nothing comes out.

“Plus,” Rubina continues, “Sending me to St. Winifred’s would be like buying ice and frying it. That’s what Grandma said. What am I gonna to do after St. Winifred’s on this little island? University? Like there’s any money for that? It wouldn’t be fair either, if I got to go to private school and Zavier and Loreen and Oskar didn’t.” I feel stupid and I feel like crying. Rubina and I talk about money every day, but it’s other people’s money, not our money. Of course St. Winifred’s costs money—the rose garden and the cricket uniforms and the big white pillars out in front of it couldn’t exist without money. Still, it’s stupid that money can decide who can go to what school. I thought of Rubina getting that scholarship as a fact, like the planets or the food groups. She is always first in our class in maths, and first or second in language. I am twenty-fifth in maths and thirteenth in language. That scholarship belonged to Rubina.

“Don’t cry, you dummy. I’m the one who has something to cry about,” Rubina says, and squeezes my hand.

“It’s not fair,” I say. Adults were always telling us that life isn’t fair, but it had never felt *this* unfair. We sit on our heels in the pile of videogames for a few minutes without saying anything. We hear the door ding. We stand up. I wipe my nose.

A woman in flip-flops marches to the counter. She would be pretty if she looked less tired. She shows us a diamond ring in a Ziploc bag. We can tell she’s not in love with whoever gave it to her. She treats it like a crab that might pinch her. I open the bag and hold the ring carefully. I breathe on the diamond. It fogs up like a window. We know right away that it’s fake. Sometimes when we feel bad for people who bring in fake diamonds, we get out the diamond tester and put on the gloves and goggles just for show. We shake our heads and say that we’re terribly sorry. But today we’re too busy feeling bad for ourselves to feel bad for flip-flop lady. We say we can give her Bds$20 for the ring. She chomps on her gum a few times and says never mind. She shoves the ring back in the bag and flips and flops out the door. She must have known the diamond was fake or she would have argued with us. We’re quiet after she leaves until I say,

“Don’t you think we can do something about it? About St. Winifred’s? You do want to go, right?”

“Are you crazy? Of course I want to go. I’ve already tried stuff. I applied for the scholarship but I didn’t get it. They sent me a snobby letter. I called their office and left a bunch of messages. I’m sorry for not telling you earlier, Jackie. I guess I felt like if I didn’t talk about it then it wouldn’t be true. I haven’t totally given up though. Maybe there’s something else we could do. I don’t know what it would be though.” We both bite our nails in thought.

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The next afternoon when we arrive at the shop, our dads are huddling around the computer behind the counter. Rob is walking around the store and yelling, or maybe just talking loudly. It’s hard to tell with Rob. Rob is from corporate. He lives in Texas but he shows up a few times a year and tells everyone what to do. Our dads look worried.

“Pay attention, why don’t you?” Rob says. He slaps my dad on the back in a way that isn’t quite friendly.

“Hi,” I say. A smile spreads across Rob’s face. We put on our fake smiles. We have to be nice to Rob.

“Well howdy!” he says to us, stretching the vowels as if he’s talking to a baby. We shake Rob’s hand. He is sweaty. He smells like he’s just eaten something fried.

“Y’all have grown since I was last down here, huh?” What are we supposed to say to that? We don’t know. We keep smiling.

“Been playing tennis, I see,” Rob says, pointing at our uniforms.

“Cricket,” Rubina says.

“Oh boy. Excuse me,” says Rob, with exaggerated, fake politeness. We smile some more, then go to the storeroom to get dressed. We listen through the door of the storeroom. We hear Rob yelling about software and our dads apologizing and saying,

“Absolutely sir” and “Certainly sir.” We come out in our polo shirts and I hunch even more than I usually do.

“I bet they can figure it out,” Rob says, pointing to us. Dad waves us towards the computer. Rob has installed a new operating system. It’s called Pawn Master. Usually Dad and Audley write down transactions on pieces of yellow paper and then type them up on a spreadsheet to send to corporate at the end of each week. That’s what me and Rubina do too. Rob says that those days are over. “Come have a look,” he says to us. We bend over the computer and Rob puts a hand on each of our backs. He shows us how Pawn Master works. It looks like the makeup blogs that we read. Everything is dark green and black and elegant. It isn’t hard. It makes graphs of your inventory and tells you how to price different items. You can take pictures of borrowers and track them. People can pay their loans back online. You can track layaways and pawns and sales. We get it. “Good. Very good,” says Rob.

“Bless you girls,” says Audley, and he tugs us away from Rob.

“You’re a whole smarter than your dads. That’s for sure,” says Rob and laughs like a mean Santa Claus. Nobody else laughs. We hate Rob, but we love our new power. We are the masters of Pawn Master. The dads begin to figure it out too, but we are still better at it. At six, Rob says he has to take off. He’s staying at a resort in Bridgetown with a waterslide. We stand far away from him so he won’t hug us goodbye.

“I’m proud of you girls,” he says, and winks at us. We wish we could make a face at him but we smile and say thank you. When he leaves we make barfing noises. Usually the dads would tell us that this is impolite, but they don’t.

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The next afternoon we don’t have cricket so we can dawdle on our way from school to the shop. We buy fish cakes and mango slices from a stand by Welches Beach. We sit on the retaining wall and swing our legs. There are tourist boys playing catch beneath us. They’re pretty cute. Normally we might talk to them—try to convince them that we’re fifteen or that we’re models or that we’re from Toronto and just passing through. Not today though. We have a plan to hammer out.

We get out our notebooks. Rubina writes *The Plan* at the top of her page and underlines it. I do the same. Then we write *What we know* the way we learned to when we did our research projects on Ancient Rome. We write: *1) We need money for Rubina to go to St. Winifred’s 2) We know how to work Pawn Master better than the dads do, at least for now. 3) Rob is a creep.* Then we write out the plan. We draw the shop and ourselves and St. Winifred’s and the rose garden and Rob and lots of arrows and dollar signs. This is the plan: When we’re in charge at the shop, we will pick out customers who we think won’t come back for the stuff that they pawn. They’re easy to spot—tourists, people pawning wedding rings after divorces, people who seem disorganized. If one of these customers brings in, say, a T.V. that we would normally lend Bds$160 on, we’ll write in Pawn Master that we lent Bds$200 on it but we’ll only give the customer Bds$160. They’ll never know because they won’t come back to pay off the loan. We’ll put the extra Bds$40 in a shampoo bottle. If we can do that with give or take Bds$100 each day, we’ll have enough for the Bds$30,000 St. Winifred’s tuition by early next summer. Rubina calculates it all. She’s good at long division. I color Rob’s face with my red pen and draw squiggly lines around him to show that he smells bad. Rubina puts a box around her answer the way we learned to in maths—Bds$30,000.

“Well, the numbers will work out if we can pull everything else off,” she says, looking out at the ocean.

“We can,” I say, hugging her arm. It’s a really, really good plan. It’s such a good plan that it makes us shiver. We know it isn’t right to steal, but it also isn’t right for best friends to go to different schools, or for guys named Rob to yell at our fathers and breathe their stinky breath on us.

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The Christmas rush at Moneywhiz approaches. We wrap lights around the bars on the windows. We cut out paper stockings and tape them to the counter. It’s the first December of our lives when Christmas doesn’t feel like the most important thing in the world. The plan is working. We have to get a second shampoo bottle for our cash, and then a third and then a fourth. We make plans for when it will be time for Rubina’s brothers and sisters to go to St. Winifred’s. We’ll be able to handle it. We type up a letter from a woman named Madame Cecelia Violet saying that she donated money for Rubina’s scholarship. The parents are bound to ask about it and we will be ready. We have a stamp of a pineapple that can pass for a coat of arms if we use the right kind of ink. We practice Madame Cecelia Violet’s signature in our notebooks. Primary school feels hazy and boring, like a dream that we will soon wake up from. Our real lives will begin at St. Winifred’s. We will wear white shirts with mint green pleated skirts. They will fan out when we twirl in them. We will sing in the choir and take drawing classes. Our cricket team will go to Toronto. Boys in Toronto will fall in love with us and then we will break their hearts. Eventually, after we graduate from St. Winifred’s, the whole world will fall in love with us. We can’t decide if we will be famous singers or dancers or makeup artists or cricket players, but we will figure it out when the time comes.

The day after we reach Bds$20,000 is a Friday. We’re going to have a sleepover at my house after work. We’re going to eat KFC and Christmas cookies in the pool and make face masks out of bananas. It’s a gorgeous day. Almost all days in Barbados are gorgeous, but usually we don’t notice them. Today as we bike to Moneywhiz, I notice. I notice the sugarcane saying “hush, hush, hush” in the wind. I notice how Rubina’s laugh sounds like a movie star’s laugh. I notice the Barbie-doll-pink hibiscus bushes skimming our legs as we ride by them. I notice the green water stretching out to touch the blue sky. Across that water are all of the places where we’ll go someday—Toronto and London and Egypt and Japan and California and everywhere else. I realize that I will miss these bike rides. We will take a shiny white bus to St. Winifred’s next year. I realize that I’ve never really had something to miss before, and soon I will. That must be a part of growing up.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?” I say to Rubina. She’s sitting on the handlebars.

“Yeah, I’ll miss these bike rides next year,” she says. It’s like we have the same brain.

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When we pull up to the store there are blue and red lights blinking against the windows. They look like the lights that flash in the nightclubs by the beach. We’ve never been to a nightclub club but we looked inside of one once.

“What the heck?” I say as I lock the bike.

“Look,” says Rubina. She’s pointing to two police cars. That’s where the lights are coming from. We run inside. We’re more excited than scared. Inside there are four police officers. Rob is standing behind the counter. Our dads and Remy are standing next to one of the police officers with their hands behind their backs. They’re wearing handcuffs. Rob is yelling. Dad’s eyes meet mine. Then his eyes get watery as if he’s crying.

“Well what do *they* know about this?” Rob yells and points to us. Suddenly I feel my heart drop into my stomach. I cross my fingers on both hands and hope that “this” does not mean the Bds$20,000 in four shampoo bottles in the storeroom. I look at Rubina. She is shaking.

“Girls,” Dad says. He is really crying. I didn’t know he could cry. “A large amount of money is missing from the store. None of us have any idea what happened to it, but if we don’t find it everyone is going to be in…well, huge trouble. You don’t have any idea what might have happened, do you?” I look at Rubina’s dad and he is crying too. I could put on my fake smile and lie to Rob no problem, but I can’t lie to Dad. I wish that I could. I reach for Rubina’s hand. We lock our fingers together and squeeze.

“I know,” says Rubina. The sixteen eyes on the eight men in front of us widen at the same time. A girl somewhere deep inside of me says, “I know too. We…know.” My voice sounds smaller than Rubina’s. Rob steps around the counter and walks slowly towards us. His face is sweaty and huge.

“Explain, please,” he says. I feel his warm stink-breath on my forehead. I squeeze Rubina’s hand tighter and swallow. My throat feels like it’s full of Styrofoam.

“One second,” says Rubina. She lets go of my hand and walks to the storeroom. No one follows her, not even me. She comes back with the shampoo bottles in her arms and hands them to Rob, one by one. I want to stop her but it feels like the veins in my arms are full of sand.

“There’s your money, sir,” Rubina says to Rob, looking right at him. “We’re very sorry.” I can’t look at anybody. I look at a tile on the floor. The line of grout around it blurs and a tear falls down out of my eye and in between my feet.

Rob starts yelling—at us, at our dads, at Remy, at the police officer.

“You people!” he calls us. Then he calls us other words that I’m not allowed to say. He swings his huge arms around and I worry that he’s going to slap us but he doesn’t. After he yells so much that he coughs, Rubina and I are loaded into police cars—two separate ones. It would have been fun if we were together, but all by myself I’m terrified. The police car is cold. There are bars on the window, but they don’t make me feel safe like the bars on the windows of the store.

At the police station, I sit on a sticky chair under a florescent light that flickers and makes the room feel haunted. A woman with glasses and a voice like wet seaweed asks me about working at Moneywhiz. I try to tell her about St. Winifred’s and that I’m sorry for stealing the money and how Rubina and I have to go to the same school even if I have to go to Murphy, but she doesn’t seem interested in any of that. She asks questions about Dad and Audley and how many hours I worked at the store.

“You worked there all by yourself?” she says.

“No,” I say. “Me and Rubina were always together.” If I knew what she wanted me to say I would say it, but I don’t, so I tell her the truth. She asks me about Rob. She asks if he ever touched me in a way that I didn’t like.

“Yeah,” I say. “Like, all the time.” She chews on the end of her pen and makes a checkmark on her clipboard. She asks if Dad every touched me in a way that I didn’t like.

“What?” I say. She makes another check on her clipboard. I want Rubina’s hand to hold and Dad’s shirt to cry into or Rubina’s mom and dad or Remy or Sherra and her cupcakes, but all I have is this seaweed voice woman shaking her head at me.

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I sleep on a cot at the police station that night. They get me a Subway sandwich but it has olives on it and I hate olives. There’s a stuffed bear on a chair in the room where I sleep. It looks like it washed up on the beach and it smells like toilet paper but I hug it because I have nothing else to hug. In the morning, Seaweed-voice brings me a suitcase with some of my clothes in it. She gives me a box with a toothbrush and a doll-size tube of toothpaste in it. I don’t use the toothpaste. I save it to show Rubina.

“You’re going to visit your mom, Jaqueline! You’ll have such a good time.” Seaweed-voice says. She’s trying to make her voice sound nice but it still sounds like seaweed.

“My name’s not Jaqueline. It’s Jackie.” I tell her. She’s already in the other room and doesn’t hear me. I need to tell her that I don’t want to visit my mom. I need to tell her that I need Rubina. I need someone to explain to me what’s going on and then I need to go home, but she’s gone. One of the police officers who was in Moneywhiz yesterday drives me to the airport in a normal grey car, not a police car. A flight attendant with a necklace in the shape of a scotty dog puts me on a plane to Miami. I ask her if the necklace is real gold. I ask her if she’s ever considered pawning it. She says it’s none of my business. I’ve never felt so confused or so lonely.

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The visit with my mom has lasted almost a month. She lives in a condo. It has white carpet and white couches and white chunks of coral sitting on everything. I’m not allowed to touch the coral. There’s even a white plastic Christmas tree. I’m not allowed to touch it either. Some of the ornaments are heirlooms, my mom says. I don’t know what that means but I don’t want to ask her and seem dumb. There’s a pool but it’s freezing cold. My mom is at work for most of the day, being a lawyer. When she comes home she doesn’t know what to talk to me about. She asks if I have a boyfriend. That’s disgusting, I tell her. Then I feel bad.

On Christmas she gives me useless presents—fuzzy socks that are too small and a book about how to make tapas. I don’t know what tapas are and I don’t care. I give her my best fake smile when I look at the book. I wanted a bra. I want to tell her but I decide it would be rude. The book looks expensive. Maybe bras are expensive too. She drinks hot chocolate with alcohol in it. She asks if I want a sip. No thanks, I say. She asks if I want to do a puzzle. No thanks, I say. Then she goes and sits in her room. I watch the end of a Christmas movie on the T.V. I think I’ve seen it before but I don’t remember the beginning. There’s a little girl in it.

After New Year’s I’m going to start at a new school, which makes me think that I’ll be in Miami for a while. It could be a long while. My mom says that in the U.S, they say 6th Grade instead of Grade 6. They don’t go to primary school and secondary school. I will go to a “middle school” called Southwood. My mom drove me to see it yesterday. There’s no rose garden or pillars. It’s long and messy-looking and made of brown bricks. They don’t even wear uniforms.

I talk to Rubina almost every day. Our dads got fired from Moneywhiz. Not only that, but they’re in jail for six months. Mom says they weren’t supposed to let us work in the pawn shop by ourselves. Mom says there are laws about kids working and they broke the laws. They must have been dumb laws.

“We were so good at working in the shop. We ran the show,” I say to Rubina on the phone.

“I guess that’s not what counts,” Rubina says. If we hadn’t gone through with our plan, none of this would have happened. We feel terrible about the plan. Worse than terrible. Worse than any word. We can hardly talk about all it without feeling like we’re going to throw up, so we talk about other stuff. Rubina is living in Trinidad with her cousins and her aunt and her mom and Zavier and Loreen and Oskar. She says she misses me, but I don’t think she misses me as much as I miss her. I miss her more than I can even think about.

She gets an Instagram and I get one too so I can look at little squares of Rubina laughing, Rubina eating a fancy ice cream bar, Rubina on the beach with her arms around her cousins and her new friends. She wears the kinds of swimsuits that look dumb on me. They look good on her. Her new friends comment things like “luv you” on the photos. I don’t know what to comment, so I don’t.

Rubina says the boys in Trinidad are cute, and they think she’s interesting because she’s from Barbados. Nobody thinks I’m interesting in Miami. Nobody thinks about me at all because I don’t know anybody. Rubina says that she’s going to a movie with a boy named Marco.

“Is he cute?” I ask.

“Not that cute,” she says, but I know she’s just saying that so I won’t feel bad. I find him on Instagram. He’s really cute. The day after they go to the movie, I ask, “Did he put his arm around you?” I expect her to say no, but she says, “Well, yeah! He did! It was nice. He did it in a shy way. His arm was warm but it wasn’t sweaty. You know?” I don’t know. I’ve never touched a boy’s arm like that. It seems a little bit gross. I wish I could squeal with joy and jump up and down on my bed for Rubina, but I feel tears in the back of my eyes. I hear Rubina’s mom and Oskar talking in the background. I wonder if they have forgotten about me.

“So cool,” I say, and then I tell Rubina that I have to go and see a friend even though I don’t have any friends in Miami. I cry into one of the white pillows on the white couch. I try to be quiet so mom won’t hear me. It would be embarrassing. The TV is on in her room and she doesn’t hear.

Dad calls me from jail a few days later. He tells me not to worry. He says jail is just like a lousy hotel. He gets to play basketball. He works making desks for schools. He says maybe I’ll sit in one of them at my new school. I hope not. What if the teacher told everyone? She would say,“Hello class, guess what? Jackie’s dad made these desks for us—in prison! It’s Jackie’s fault that he’s there!” No thank you. He’ll be out pretty soon, Dad says. His voice sounds hoarse and crumbly.

He writes me long letters on grey paper. They’re happy letters. I always mean to write back but I don’t know what to say. In one of them he writes, *Honey, pretty soon we’ll be able to put this whole mess behind us and you can come home and everything will be back to normal. Right?*

“Wrong,” I say out loud when I read that line. Home won’t ever feel like home again. Home is biking through the sugarcane with Rubina on my handlebars, sliding on the floor of the storeroom with Rubina, jumping into waves on Welches Beach with Rubina, back when I wasn’t embarrassed to wear a swimsuit. But Rubina, and that girl Jackie who was her best friend aren’t the same girls who they used to be. They grew up as tall and sweet as they could until they got burned up and drifted away like sugarcane. We’re grownups—women now.