

## Meera

By Karthayayani Priya Satish  
Al Ain Academy  
2016 Division C 1<sup>st</sup> Place Writing Award

It is raining outside. It rains everyday here, they tell me, and it is always wet. I don't contest this; hardly a week into this strange country and I can already feel the damp soaking into my very bones.

I look at my new clothes. They are dull and brown, so far from my scarlet skirts, bejewelled bangles and tinkling anklets. In the mirror I see my face, ashy and drawn, stripped of its usual sweep of thick black kohl and crimson *bindi*. It's a face my people would never have recognized, and as I think of them a single tear lines my eye.

I distract myself with tales of new beginnings and happy endings, pulling a woolen sweater over my head, thicker than any *shalwar-kameez* I've ever worn back in Rajasthan. I glance at the windows, where rivulets of water snake down the pane slowly, seeing a tiny Meera in each raindrop. She looks scared today, terrified, fearful as the day they told her parents were dead and she was to live in the house of an uncle she had never met.

My new mother, blonde and pink-cheeked, rushes out and tells me I'll be late for school. I stare at her as she bustles around, looking at her soft feet unscarred from running around the sun-baked fields, her pale skin unbrowned by the blazing midday sun. Back in my village, she would have been stared at and gossiped about as the women did

their chores, but here, I, with my rough feet, and broken English am the one to be scrutinized and studied, the subject of a thousand hushed whispers everywhere I go. We get in a car, and I think of the sputtering old Ambassador that came rumbling up the path to the village once a year. It always had the local *zamindaar* in it, who pranced around the huts in a lordly fashion demanding rent from the people whose lands he had seized years ago. Everyone had to feed him the best of their food to avoid risking his displeasure, and us kids watched with hungry eyes as he pecked at bowls of *daal-chawal* that could have fed us for a week.

When we get to school, my mother walks briskly through big wrought-iron gates, the kind the villain always has at his house in Bollywood films. She breezes through crowds of plump schoolchildren in sweaters similar to mine without attracting a second glance, but as I scamper through, I see them stare at my pox-scarred cheeks and chocolate skin. My cheeks heat up as I walk even faster, and finally, I reach an office with paintings on the walls. Traditional Rajasthani paintings, I notice. The paintings and I have both come a long way.

My mother speaks in hushed tones with a grey-haired man in a suit, telling him that I am adopted because “her uncle wanted to get rid of her”. I look up and she blushes, embarrassed, but I shake my head. I know he did not want me, and gave me away the first chance he got. Three daughters made his life hard; three weddings to pay for, three dowries to hand over. Why would he accept a fourth?

I remember that day vividly; me, standing in the doorway of our hut confusedly as my uncle smiled, and my aunt cried.

*“Tum England jaa rahi ho,”* my uncle had said, still smiling. “You are going to England. A nice lady will look after you.”

I was more confused than anything else, pure bewilderment blocking any grief inside me as my new mother, Deborah, she had said, led me through airport gates and onto a plane that roared across the oceans to this land. When I finally had both feet on English soil, I understood, but it was too late for anything to change.

“Meera, honey,” Deborah says softly now. “It’s time for you to go to class.”

I get up slowly, eyes closed, thinking of wheat fields, meandering rivers, terracotta grounds and starry sky. I think of hennaed feet and kohl-lined eyes, think of the smell of rotis and the tang of daal, the blaze of the sun, the laughter of my father and the warmth of my mother’s arms. I think of Rajasthan; my birthplace, my home, and where my heart will always be, and open my eyes, taking a step forward. It’s time to begin my new life.