

a Thousand Questions

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**ADVANCE
READER'S
EDITION
NOT FOR SALE**



Mimi

Summer Vacation is Overrated

Imagine an oven, like 400 degrees. Then imagine crawling inside and closing the door behind you. That's what Pakistan feels like in the summer. Who'd be dumb enough to crawl inside a superhot oven, you ask?

Good question. Nobody with brains, that's who.

We're standing outside the Jinnah Airport in Karachi, trying to get a taxi from a small kiosk with dirty windows. There are a million people around me, all talking faster than I can understand, and anyway they're talking in Urdu so I have only a vague idea of what they're saying. Mom fans herself with a *Parents* magazine, the blond model on the cover all creased as she tries to keep her mom-cool. I try fanning too, but my copy of the new Dork Diaries is too thick and short to give me any air. "Ugh!" I grunt, and Mom turns to frown at me.

"No complaining, Mimi," she reminds me, patting my nose with her finger. That's been our rule since I was a little girl. No complaining, no matter how hard things get. Not when Dad left us when I was five. Not when I crashed my bike in the street outside our Houston apartment at age seven and broke my leg in three places.

Not when Mom lost her teaching job at the Houston Art Institute last year and went on a million interviews, always returning with a smile on her tired face, saying, "It's fine. Something will turn up soon."

But this forced vacation in Pakistan, the land of my ancestors. . . . This is not the something I'd been expecting to turn up.

I swat angrily at a big fly that's been trying to land on my face for the last ten minutes. "Not easy," I hiss at Mom. The fly glares at me with its hundred eyes, daring me to catch it.

Mom turns back and offers an apologetic smile to the man in the window. "So how much?" she asks in Urdu. I can't speak it too well, but I've heard it enough to know what she's saying. How much to go to Grandma and Grandpa's house?

That's another thing. I've never even met these Pakistani grandparents of mine. Mom's parents. They call us on Skype once in a while, but mostly in the middle of the night, when I'm already asleep, because of the time difference. I have to stay up late on my birthday to talk to them, but it's always an awkward moment when they stare at me through cyberspace. A stern woman with glasses and arched eyebrows. A man with a shock of white hair and twinkling eyes.

Mom is still haggling with the man in the kiosk. He says something, and she shakes her head. "Too much, that's insane!" she says, firm and clear.

"It's nothing in dollars, ma'am," he tells her firmly, almost mocking. I gasp. How does he know we're American? Is it my Old Navy backpack, or my colorful Skechers sneakers? Is it Mom's dangly earrings or her white embroidered tunic worn over jeans? I'm pretty sure it's the clothes. I survey the women milling around us. Almost everyone is dressed in shalwar kameez of a dizzying variety of colors. Blues and greens like the ocean. Reds and yellows like the leaves in fall.

I do have the traditional Pakistani dress, a black linen kameez with silver embroidery on the sleeves and a plain white cotton shalwar that's too short for my legs now. I wore it twice last year for the two Eid celebrations, and then stuffed it in the back of my closet. I prefer jeans and T-shirts with funny messages. Right now, for

instance, I'm wearing a white T-shirt with a purple poop emoji. It's holding its nose and asking *WHAT STINKS?*

I can smell so many things at the moment, none of them good. Garbage spoiling in the early sun. Sweat. Muddy shoes. My T-shirt suddenly doesn't seem that funny. I take my blue cardigan from around my waist and put it on over the poop emoji. "What do you think the temperature is, Mom?" I ask. "Probably a hundred degrees. Or do they use Celsius here?"

Mom shushes me with a finger. She and the man in the kiosk have decided on a price. I never knew one could haggle over taxi fares. Another man walks out, picks up our luggage and takes it to a white sedan with a broken bumper, covered in dust, and we climb in. "Thank you," I say in English, and he stares at me.

"Is it okay to say thank you?" I whisper to Mom as we settle in and the driver starts the taxi slowly, honking the horn every few seconds to alert people on the road. Wait, is this a road or the sidewalk? It's hard to tell because there are people everywhere.

Mom gives me the side-eye. "Please, can we take a break from your thousands of questions, just this once?"

"Mo-om!"

She leans her head back and closes her eyes. "Yes, Mimi, you can say thank you. Or shukriya."

"Really? I feel like that guy didn't understand me when I said thank you to him. Or maybe he's just not used to getting thanked. What do you think?"

She doesn't reply. "Mom?" I say, louder, then feel the driver's eyes on me in the rearview mirror.

"Just look out the window, sweetie," Mom murmurs. "You don't want to miss any details for your travel journal, do you?"

I grimace, thinking of the journal Mom gave me a few weeks before we left Houston. I'm secretly planning to write to Dad about my trip, even though I haven't heard from him in years, but she doesn't need to know that. Somehow I doubt she'll be thrilled. She always mutters about him and says "good riddance to bad rubbish" or something if anyone asks. But maybe if I write to him, he'll start writing back.

I turn toward the window, shutting my mouth firmly. At least the car isn't too hot. The crowds outside have disappeared, and we're cruising down a big road with neat little trees on each side. The traffic is heavy, though. There are small cars, motorcycles with loads of passengers, and big buses with men sitting on the tops and hanging from the sides. Billboards line the sides of the roads, advertising everything from the latest fashions to cell phone service. A few signs in English proclaim *DON'T FORGET TO VOTE ON AUGUST 1*, with dozens of Pakistani flags surrounding the words. My eyes are literally popping out of my head; I can feel them. It's all so strange, but also weirdly cool and bright, an explosion of color so sharp it reaches inside me and draws out a little sigh.

I realize I'm pressing my face against the window and force myself to sit back and relax. This is Karachi, the largest city in Pakistan, the birthplace of my mom and the grandparents I've never met. This is my home for the next month and a half, whether I like it or not.

We pass through congested intersections filled with cars and motorcycles, trucks and donkey carts. I see squat buildings that are obviously offices, and tall glass structures that may or may not be offices. One is definitely a mall, and it rises to the sky. Soon, the streets broaden; the cars thin out. We must be in a different part of the city.

I squint at the street sign. Sunset Boulevard. Funny, Dad once sent me a postcard from Sunset Boulevard in California, a year after he left. It was the only time he ever sent me anything. Is this an omen? He's a journalist and travels a lot, so he could be anywhere in the world right now. Thanks to Google, I know he's traveled to lots of cool (and some hot) places. The last time I checked, about six months ago, he was the Asian correspondent of a fancy-pants newswire service somewhere in China. Still, I like to think of him in sunny California, surfing the waves and reporting on shark attacks.

I lean my face back against the window, taking in the big houses and the towering boundary walls with barbed wire on the top. This journey is never-ending.

I look sideways at Mom. She's breathing deeply from her mouth, a sure sign she's asleep. Her hands are folded neatly in her lap,

fingers stained deep blue from the last painting she worked on before we left Houston. She can never get the stains out properly.

I rummage in my backpack and find my little square journal. It's got a gray leathery cover, and thick lined paper. My purple gel pen is tucked inside, serving as a bookmark.

Dear Dad,

You won't believe that I'm on a different continent from all my friends, right this minute. I'm awake while they're all sleeping, dreaming of who knows what. It's early morning here in Karachi, all the way in South Asia.

We're taking what Mom calls a long-overdue vacation. She's finally got a job at a private school as the art teacher, and we have the whole summer to celebrate instead of worrying about money as usual. My best friend, Zoe, is spending the summer in Italy. Isn't she L-U-C-K-Y? I would give my left arm to go to Europe. Instead, I'm in Pakistan, which Mom says means "land of the pure." Ugh. It's pure, all right—pure haze, pure dust. Pure heat.

Have you ever been to Pakistan? Somehow I doubt it. A white man with light brown eyes and blond hair would really stand out here. Mom says this place will grow on me if I just give it a chance, but at the moment I'd give anything to be with you. Would you give anything to be with your family again?

Love,

Your daughter, Mimi

The taxi screeches to a stop in front of a sprawling white house with huge windows covered with metal bars and a balcony on the second floor. There are more *VOTE!* posters plastered on the boundary wall, along with colorful graffiti. "Is this it, ma'am?" the taxi driver calls out in Urdu.

Mom straightens up, yawning. I'm always amazed at her ability to take cat naps and wake up refreshed. I, on the other hand, wake up grouchy as a cat without whiskers. "Still the same," she says quietly, staring at the houses outside with a dreamy expression.

I scramble out of the car without being told and stretch on the street. "This is practically a mansion," I whisper in awe.

Mom joins me and grins. She's standing up straighter than I've seen in a long time. "Welcome to my childhood home, Mimi, my darling!" she says, and strides up to the gate to ring the bell.