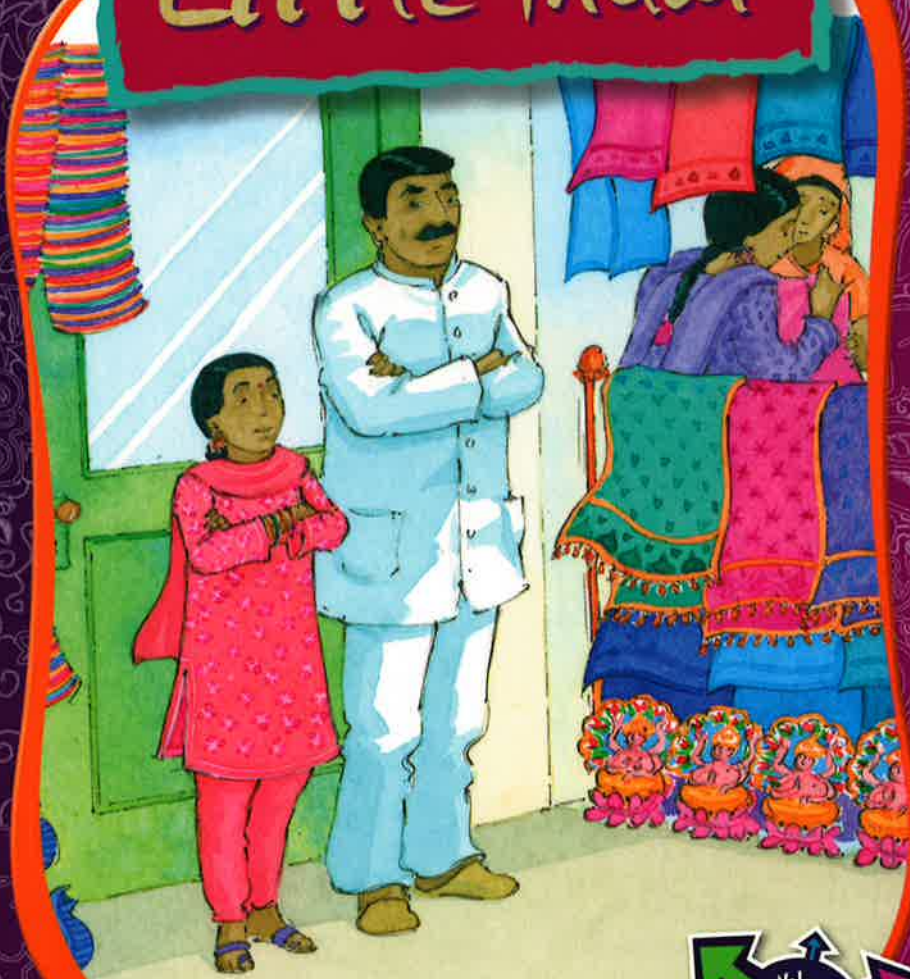
The Chalk Girl of Little India



John Parsons

Pat Reynolds

Nelson Literacy Directions

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The Chalk Girl of Little India

Written by John Parsons
Illustrated by Pat Reynolds

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Meet the Characters

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Navita

A chalk girl.



Rajaratnam

Navita's uncle,
a master tailor.



The Client

A foreign traveller.

Author's note: In this story, you will see Rajaratnam's shop is called Rajaratnam S/O Govindarajan. In Singapore, "S/O" is a common abbreviation that means "son of". Although it is not as common, "D/O" means "daughter of". These abbreviations are used to show that a business has been owned and run by many generations of a family.

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POSTCARD

Dear Reader

I love travelling to Singapore. It is a colourful, friendly and culturally diverse island full of fascinating places and people. Last time I was there, I went to Little India, where lots of tailors offered to make me a suit. Normally, I would have said "yes", but it was so hot I could hardly wear a t-shirt, let alone a suit! Maybe next time I'll go during the cooler monsoon months!

John Parsons
Author

Singapore

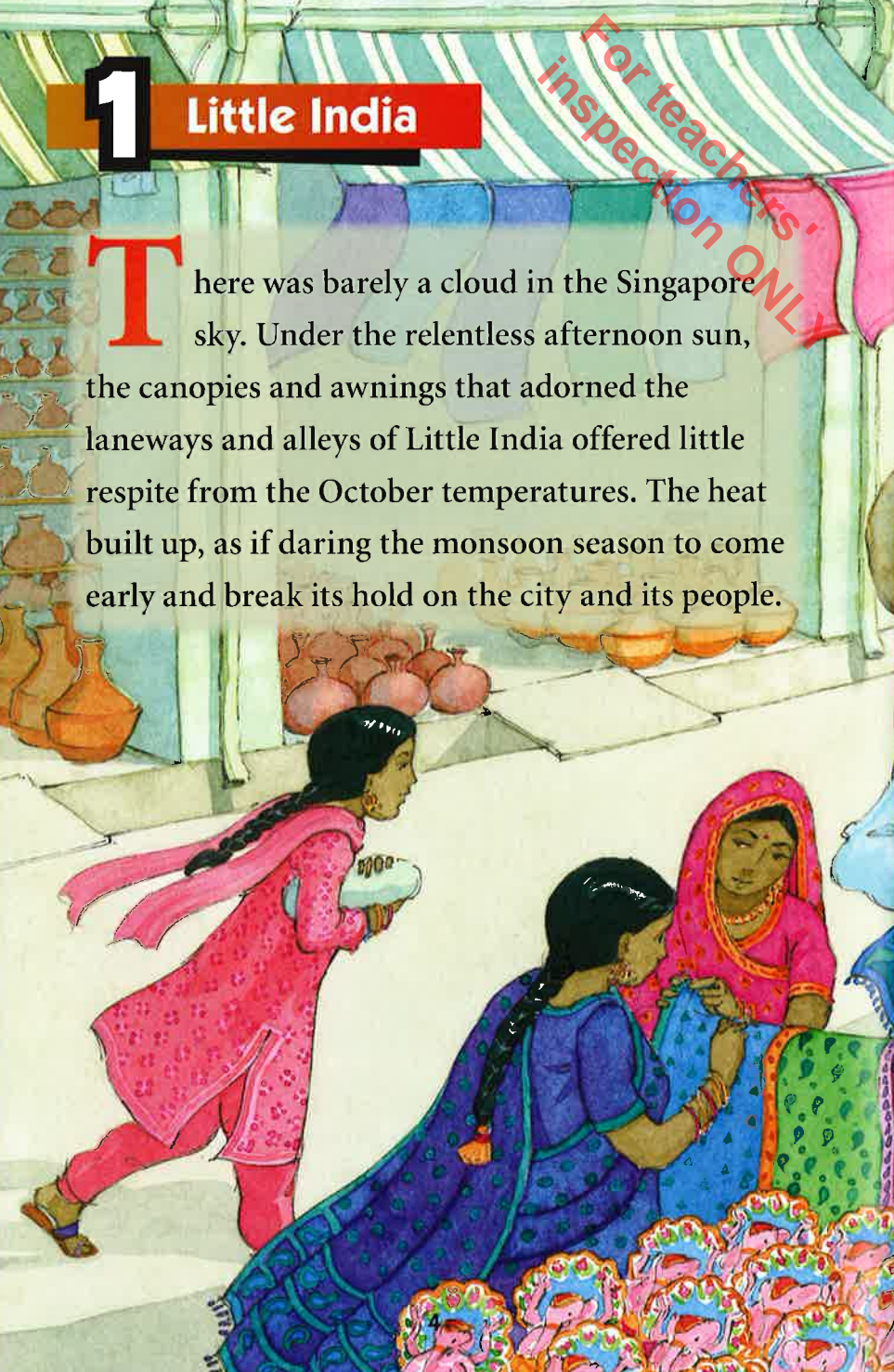


1. The island of Singapore
2. Little India (a suburb of the city)
3. Malaysia
4. The Merlion: half lion, half sea creature, and the symbol of Singapore

1 Little India

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There was barely a cloud in the Singapore sky. Under the relentless afternoon sun, the canopies and awnings that adorned the laneways and alleys of Little India offered little respite from the October temperatures. The heat built up, as if daring the monsoon season to come early and break its hold on the city and its people.





In this district of the island, luscious saris the colour of ripe mandarins and plums, and bright headscarves flecked with strands of gold thread flapped restlessly from garment racks in the street. Rows of tiny carved elephants and brigades of plastic Hindu gods watched over columns of gold bangles, each stall a kaleidoscope of colour and culture. The sounds of bicycle bells and car horns, and the smells of spices and incense filled the humid, sticky air.

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Morning trade had been good. But by four o'clock, the hawk-eyed traders who darted from customer to customer sensed that the tourists were wilting, abandoning the two-storey shophouses of Little India for the air-conditioned comforts of the boutiques lining Orchard Road or the cafes of Clarke Quay. As the afternoon trade slowed, they too retreated inside their stalls to swig gulps of water from the bottles they used to lure customers inside.

Navita hurried past the gold traders of Serangoon Road, a bundle of tightly wrapped fabric under her arm. She slipped into a laneway, one of four that wound themselves together in a covered market. Trapped by the stalls on either side, the half-hearted breezes of Serangoon Road carried no relief, only the heat of the afternoon, deep into the market. She ran between the groups of tailors and hawkers regaling each other with recounts of the morning's trade. At the intersection of the laneways, she turned left. Navita followed that laneway outside to her destination.

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"Rajaratnam S/O Govindarajan" announced the sign over the shophouse's door. It was a long name, as long as the tradition of tailoring that its owner, Navita's uncle Rajaratnam, had proudly followed since her grandfather Govindarajan began the business in 1964. "Master Tailors and Alterations for Distinguished Gentlemen. Finest Suits in Two Days. Worldwide Shipping."

A bell tinkled as Navita opened the pale green door. Rajaratnam, who was sitting behind a desk crowded with receipts and order slips, barely looked up. He was tearing a *bhatura* into bite-size pieces, slowly chewing the flatbread as he worked.

"*Madhiya vanakkam*, Uncle," murmured Navita as she walked past. "Good afternoon."

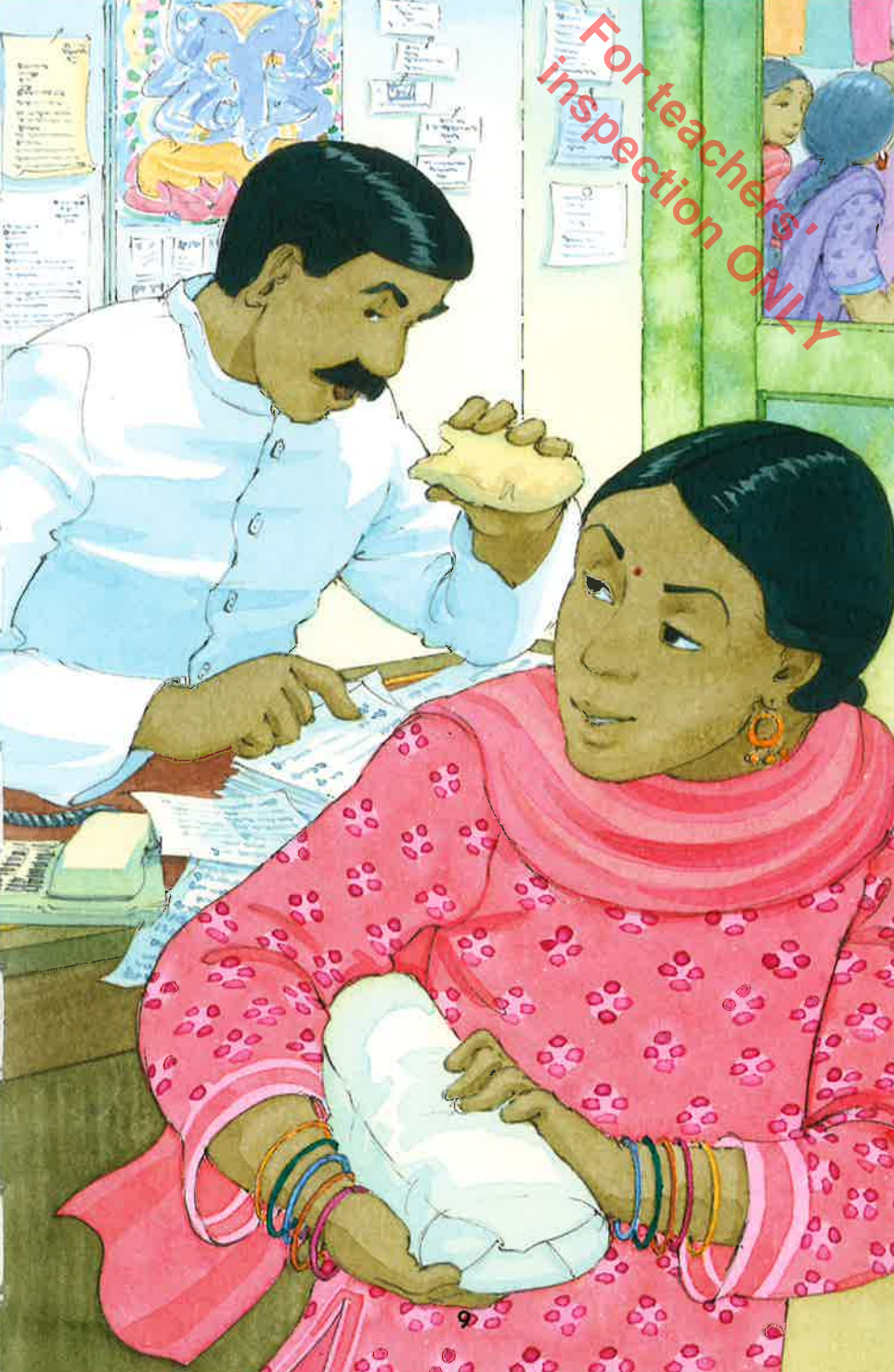
Rajaratnam glanced up. "*Madhiya vanakkam*," he replied. Formal greetings were always used behind the pale green door of Rajaratnam S/O Govindarajan. "Tradition and formality," Rajaratnam had said when Navita was first employed, "are essential in the front room."

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"Properness," he called it. "My clients expect nothing less than properness." Navita wasn't sure that was even a word, but she followed Rajaratnam's wishes. He was the owner and a master tailor who could make fine suits for distinguished gentlemen in only two days. She was just a chalk girl who worked after school, marking out where the fabric should be cut to start sewing the morning's orders. Her other job was to carry the cut panels of fabric upstairs, where Ovashni the seamstress expertly sewed them together, and to bring the finished suits downstairs. But, when a client was in the front room, she was never allowed to speak.

"Most improper," Rajaratnam had warned her. "Only master tailors may speak with distinguished gentlemen."

Rajaratnam chewed his *bhatura*. "What is that?" he said, pointing to the bundle under Navita's arm.



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"It's fabric for a sari," said Navita. "It's for my mother's birthday. I was hoping I could keep it here, rather than at home, so she doesn't see it."

"Very well," murmured Rajaratnam, turning back to his receipts. "My sister is indeed lucky to have a dutiful child who buys her birthday gifts. But keep it well away from my bolts of expensive cloth. I don't want any strands of cheap fabric to rub off onto them."

Navita went downstairs into the cellar room, leaving Rajaratnam to his *bhatura* and his receipts.

