

When the Name Tree Sings

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One

Unwanted Plot Twist



Zain tugged at his clothes and frowned at the mirror. A scrawny figure wearing shorts that looked too baggy on skinny legs and an oversized t-shirt stared anxiously back at him.

He almost wished this new school had a uniform – though he would never say this out loud – so he wouldn't have to worry about how he looked every day.

A knock on the door, pushed open almost in the same moment.

“Dad! You could at least wait for me to say ‘come in’,” Zain said.

“I knocked, didn't I? And I need to leave, as do you.” His dad looked at Zain with that familiar expression.

“I’ve told you before – clothes make the man. You can take on the world in a good shirt with a sharp collar and smart pants.”

“I’m going to school, Dad.”

“So what? Anything goes at that school. Some of those kids have coloured hair and wear ripped jeans – I think people would appreciate some smart clothes, Zain. You’d stand out! People might look at you twice.”

Yeah, but some kids just own their looks, thought Zain. They could wear a ball dress with running shoes and make it look exactly right.

“Maybe I don’t want anyone looking at me once, let alone twice,” muttered Zain.

“What? Speak up, Zain! Don’t mumble.” His dad let out an impatient breath. “Look, I have to go. Your mum is still in bed, so make sure you get yourself organised and out the door in time, all right?”

“Is Mum okay?” asked Zain quietly, and this time Dad did not tell him to speak up.

Dad shrugged and turned away. “She’s fine. Just don’t be late, okay? Punctuality is important.”



Zain left it too late to walk to school, so he had to catch the tram. He hated the packed morning tram, loud with jostling schoolkids from other schools nearby.

He swung his backpack off his shoulder and pushed his way onto the tram. Ben and Sam from his school were there with a bunch of other kids Zain didn't know. He nodded to Ben, who looked blankly at him before turning to laugh at something Sam had said. A girl – Ada? Ava? – shouted something to Sam about his new haircut, and Sam struck a pose and went red at the same time.

“Aw, you’ve made him blush!” shouted Ben, and everyone laughed, including Sam, who fluttered his eyelashes coyly. How was he always so cool about people laughing at him? The thought of all those eyes turning on Zain, waiting for a response – a *funny* response – made him prickle with anxiety. He would stand there awkwardly, oozing sweat and shame, and any laughter would be at him.

Zain pushed further up the tram, as far away as he could from the group. They were too busy bantering to notice Zain, so he could sit back and

watch them wisecracking with each other, as if they were in one of the old movies Zain loved. He and his mum used to curl up together on the couch on Sunday afternoons with tea and biscuits, reciting the best lines word for word. They would compete with each other, making their delivery as dramatic as possible, but they had not done that for ages. Not since they had moved house, come to think of it.

Zain slouched off the tram at the school stop, channelling a cool-guy movie swagger as he shrugged his bag onto his back. Imagine being one of those guys, or one of the sassy actors who released one-liners with a perfectly raised eyebrow? Imagine not dissolving into panicky sweat whenever attention turned to you? Imagine actually enjoying it?

They had literacy first today, thank goodness. Ms Phillips was his favourite teacher – kind, calm, serious. Some of the kids said she was boring, but Zain loved her gentle attention, which gave him space to breathe, collect his thoughts, so that he could even answer questions in class. He never felt anxious around her. Ms Phillips was exactly how he needed this week to start.

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He shuffled into the classroom with a couple of stragglers, not quite late, and took a seat at the side. Ms Phillips was not there yet, which was strange. She would usually be perched on the desk, watching them file in before she would clap her hands for quiet and the class would start.

The classroom buzzed with unsupervised energy until the door swung open again. The noise instantly dropped as a woman strode in, dressed in bright blue and green and jangling with bangles and long earrings. A quickly smothered titter rose at the back of the room as she dropped a pile of books on the desk and swung around to face the class. She had long black hair piled into a complicated bun with a big pink headscarf wound around her head, her eyes ringed with dark eye make-up. Her smile flashed around the classroom, and she spread her arms wide.

“Good morning, young people. I am Mrs Sharyar, and I am your teacher until the end of term.”

Two

Mrs Sharyar



There was a long, awkward pause as the class stared back at the new teacher. It was Rose who broke the silence. “Where’s Ms Phillips?” she asked.

“The estimable Ms Phillips has been unexpectedly called away. Life is not always predictable, my friends, but it means we have this gift of two weeks together, no?”

Zain glanced around and caught a side-eye from Ben, who rolled his eyes. “Why’s she talking like that?” he muttered, and Zain rolled his own eyes in return.

“Right?” Zain murmured happily. He was usually the one the side-eye was about. Maybe having this teacher wouldn’t be all bad, after all.