



Noon Chai and a Story



STORY: ADITHI RAO
PICTURES: GHAZAL QADRI

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We huddle around the bukhari, listening to the Uncle From Far Away.

“A library,” he smiles, “is a bank of books!”

He holds up a colourful book with beautiful pictures. My hand itches to touch it.

“This is the first book in your new library. You must collect more. When I come back in the summer, I will count them!”

The others are thinking the same thing as I am: We will collect lots of books!

After the Uncle From Far Away leaves, we crowd around to read. Asmat Apa helps us with the difficult words. Such a lovely story! Now we must find more like it.

But how?

In Gurez, there are no storybooks. Only lots and lots of snow!

In cold Kashmir, a bukhari is lit to keep the room warm.



At home in the afternoon, I sit down to do my maths homework. But my mind is far away. Deidi looks up from pouring water into the samavaar. The coals must be red hot by now, even though they cannot be seen from the outside.

“Little Amiya looks worried,” Deidi says, as she adds the tea leaves to make noon chai. I tell her about the library-with-one-book.

“Can I help?” she asks.

“You’re so old-old, Deidi. How will you help?” I reply.



Deidi chuckles. With a sigh, I return to my sums. Suddenly I have an idea. Deidi has lots of stories in her old-old eyes! And my sa won a prize for her drawings in school last year.



“Deidi, you tell me a story. I will write it down and Sa will draw pictures. Then we will stitch the pages together to make a book.”

Deidi smiles and tosses a pinch of phul into the samavaar. I scurry across the dastarkhwan to peer at the brew. When I was a little girl, Deidi told me that the colour in my cheeks turned the noon chai pink. Later, Ajee explained that it was phul – the cooking soda – that did the magic.

(I believe Deidi. I like her explanation better!)

“If every girl in school writes a story, your library-of-one will become a library-of-many, no?” Deidi asks.

“Exactly!”



Dastarkhwan is a cloth on which food is served.



Phul, or ful, is cooking soda.
Kulcha is soft bread, delicious with tea!



My deidi adds a pinch of noon to make the tea salty. Then, she pours in the milk and replaces the lid with a cheerful clang! I fetch my notebook and pencil.

“Begin!”

Deidi shakes her head. “We must wait until the tea is ready. Noon chai makes a story flow better.”

Half-an-hour later, I bite into a buttery kulcha. Delicious hot chai slips down my throat. The world feels warm and wonderful...



Deidi begins her story.

“My husband and I grew up together.”

“You and Dado?”



“No, Aamir. The man I was married to before your dado.”

She sees surprise in my eyes and smiles.

“Aamir and I were cousins. We played together. When we were twelve, we got married and I went to live in his house, next door to my ajee and babo’s logwood one.

“We were so happy together! We grew potatoes like everyone else in the village. In the summers we collected wood to keep the bukhari running all winter. We also had a flock of sheep. Aamir and his babo took our potatoes to Gilgit to exchange them for apples and apricots. They did this after each harvest.”



“He became a person of a different country.

“In between were the men with the guns.

“Aamir could not return home to me.”

Deidi falls silent, gazing into her teacup. But nobody can look at the rosy noon chai and stay sad for long. Impossible!

“One August day in 1947, when Aamir was away in Gilgit, our world was suddenly cut in two. No longer one land made of mountains. It became two lands with a line in the middle that nobody could see but everybody spoke of. Aamir was on that side of the line. I was on this.



“Then, Deidi?” I ask. “Did Aamir come home?”

“No. But his letter did. He told me to get married again. My ajee and babo found your dado. He was good and kind. In time, I became happy again.”

“Deidi,” I whisper, popping a piece of chai-soaked kulcha into her mouth, “do you still think about Aamir?”

Deidi giggles like a little girl. She rummages inside her steel trunk. From the bottom, she pulls out a book.

“I thought you couldn’t read or write!” I exclaim.

“This is not for reading,” she says. “It is to store memories in.” A page falls open, and a papery-dry pink rose slips out.



Picking it up gently, she says, “Aamir had once brought it for me from Srinagar.”

“It is the colour of noon chai!” I cry.

Deidi’s eyes twinkle naughtily. “See? Every afternoon I think of him when I drink it!”



A week later, the library-of-one-book has become a library-of-two.

We huddle around the bukhari and run our fingers lightly over my sa's beautiful drawings, Deidi's gentle words.



Picking it up gently, she says, "Aamir had once brought it for me from Srinagar."



One August day in 1947, when Aamir was away in Gilgit, our world was suddenly cut in two...





Winter is coming. Soon we will be inside our homes, buried under snow. That's when my schoolmates and I will collect stories.

After all, stories flow best over a cup of noon chai in the afternoon!



THE MAN WITH
A
GUN

Ammi's
Wedding

PHERAN

DADO'S
WALKING
STICK





For Jasir, Urvashi, Sajad, Basharat, Inshada & Javaid.
May there be peace and hope wherever you go. – Adithi Rao



Wordbird Books feature traditional and contemporary stories from many regions. Unfamiliar words from different languages are explained with the help of Wordbirds that streak through the pages, giving readers access to a multicultural, multilingual vocabulary.

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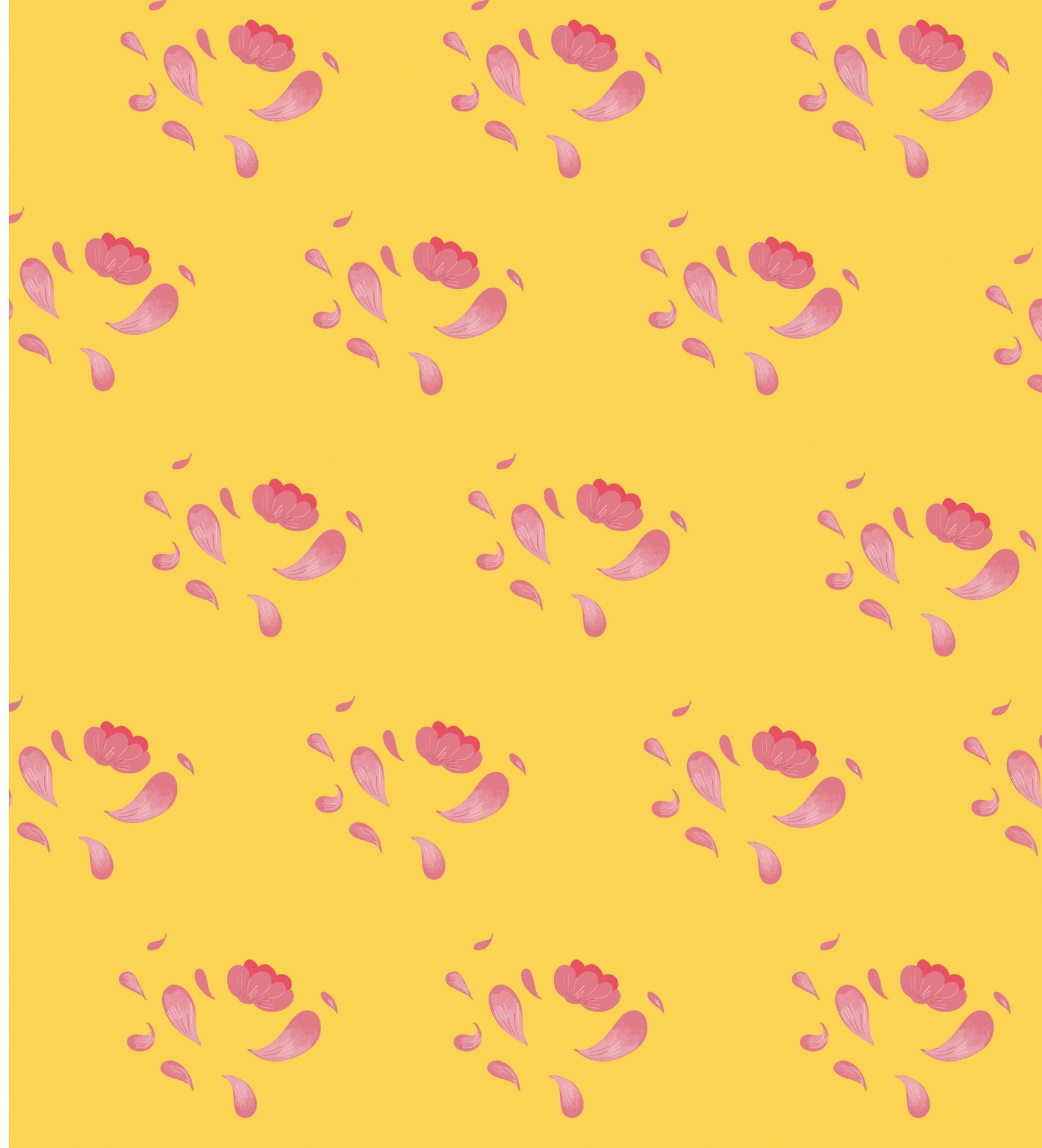
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“In Gurez, there are no storybooks. Only lots and lots of snow!”

When the Uncle From Far Away shows her class a storybook with beautiful pictures, little Amiya is wonderstruck. Now they must build a library, he tells them. But how? Well, Amiya knows that Deidi, her grandmother, has many stories in her old-old eyes. And so, over steaming cups of pink noon chai and buttery kulchas, Deidi begins, Amiya writes, her sister draws, and another book is born!

Tucked within is the isolation of a village situated just this side of the Line of Control in Kashmir, and the hint of conflict. But the affectionate and stylised illustrations are flavoured with the gentle spirit of the people. A heartwarming story about books, and what they mean to those who don't have them.

Adithi Rao's strong visual sense pervades her work. Having written four books for children and short stories for several anthologies, she also works in cinema. She was assistant director for the Hindi film *Satya*, and the rights to her film script, *Baraf*, have been sold. This is her first book with Tulika.

Ghazal Qadri was born and raised in Kashmir. She believes in creating art through lived experiences, and enjoys portraying them through comics and illustration. Using a sprinkling of humour to change an ordinary moment into a relatable story allows her to make sense of life.

