

• SAINT CHOLA •

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Skater. Hesh. Tagger.

Lesbo-Slut. Wanna-be. Dweeb.

Fag. Prep. What-up.

Nerdy. Trendy. Freaky. In a few weeks it'll be solid like cement, but right now nobody knows yet. You might be anything. And here's an example: meet Mohammadee Sawy. Hyper-color t-shirt, over size over-alls with just one hook fastened, the other tossed carefree over the shoulder like it's no big thing. In walks Mohammadee, short and plump and brown, done up for the first day with long fluffy hair and a new mood ring, but guess what, it's not *Mohammadee* anymore. Nope, because dad's not signing you up today, you're all by yourself and when you get the form where it says Name, Grade, Homeroom, you look around and take the pen Ms. Yoshida hands you and you write it in big and permanent: Shala M. Sawy. And from now on that's who you are. Cool.

It's tough to do right but at least you learn what to want. You walk the halls and you see what's there. I want her jeans, I want her triple pierce hoops, I want her strut, I want those boobs, I want that crowd, I want shoes like those shoes, I want a wallet chain, I want a baby-doll dress, I want safety-pins on my backpack, I want a necklace that says my name. Lipstick. I want lipstick. Jelly bracelets. Trainer bras from Target. It could be me. I could be anyone. KISS FM, POWER 106, Douche-bag, Horn-ball. Fanny packs! Biker shorts! And suddenly, wow, Shala realizes that she has a surge of power inside that she never knew was there. Shala realizes that she's walking around and she's thinking Yup, cool, or No way! Lame!

Shala? That sounds good. And that's just the way tiny Mrs. Furukawa says it in homeroom when she calls roll. She says *Shala*. And Shala Mohammadee Sawy? She smiles. (But not so much as to be uncool because she's totally cool.) And she checks out the scene. There's a powerhouse pack of scary Cholas conspiring in the back row,

there's aisle after aisle of knobby, scrawny white-boy knees sprouting like weeds from marshmallow sneakers, and there are clumps of unlikely allies haphazardly united for the first time by the pride of patriotism: Serrania Avenue, row three, Walnut Elementary, row five, or MUS, first row. Forty faces. Shala knows some of them. Bad-ass. Gangster. Dork. Ido, Farah, Laura Leaper, Eden, Mori Leshum—oh great, and him: Taylor Bryans. Barf. But the rest? They're all new. So who knows.

In Our World, fourth period, you learn current events. It's social studies. The book's heavy. But then there's a war. And then you're embarrassed to say Niger River out loud, and you learn to recognize Kuwait and a kid named Josh gets a part in a movie with Tom Hanks, but that's nothing you tells Lucy because you used to roller-skate at Skateland with the kid from Terminator Two. And he's cuter. Way cuter.

It's L.A. Unified where there's every different kind of thing, but it's just Junior High so you're just barely starting to get an idea of what it means to be some different kind of thing. There are piercings. There are cigarettes. Even drug-dealers. And with all that, there's the aura of danger all around, and you realize, for the first time, that you could get your ass kicked. You could get pounded after school, you could get jumped in the bathroom, you could get jacked-up, beat-up, messed-up, it's true, and the omnipresent possibility swells every exchange.

Mrs. Furukawa's new husband is in the army. She says so. She wears the highest heels you've ever seen a person wear. Her class reads *The Diary of Anne Frank* but you know you're set, you already read it. Plus *A Wrinkle in Time*, and you read that one too. At home your mom says Get out the flag, we want them to know what side we're on.

On television every night Bush says Sad-dum instead of Suhdom and your dad says it's a slap in the face. Your dad, the Mohammad Sawy from which your Mohammadee came, says it's on purpose, just to drive that bastard nuts. Your dad, sitting there in the saggy green couch, looks smaller than he used to, tired. You practice saying that big name both ways, first the real way and then the slap-his-face way.

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Gym class is the worst because you have to get naked and that is the worst. Gym is what your friends feared most in fifth grade when you thought about Junior High and you tried so hard to imagine what it would be like to be with other people and take your clothes off (Take your clothes off? In front of people? Strangers-people? Oh yeah right. Get real. No way.) and you started trying to think up the lie you'd have to tell your parents because they just wouldn't get it. A big important thing is Modesty. You know that. It's your cultural heritage, and naked is certainly not Modesty. On the first day just to be sure, you raise your hand and ask If you were a non-strip every day would you fail? And Ms. DeLuca says Yes.

Some kids ditch but it's been three months. It's too late now. You're stuck with who you are by now and even though you're finally Shala you're still a goody-good brainy dweeb. And dweebs just don't ditch. Not like you want to anyway. Except in Gym. That's when you do want to. You sit on the black asphalt during roll call with your gym shirt stretched over your knees so that it's still all bagged out twenty minutes later when the volleyball crashes bang into your unprotected head for the fifteenth time like it's been launched from some mystery rocket launcher and it's got a homing device aimed straight for you.

At twelve, no one knows anything yet, so what kind of name is Shala? Who can tell? And, plus, who'd even consider the question if parents didn't ask it? Sometimes kids slip up to you in the crush of the lunch line and speak quick Spanish and expect you to answer. Sometimes kids crack jokes in Farsi and then shoot you a sly glance just before the punch line. Sometimes you laugh for them anyway. Sometimes you'll try and answer *Sí*, and disguise that anglo-accent the best you can. *Sí, claro*. But the best is when a sleep-over sucks and you want to go home and you call up your mom and mumble Urdu into the telephone and no one knows when you tells your mom I hate these girls and I want to leave.

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On Tuesday a kid wears a t-shirt to school and it says 'Nuke Em' and when Mrs. Furukawa sees it she's pissed and she makes him go to the office and when he comes

back he's wearing it inside out. If you already saw it you can still kind of tell though.
ME EKUN.

After school that day your cousin asks if you want to try Girl Scouts with her. Then she gets sick and makes you go alone. When you get there it's totally weird for two reasons. First, your cousin's older by one year and she already wears a hijab and when you went over to get her she dressed you up. So now you're wearing a hijab and lipstick and your cousin's shirt, which says 'Chill Out.' Uncool. But what could you say? She's all sick and she kept cracking up whenever you put something else of hers on and she's so bossy all the time and then before you knew it the carpool's honking outside and your Aunt shouts that you have to go right now. So you do. Then, second of all, you don't know anybody here. They're all seventh graders. It sucks.

They're baking banana nut bread and the girl who gave you a ride says that you smell funny. What's worse than smelling funny? The first thing you do is you go to the bathroom and wash your hands. Then you rinse out your mouth. You try to keep the lipstick from smearing all over the place. You sniff your armpits. As far as you can tell, it seems normal. In the mirror you look so much older with Aslana's hijab pinned underneath your chin like that.

When you walk out of the bathroom you bump into the girl-scout-mom and almost immediately she starts to yell at you like you spilled something on the carpet.

Um, excuse me but this is a feminist household and hello? Honey, that's degrading, she says.

She must be confused. At first you wonder, is she really talking to me, and like in a television sitcom, you turn around to check if there's someone else standing behind you.

Don't you know this is America, sweetheart? I mean have you heard of this thing feminism?

Yeah I'm one too, you say, because you learned about it in school and it means equality between the sexes and that's a good idea.

That's sweet. She looks at you. But get that thing off your head first, she says. You know you don't have to wear it. Not here. No one's gonna arrest you. I didn't call the police or anything, honey—what's your name?

The girl-scout-mom shakes her girl-scout-head and she's wearing a giant girl-scout outfit that fits her. She looks weird. Like an enormous kid, super-sized like French fries. You can just be yourself at our house, honey, she assures you. You can. What, your mom wears that? She's forced to? Right? Oh, Jesus Christ. Look at you. Well you don't have to, you hear me? Here, you want to take it off? Here, com'ere, honey.

And when you do she helps you and then after you're ashamed that you let her touch it. Then you mix the banana nut dough and you think it looks like throw-up and that same girl says that you still smell like a restaurant she doesn't like. You really, really want to leave. Maybe if you stand still, you think, no one will notice you. On the wall there's a picture of dogs playing cards. Your cousin's hijab is in your backpack and you hold your whole self still and imagine time flowing away like milk down your throat until it's gone and you can leave.

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There are scud missiles, yeah, but in sixth grade at LAUSD, there are more important things. Like French kisses. There's this girl who claims she did one. You just have to think What would that be? because no one would ever kiss you. At least until you're married. Lucy Chang says it's skanky anyway. Lucy Chang is your best friend. You tell her about Girl Scouts and she says Girl Scouts is lame.

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On the way home from school you get knocked down by a car. With a group of kids. It's not that bad, kind of just a scary bump, from the guy doing a California-stop which means rolling through the stop sign. At first he says sorry and you say it's okay. But when you suck up all your might and ask to write down his license plate number he says no. You're dad must be a lawyer, he says, is that it? What, look, you're not even hurt, okay? Just go home.

You have some friends with you. You guys were talking about how you could totally be models for a United Benneton ad if someone just took a picture of you guys

right now. You're on your way to Tommy's Snack Shack for curly fries and an Orange Julius. Uhh, I think we should probably just go, alright, Noel says, It's not that bad so we should just go.

Yeah, go, the man says. Don't be a brat, he says, Just go.

Okay fine, you say, fine I'll go, but FIRST I'm gonna write it down.

He's tall and he looks towards the ground to look at you, Just mind your own business, kid, she doesn't want you to. No one wants you to, he says.

Well I'm gonna, you say.

Look, you're not hurt, nobody's hurt, what do you need to for?

Just in case, you say. If it scares him you're happy. You're in Junior High. You know what to do. Stand your ground. Make your face impassive. You are made of stone. You repeat it more slowly just to see if it freaks him out. *Just. In. Case*, you say and you're twelve and if you're a brat then wear it like a badge.

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At mosque there's a broken window. It's a disgrace, your father says, Shala, I tell you it's a damn disgrace. The hole in the window looks jagged like a fragile star sprouting sharp new points. It lets all the outside noise in when everybody's trying to pray and cars rush past grinding their brakes.

There's a report in Language Skills, due Monday, and you have to have a thesis so on the way home from mosque your mom helps you think of one. Yours is that if you were living in Nazi times you would have saved Anne Frank. Your mom says that's not a thesis. Hers is that empathy and tolerance are essential teachings in every religion. You settle for a compromise: Because of Anne Frank's tolerance she should be officially granted Sainthood.

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At home while your mom makes dinner she stands over the stove as you peel the mutant-looking ginger root and there are lots of phone calls from lots of relatives. What are we

going to do, your mom keeps demanding each time she talks into the phone, What? Tell me. What are we going to do?

Saddam does something. You know it because there are television reports. Everyone's worried for your older brother. He's studying in Pakistan with some friends and if he leaves now then he'll be out one whole semester because his final tests aren't for two more months. He's big news at the mosque. Also people are talking about the price of gas and how much it costs just to drive downtown.

Then Bush does something back, and the phone cord stretches as your mom marches over and snaps the TV off like she's smashed a spider.

The ginger and the asafetida and the mustard seed sauté for a long time until they boil down and then it is the usual moment for adding in the spinach and the potato and the oil but instead the moment comes and goes and the saag aloo burns for the first time that you can remember and the delicate smell of scorched spice swirls up through the room as you watch your mom demand her quite angry Urdu into the receiver and you realize that she doesn't even notice.

You know why she's upset. It's because everyone can tell Ahmad's American and he can't disguise it. He smells American, he smiles American, and his t-shirts say *Just Do It* like a dare. And lots of people hate America. Plus, in that country, in general in that country, it's much more dangerous. Even just every time you visit, you swallow giant pills and still your weak sterile body gets every cold and all the diarrhea and all the fevers that India has to offer. It's because of the antiseptic lifestyle, your mother insists, Too clean.

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In Science class, fifth period, you learn that everything is made out of stardust from billions of years ago. Instead of it being as romantic as Mr. Kane seems to think it is, you think that pervasive dust feels sinister. You know what happened to Anne Frank, and you can't believe that when she died she turned back into people dust, all mixed up with every other kind of dust. Just piles and piles of dust. And all of it new.

are nice and that you are no crazy, no religious nut. You are only you, and that is a very brave thing to show the world.

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Now when you guys walk home, you're way more careful about not trusting any cars to do anything you expect them to. When you get to the 7-11, you try different ways of scamming a five-finger-discount on the Slurpees. The woman behind the counter hates kids. Timing is everything. Here's how it goes: one person buys and you mix every color all together and try to pass from mouth to mouth and suck it gone before it melts. It's hard because of brain freeze. You try to re-fill and pass off, which the woman says counts as stealing and is not allowed, but that's only when she catches you. Trick is, you have to look like you're alone when you buy the cup or she'll be on to you and then she'll turn around and watch the machine. So everyone else has to stand outside with the bum named Larry and then go in one by one and sit on the floor reading trashy magazines about eyeshadow while the buyer waits in line. Today that's you. You wait in line. You've got the collective seventy-nine cents in you hand. You freeze your face still into a mask of passivity and innocence.

As the trapped hotdogs roll over sweating on their metal coils, you hear the two men in front of you discussing politics and waiting with their own single flavor Slurpees already filled to the brim and ready to be paid for in full.

Same goddamn groundwar we had in 'Nam, and hell knows nobody wants to see their baby home in a body bag. Hey.

The way I see it is, you got two choices, right? Nuke the towel-heads, use your small bombs, ask your questions later, or what you do is convert.

With you on the first one, buddy.

No, no listen: *convert*. Hell yeah, whole country. To Islam. To mighty Allah.

Shit, dude, what: you and the rag-heads?

But I got a point, right? Right? 'Cause what'd you think these fuckers want? Right? Oh yeah, hey uh, pack of Lucky Strikes, huh? And how 'bout Superlotto? Yeah, one of those, thanks.

Next: you. You try to gauge how much this straggly woman sees. Can she tell? Muslim? Mexican? Does she know that your clothes are Trendy, that your grades are Dweeby, that your heart is Goodygoodie? Your face: unreadable, innocent, frozen. One Slurpee. Please.

You walk around the counter and towards the magazines and when your friends see you, you try to look triumphant and cool and with it. But you feel like a cheat. Like maybe if it is stealing, you might not be such a good Muslim, you might be letting your kind of people look bad.

Not *stealing*, says Lucy. Sharing. It's just sharing.

So you share. You slurp cherry-cola-blueberry-cherry layers until your forehead aches. Then Jackie opens up her mouth and throws her head back and gets down on her knees and another girl pulls the knob and you all stop to watch the Slurpee slurped straight from the machine. Gross, someone says, but you're all impressed with the inventiveness and Jackie's daredevil status is elevated in everyone's eyes.

Oh, for Christssake! Give me a break! You goddamn good-for-nothing kids, get out of here! Get! Never again! You're banned, you hear me? Banned! Out! Get out!

Scatter giggling and shrieking across the parking lot, and the very next day dare each other to go back like nothing happened and you know you can because you know she can't tell the difference between any of you anyway. You could be anyone for all she knows.

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The day you try it out as a test, someone yanks hard from behind and when it gets ripped off your head, a lot of hair does too. You think about how when hard-ass what-up girls fight they both stop first and take out all their earrings. It hurts enough to make you cry but you try hard not to. *Please don't let me cry, please, please don't let me cry.* First period, and Taylor Bryans sees your chubby lower lip tremble and he remembers the time you corrected his wrong answer in front of the whole class (Not pods! *Seeds!* Duh!) and he starts up a tough game of Shala-Snot-Germs which is so lame but still the cooties spread from hand to hand all around the room as your face gets hotter and hotter and your

eyeballs sting and your nose drips in sorrow. Your dignity gathers and mounts as you readjust the scarf and re-pin the pin. You can't see anyone pass Germs, you can't hear anyone say your name. You are stone. You are cool. You will not cry. Those are not tears. The bell rings.

Then the bell rings six more times at the end of six periods and when you get home that day you have had the hijab yanked on seven occasions, four times in first period, and you've had your feet stomped twice by Taylor Bryans in the lunch line, and after school a group of eighth graders, all of them past puberty and huge with breasts in bras, surrounded you to gawk and tug in unison. And you've made up your mind about the hijab. It stays. No matter what. The fury coils in your veins like rattlesnake lava, the chin pushes out to be held high, the face is composed and impervious and a new dignity is born outraged where there used to be just Shala's self-doubt. It stays, you think, No matter what.

Still, at home you cry into your mom's sari and you shout at her like she's one of the merciless, I'm just regular, you wail. I'm the same as I ever was!

Oh baby, come on, *bendi*, shhh, it's going to be okay, she says. And then your mom suggests that maybe right now might not be the right time to start wearing this. She assures you that you are okay either way, that you can just take it off and forget about it. She says all this, sure, but she wears hers knotted firmly underneath her own chin as she strokes your back with reassurance.

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That night, before you get into bed, you think about your brother and what it must be like for him. You look in the bathroom mirror and you slip the hijab on over your young hair and you watch like magic as you're transformed into a woman right before your very eyes. You watch like magic as all of the responsibilities and roles shift and focus.

You get it both ways. In your own country you have to worry, you have to get you hair pulled. And in India there you are: the open target, so obvious with your smooth American feet and your mini Nike backpack, the most hated. With anger and envy and

danger all around you. The most hated. The most spoiled. An easy mark. A tiny girl. With every thing in the world, and all of it at your disposal.

You think about your brother and you wonder if he's scared.

As you get dressed for bed you check things out with a hand mirror. You poke at the new places you hadn't looked at before. You look at the shape in the hand mirror and you think *Hello me*. It's embarrassing even though it's only you. You feel a whole new feeling. You think about how much you hate Taylor Bryans. Indignation rises up like steam. You stand there in the bathroom with blood on your hands and you know it. *I am Muslim*, you think, *I am Muslim, hear me roar*.

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In third period PE the waves of hot Valley sun bake off the blacktop asphalt and from a distance you see squiggly lines of air bent into mirage and your head is cooking underneath the scarf and your ears feel like they're burning in the places where they touch the cloth and your hair is plastered to the back of your neck with sticky salty sweat and when you group up for teams, someone yanks hard. You topple right over. You scrape your knees and through the blood they're smudged sooty black. Everyone turns around to look, and a bunch of girls laugh quietly behind hands. The hijab is torn from where the pin broke loose and your dad is right, it's way better that it isn't a knot or you might choke. Your neck is wet with a hair-strand of blood from where the popped-open pin tip slipped along skin. And you figure, That's it. Forget it. I quit. I'm ditching. I hate you.

Someone says, Aw shit, girl, you okay?

You scramble up and walk tall and leave the girls in their bagged out PE uniforms and you go back into the cool dank locker room where you can get naked all by yourself for once. As you wash the gravel out of your hands you stare at yourself in the mirror. You think *Bloody Mary* and squeeze your eyes shut tight, but when you open them it's still just your face all alone with rows and rows of lockers. No demon to slice you down.

Now when you walk in late you're not Nobody anymore, you're not Anyone At All. Instead, now, when you walk in you have to brace yourself in advance, and you have to summon up a courage and a dignity that grows strong when your eyes go dull and you stare into unfocused space inches away while Taylor Bryans and Fernando Cruz snicker and snicker until no one's looking and then they run up and shout in your face: Arab! Lardass! Damn, you so ugly you ooogly!

Your inner reserves fill to full when Fernando stomps your feet and your white Reeboks get smeared up and wrecked and your face doesn't even move no matter how much it hurts.

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The bell rings. Lunch. You push and shove your way into the cluster of the Girls' Room, and there's no privacy and you try to peer into the tagged-up piece of dull-shine metal that's bolted to the wall where everyone wants a mirror, but there are girls applying mascara and girls with lip-liner and the only air is a fine wet mist of aerosol aqua-net and it's too hard to breathe and you can't see if it's still pinned straight, because that last snatch was like an afterthought and it didn't even tug all the way off. But you can't make your way up to the reflection and you can't see for sure. So here it comes, and then you're standing there in the ebb and flow of shoulders and sneakers and all of a sudden here it comes and you're sobbing like you can't stop.

Hey girl, why you crying? Want me to kick some motherfucker's ass for you, girl? 'Cause I'll do it, bitch, I'm crazy like that. You just show me who, right, hey I'll do it, homegirl.

And through your tears you want to throw your arms around the giant mountainous Chola and her bighearted kindness and you want to kiss her Adidas and you want to say Taylor Bryans' name and you want to point him out and you want his ass kicked hard, but you stop yourself. You picture the outcome, you picture the humiliation he'd feel, a skinny sixth grader, a scrub, the black eye, the devastation of public boy-tears, the horror of having someone who means it hit you like an avalanche. You look over your back, past all the girl-heads, the stiff blondes and permed browns and braided

weaves, the dye jobs, the split ends, all of them elbowing and pushing in to catch a dull distorted glimpse in graffitied monochrome, and you smooth over the folds of your safe solid black hijab and you snuffle up teary dripping snot and you picture what it would be.

You picture her rush him: Hey BITCH, yah I'm talking to you, *pendejo*, that's right you better run outta my way whiteboy, cuz I'm going to whup your ass, punkass motherfucker! You picture her and she's like a truck. Taylor Bryans stops cold and then he startles and turns to flee but she's already overcome him like a landslide, and she pounds him like muddy debris crushing someone's million-dollar home. You picture the defeat, the crowd of jeering kids, Fight! Fight! Fight! The tight circle of locked arms, elbow in elbow so the teachers can't break it up, the squawk of adult walkie-talkies and then the security guards, the assistant principal, and all the teachers on yard-duty, all of them as one, charging over to haul kids out of the fray and into detention, and all the while you can picture him like he's a photograph in your hand: the tears, the scrapes, the bruises, the giant shame in his guilty nasty eyes and you know that it wouldn't solve a thing and you suspect that it probably wouldn't even stop him from pulling your hair out and stomping on your feet and you picture it and you open up your heart and you forgive him.

Then you gather up all that new dignity, and then you look up at her, stick your covered head out of the girls' bathroom, and point.

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