

S. Hope Sharma



S. Hope Sharma's passion is to spread more hope in this messy world. She writes middle-grade stories that celebrate awkward, imperfect kids navigating multiple cultures and finding their true voices.

CHAMELEON

mall

The mall fountain sprays little
drops of cold water on my arms
as I see my annoying, little sister, Mona,
dart away from Mom.

She sneaks behind a neon pink,
back-to-school sign in front of Claire's.
Just past her, I see a group of pretty girls
giggling and chewing hubba-bubba
in navy, Windsor School hoodies.

My breath stops and my heart thumps.
These girls go to my soon-to-be new school.
I duck behind the fountain and try to
blend into a row of rigid plastic plants.

That was way too close.
I tilt my head, catching my breath,
but a screw on my scoliosis brace
yanks baby hair from the back of my neck.
"Ow," I yelp.

I've had the brace for about a month
but it feels like I am missing
the owner's manual or something.
It's called the Milwaukee brace
and makes me never want to visit Milwaukee
or anywhere else they design kid torture devices.

The brace is hard and makes everything harder.
Rigid plastic encases my belly and low back
and a big metal rod climbs up my chest
and two rods creep along my spine and
remind me of spiky metal dragon scales.
They connect to a steel ring
just below my chin like a stiff collar.

Today, we spent hours looking for
uniform-colored, turtlenecks and navy shirts
to camouflage the ring, rods, and screws.
We even went to the young men's department.
Gross. It reeked of cologne and weirdly,
the walls were plastered with giant posters
of boys playing soccer in polo shirts and jeans.
We bought mock necks and collared shirts
that barely conceal any metal
(but don't turtleneck choke me).

Just then, Mona pops out from behind the sign.
"Maya, did I scare you?" She asks.
"Everyone can see you," I grunt.
My eyes drift into Claire's
past unicorn necklaces and dangly earrings
to a wall of pastel journals.
A puffy diary decorated in doodles
calls to me and I brush past Mona.

A new diary ranks high
as a favorite thing to buy
any day
but especially today,
before starting at a new school,
and after just getting a back brace.

I crack open the pages
and inhale fresh book smell.
The lined pastel pages
drip with potential
and promise to hide all my feelings.
On the first page, under the line
This Diary Belongs To:
I imagine *Maya Shah* written in
fancy, loopy cursive.

“Let’s go, Maya,” Mom calls.
“Hey, Mom, I need a new diary.”
I hug the puffy-doodle diary like the statue of liberty.
“Already? My little writer,” she pats my hair and smiles big.
Maybe, it’s babyish but I still like her pats.

“Thanks, Mom, can I get it?” My eyebrows lift.
“Okay, sounds good, Maya.” She agrees.
I want to hug her but not at the mall,
not with the Windsor girls lurking around,
and not in my metal cage.
It block all the softness.

Mona pops out behind a bracelet rack
and almost knocks it over,
“Another one? What do I get?” She stomps.
“Now, Mona, easy there. If you write more
then, you can get one too.”
“I will, I will, please, Mommy?”
She puts her palms together in prayer
and I roll my eyes. *She will never use it.*
Mona makes puppy dog eyes and pouty lips
and of course, Mom caves.
“Okay, grab one you like,” Mom sighs.
As long as she doesn’t mess with my diary,
Mona the menace can get what she wants.

When we get home,
I rush to my room and
whip out my thick new diary.
I breathe in the pages again,
it smells like pulpy wood
and fresh starts.

The comfort of fresh pages
and imagined stories
and faraway places
and living
in a brace-free world
enchant me.