

DROPS JOIN TOGETHER

How one girl's bravery
brings freedom from slavery.



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kneel in the dirt and flick my favorite marble. Click! It strikes Prisha's last marble and pushes it out of the ring.

"Do you want to play again?" I ask my best friend.

"With what, Diya?" Prisha laughs. "You won almost all my marbles."

"Let's divide them and start over tomorrow," I suggest. "It's almost time for my Appa to come home anyway."

"It is getting late," Prisha agrees. "See you tomorrow!"

Prisha smiles at me then heads toward home. It is hot and dry. The wind swirls dust from the road around her. We have not had rain for a really long time. Appa says we are having a drought.

I collect the marbles and wait for Appa in front of our bungalow. When I see him come in from the fields, I run to meet him.

"Appa! Appa! Do you want to play tag today?"

"No, Diya," he snaps.

"How about hide-and-seek?"

"No," he snaps again.

"Marbles?" I try a third time, holding up the marble bag.

"No games today." Appa looks down at me, and his eyes soften.

"Why, Appa?" I don't understand.

“Come.” He holds out his hand to me. I take it and follow him inside.

My Amma looks surprised to see us so soon. She rushes to put the rice pancakes on our eating mat.

We smear chutney on our pancakes and start to eat. Appa is quiet. Amma looks worried.

“The last of the grape vines withered today,” Appa says, finally breaking the silence. “We have borrowed money to pay for food. Now that there are no grapes to sell, we can’t repay the money.

“We have had an offer to work in a brick kiln several hours away. The kiln owner will pay the money we owe. We will pay him back and earn money for new vines. We leave in the morning.”

“But what about Prisha? School?” Tears well up in my eyes.

“Drops join together to make a stream, Diya,” Appa says quietly. “If we join together and work our hardest, we will repay the money faster. You won’t be away from school or Prisha for long.”





Later, Amma tucks me into bed. My stomach is filled with butterflies as I twist and turn. Amma strokes my hair and sings my favorite lullaby:

“Sleep o lil one sleep,

The one who is as beautiful as the feather of a peacock.

From where have you come to brighten my home?

For you seem like an angel dropped from the heavens.”

I clutch my marble and fall asleep.





he next day, we arrive at the brick kiln tired and hungry from our journey. Instead of resting or eating a meal, the kiln owner forces us right to work alongside many other families.

Appa digs clay out of the ground. Amma mixes the clay with dirty water and places the mixture in brick molds. The newly molded bricks must dry in the hot sun for several days. I carry stacks of the sun-dried bricks to the hot kiln to bake.

I lose track of time walking back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth. The sun plus the kiln heat makes me feel like I am surrounded by fire. My fingers and hands hurt from the clay — it is rough and leaves burn marks. Sharp pains shoot through my shoulders.

When it is too dark to see, we finally finish. Amma and Appa eat cold, lumpy rice. I am too tired to eat. I fall onto one of the three sleeping mats in our shack. The hard ground makes my back hurt as much as my shoulders and hands.



“Will it get better?” Amma asks with a sigh.

“I believe so,” Appa says. But his voice sounds sad to me.

I roll my favorite marble between my fingers and imagine Prisha smiling at me before I fall asleep.

For the first time in my memory, Appa is wrong. Things do not get better. Each day is like the last. Even after many months, we barely make enough money to pay for our shack and lumpy rice. There is no extra to repay the kiln owner or save for new grape vines.

Once, Appa questioned the kiln owner about our wages, and the owner beat Appa with a stick. Amma and I saw the marks on his back at bedtime, and we sobbed all night. Now, Appa never speaks of home or anything at all. He mostly stares into space. Many days, Amma is sick from the dirty water and stays in the shack with stomach pains. She no longer sings my favorite lullaby. Her song is gone.





My hands are covered in scars from the blisters that break open and bleed. At first, I made it through those hard days by dreaming of school and Prisha's smiles, and of playing marbles or hide-and-seek or tag. Now, I only dream of lying down.

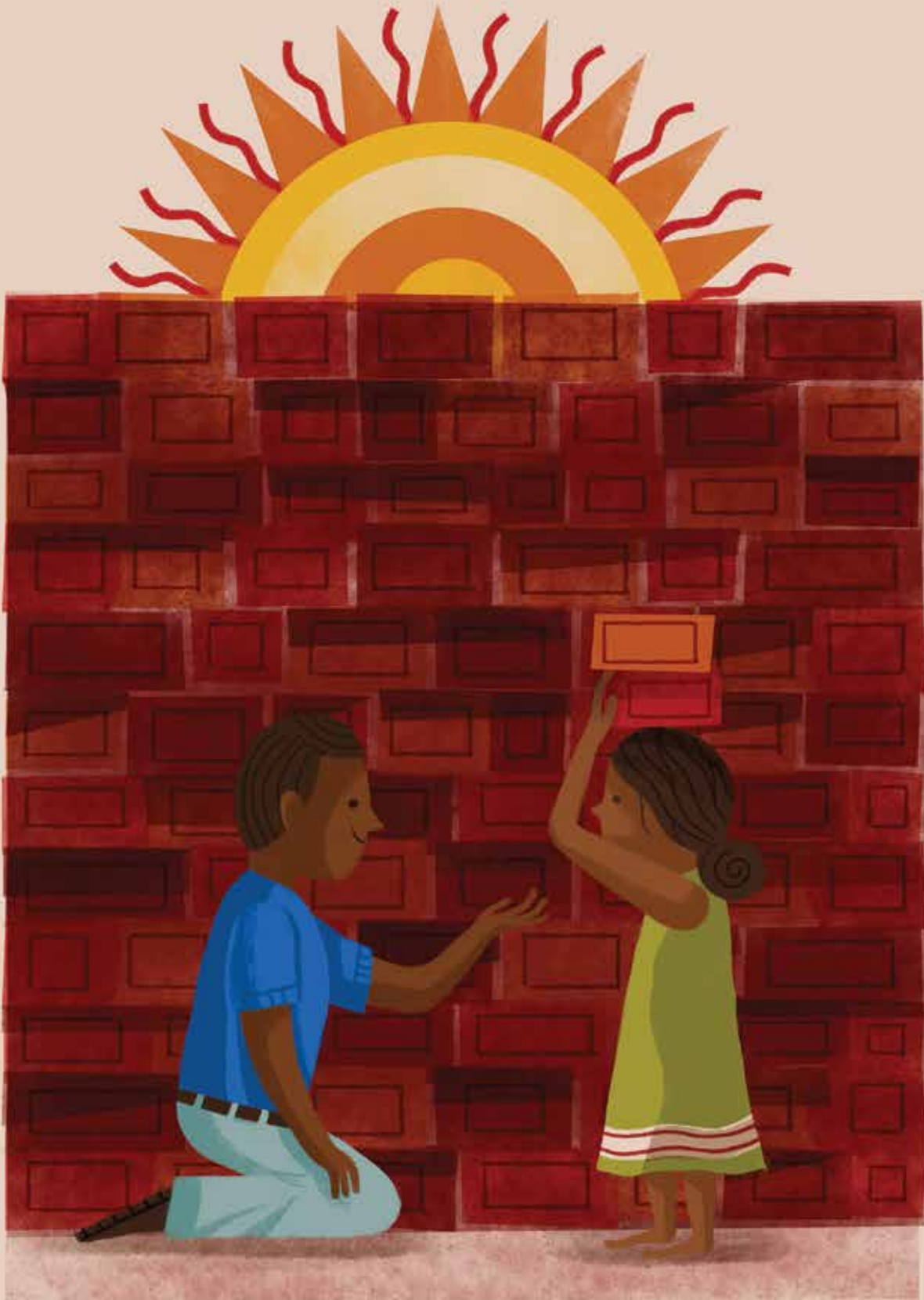


ne afternoon as I am stacking bricks, a strange man blocks my path. What have I done wrong? Will I get beaten like Appa? He kneels down in front of me. I start to tremble and close my eyes, waiting for the stick.

“Do not be afraid,” he says. “I am here to help.”

I roll my marble between my fingers in my pocket; then I open my eyes.

“I am going to take you and your family to safety where you will be free,” the man says. He holds out his hand and I look into his eyes. They are soft like Appa’s used to be. I take his hand. He leads me out of the kiln and onto the street. I see a woman also leading Appa, Amma and some other workers out of the kiln.





Suddenly, we hear loud angry voices. The kiln owner and neighboring kiln owners are pressing in around us, trying to scare us into staying. I look over my shoulder. Appa looks like he's frozen in fear.

But these people helping us are nice, and I trust them. If we are going to leave, it has to be now.

I gather my last bit of courage and reach toward Appa.

"Drops join together to make a stream," I remind him. "We must show everyone how to leave." I look up into his eyes. I see them soften.

"You have lived up to your name, Diya," he says, grasping my hand. "You are a light."

We all link arms and push through the kiln owners and into a waiting truck.

Appa puts his arm around Amma and me. We huddle together.
Amma strokes my hair and sings my favorite lullaby:

“Sleep o lil one sleep,

The one who is as beautiful as the feather of a peacock.

From where have you come to brighten my home?

For you seem like an angel dropped from the heavens.”

I roll my marble between my fingers and dream about school and
Prisha’s smiles and playing marbles and hide-and-seek and tag.

We are free. We are going home.



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