

Drama Stage 5 (Year 10) – script booklet 3

Laila is Missing by Bina Bhattacharya

This document contains teaching and learning resources that accompany the Year 10 unit, 'Finding voice – crafting a play'.

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Resource overview

This script booklet is not a standalone resource. It has been designed for use by department teachers in connection to Year 10 resources designed by the Creative arts curriculum team for the [Drama 7–10 Syllabus \(2023\)](#). These include the Stage 5 scope and sequence, Year 10 ‘Finding voice – crafting a play’ unit and sample assessment task. All documents associated with this resource can be found on the [Planning, programming and assessing drama 7–10 \(2023\)](#) webpage.

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Laila is Missing

A modern melodrama by Bina Bhattacharya

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Acknowledgments

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the NSW Department of Education Creative arts curriculum team for their knowledgeable and capable stewardship of this project. Thanks also to Yvan Karezi, Varuna Naicker and Kobra Sayyadi for their analysis and fearless assessment of the first draft. And finally, my most humble and hearty gratitude to Elke Schmidt, Tan Nguyen and the wonderful 2024 Year 11 Drama class at Cabramatta High School for their insight, thoughtfulness and generosity in undertaking a table read and providing feedback at a critical stage.

Dedicated to all the Lailas I've known.

Characters

Laila – the confused ethnic girl, with a rebellious streak. Brilliant but frustrated. If her parents weren't so strict she'd be a regular at slam poetry, so instead she runs a hugely successful Tik Tok account about poetry from around the world.

Misha – the good ethnic girl. School Captain. Nancy Drew. Feels immense pressure from her parents. Can be friendly with Laila at times but is also competitive with her.

Farah – Misha's best friend. Joins in on the cruelty and is nasty to Laila. Is superstitious.

Jamila – Laila's classmate, and the only person sympathetic to her.

Alex – Sam's rival. Intelligent and practical.

Sam – Alex's rival. Also, intelligent, and practical.

Optional (Heard but never seen)

Miss Stratford – the English teacher

Misha's Mum

Misha's Dad

Laila's Mum

Laila's Dad

Playwright's notes

I was approached to write a 'modern melodrama' that could be performed in Years 7-10 drama classrooms that reflected the cultural diversity of public schools. When I was studying drama in high school 20 years ago there, I never was presented a single text by a writer of colour. All the plays were about Anglo families and young people with outdoorsy interests and a distinct lack of ambition which felt a world away from my highly competitive, multicultural all-girls public high school in Western Sydney. I remember being given one play that tried to deal with racism, written by a white writer, but it felt superficial and inauthentic.

I thought a lot about my own teen years, the pressure I was under to do well in school, while also trying to fit in, and reflected on the ways students are often negotiating a double life from their parents and community. My original idea was 'Eerie, Indiana' meets 'An Inspector Calls' – but ethnic.

The intention is for it to be universal enough that it can be adapted to suit the students of whichever drama class wishes to perform it. Laila and Misha's ethnic backgrounds are never specified. I went with the names 'Laila' and 'Misha' as they are common throughout the world. I strongly advise directors and drama teachers to revise the script once the roles of Misha and Laila have been cast with a view to pepper more specific descriptions or slang to firmly ground the text in their community. For example, if you decide to cast a student of Indian descent as Laila, the line 'you don't understand ethnic parents' could be adapted to 'you don't understand Indian parents.' In Scene 5, Laila should be given a suitable last name for the missing person's report. You could translate all the parents' lines to be in a language other than English, if that's authentic to the community, and actually specify which one rather than just saying 'in language'. I encourage classrooms to engage in thoughtful and robust conversation around amending the script in a way that makes it feel relatable and authentic to them.

I wrote the play in such a way that it could be performed by either an all-girls classroom or a co-ed classroom. It's no accident that 'Alex' and 'Sam' are unisex names. I felt like this was a wise choice given that girls tend to outnumber boys in most drama classes, and also that so many plays are written by men with limited offerings for girls.

There are 6 roles seen on stage and an additional 5 roles that are only ever heard, whose lines could potentially be recorded beforehand. The classroom scenes and the vigil scene could also work as ensemble moments with a bigger group making shapes and tableaux to frame the action of the main characters. I kept the adult roles as optional because in my experience, young people don't always enjoy playing parents and also because in true 'teen mystery' style, adults are absent

from the young people's adventures as a genre convention. Again, I encourage classrooms to adapt the play to suit a larger group. There's no reason why you couldn't have Miss Stratford, Laila's parents and Misha's parents appear on stage, and this could offer some interesting variations.

The slang and references to social media are accurate and up to date in early 2024. I encourage classrooms to feel free to either firmly set the play in 2024 or update it to better suit the latest slang and social media trends so that it does not feel anachronistic.

I encourage classrooms to be creative in how they make the social media aspects dramatic and theatrical.

The piece was written as a cohesive 30-minute melodrama but also contains a number of scenes that could work on their own. Laila's final vlog could be expanded by students to make a 3-minute monologue, and her scene with Misha could make a great duologue.

The poem Laila recites is a translation of 'Gitanjali 84' by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and is available in the public domain. It could be replaced with any suitable poem from the non-English speaking, non-European world, in line with Laila's interest in literature from around the world and multicultural background. Perhaps a poem from Rumi or Pablo Neruda would be more appropriate. I chose 'Gitanjali 84' as a contrast to the English poets who are zooming in on a person or object, as opposed to Tagore's poem which ponders the universe in its entirety.

Laila is Missing includes excerpts from:

- 'Gitanjali 84'
- *Midnight Songs*
- 'Sonnet 18'
- 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

Scenes

Scene 1 – Laila is recording a new vlog in her bedroom before being interrupted and threatened by her strict, overbearing parents.

Scene 2 – All the students go through the heightened performance of receiving English assessments back. Laila is absent, having been tricked by her friends to go to the wrong room. Her classmates gossip cruelly about her.

Scene 3 – Laila confronts Misha in the library after school. They talk about their upcoming English assessment, where Laila plans on presenting a Bengali poem, which Misha scoffs at. Laila accidentally leaves her book of poems behind, tempting Misha.

Scene 4 – In English class, Misha blindsides Laila by presenting the poem Laila had planned on presenting as her own. Laila objects, but everyone sides with Misha because they like her more. Devastated, Laila absconds.

Scene 5 – On the school grounds, gossip is spreading among Laila's classmates. Laila has not returned to school, and her entire social media footprint has disappeared. They discover she has been reported missing. Her classmates' speculation becomes frenzied, and they assume she has been somehow hurt by her family. Misha leads the charge against what she sees as the root cause - unreasonable parents.

Scene 6 – Misha organises a candlelit vigil for Laila to draw attention to the harm caused by tiger parenting, with unexpected results and a dramatic finale.

Scene 7 – Epilogue. Laila explains her new situation.

Scene 1 – Laila’s vlog

Laila is recording a vlog in her living room. She is playful and flirty.

Laila: Hello lovers. It’s Luscious Laila here. I found a delicious poem today that I wanted to share with you all. It’s attributed to the fourth century poet of the Chin dynasty who called herself Tzu Yeh, or ‘Lady Midnight’. I’ll let you decide why she might have chosen that name.

She performs the poem, like a peacock.

Laila: I could not sleep with the full moon haunting my bed!
I thought I heard—here, there, everywhere—
disembodied voices calling my name!
Helplessly I cried ‘Yes!’ to the phantom air!

Her door is thrust open just as Laila is in the throes of an embarrassing pose. She panics and quickly tries to hide what she’s doing. Her parents’ voices scold her from off-stage.

Laila’s Mum: (off-stage) Laila! What is this?

Laila: It’s for school, Ma!

Laila’s Mum: (off-stage) This? This is for school? This is filth!

Laila’s Dad: (off-stage) You are filth! Stop lying to us!

Laila: But it really is! I’m making a study video.

Laila’s Dad: Studying is something you do by yourself. Not this...this exhibitionism! I’m warning you, Laila.

Laila is devastated.

Scene 2 – English class

A Year 12 English class of a multicultural public high school in Western Sydney. Students are receiving their results. The voice of their teacher, MS STRATFORD, is heard but she is never seen. They are receiving their marks back for an assessment.

Teacher (off-stage): Jamila. Alex. Sam. Misha. Farah.

Each classmate goes up when their name is called, grabs their paper, and performs the same ritual of clutching their paper to their chest until they sit back down, before taking a peek and reacting.

Alex: How did you go?

Sam: I got 17.

Alex: That's really good!

Sam: No it's not. What did you get?

Alex: Also 17.

Sam: Oh. That's really good...for you.

Alex: What's that supposed to mean?

Sam: As in...it's a good mark.

Alex: What, it's only a good mark when I get it but it's not when you get it?

Sam: I just... English is my best subject. If I don't get a Band 6 I'm stuffed.

Alex: I know exactly what you mean.

Awkward pause.

Alex: 17 **is** a good mark. It's 85, or an HD.

Sam: Exactly.

Alex: And I only studied the night before. If I had actually studied properly I would have gotten even higher.

Sam rolls her eyes and turns to Misha.

Sam: How did you go?

Misha: I'm not telling.

Farah: She got 19 out of 20.

The disembodied voice of Misha's mother's echoes around the space– her inner critic. Only Misha hears it.

Misha's mum (off-stage): Just 19? If you just studied harder, you could get full marks!

Misha: Shhhh!

Sam: Congratulations!

Alex: Well done.

Misha: It doesn't matter about the mark. It matters about the rank.

Misha's dad (off-stage disembodied, echoing): We expect you to be coming first.

Sam: I'm pretty sure that's the highest.

Alex: How did Laila go?

Jamila: Where is Laila, anyway?

Misha: Ugh, she's been driving us all nuts.

Farah: We sent her a fake location saying today's class was in the library. But really we just needed some space from her.

Alex: She's painful.

Misha: Oh I know.

Sam: Her stupid Tik Toks.

Farah (imitating Laila, gyrating and pouting): I'm Laila. You can call me 'Slay-La!' Yeah. 'Roses are red. Violets are brown. Like, comment and subscribe for another...' what rhymes with brown?

Farah comically poses. Her classmates laugh, cruelly.

Sam: I bet you hot chips there'll be some weepy post tonight about how mean we are for ghosting her and no one understands her genius.

Misha: She'll be low-key devastated she wasn't here to do a big performance around her assessment.

Sam: Yeah. I have to admit I'm curious as to what she got.

Misha: Miss Stratford?

Miss Stratford (off-stage) Yes?

Misha: What was the highest mark?

Miss Stratford: (off-stage) We had one exceptional answer. One person got 20 out of 20.

Misha: That must have been Laila.

Farah: Good thing she's not here to gloat. We should be careful about talking about her too much. I believe that if you say someone's name and think about them too much you can summon their spirit.

Misha: You're so superstitious.

Farah: I'm serious. You watch. She'll somehow appear to you before the day is out.

Scene 3 – The Library

A study room of a local public library.

Misha is working on an upcoming English assignment and reading her work back to herself.

Misha: The poem I have decided to present is 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', by celebrated English poet John Keats. Keats was famous for his use of....

She trails off, struggling. She consults her phone as she writes.

Misha: Keats is widely regarded as one of the seminal poets of the English Romantic period. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' uses literary devices such as...metaphor...repetition...

Misha has hit a wall.

Misha: Ugh, I hate this. Surely what I've written is enough? Do I really have to come first in every single assessment?

She dramatically puts her head on the desk, seemingly given up. The disembodied, booming voices of her parents jolts her, ethereally. Only Misha hears it.

Misha's mum (off-stage): 70? 70? This is the best you could do? How will I ever show my face again?

Misha's dad (off-stage): Monica got into Medicine at UNSW!

Misha's mum (off-stage): If you just concentrated you could get 100!

Misha's dad (off-stage): You are a failure! A disgrace! All our money and sacrifice wasted!

Misha draws the strength to sit up and try again.

Misha: Literary devices such as metaphor, repetition and ekphrasis...ooh! That's coming up with a red squiggly line - that must mean it's a rare word, surely I'll get marks for vocabulary.

Sound effect - notification. Misha is distracted by something. She clicks on the notification. Laila appears behind her, rap freestyle vlogging, suggestively.

Laila: Some people can't handle their spice. Fragrant, pungent, tongue-twisting delights. For a price, brown bodies subjugation, sun-kissed rice, whole nations absorbed by an empire, our plight. From being plundered for our earthly zest, the best, from the breast of mother nature, to now, deemed too much, too smelly, too hot, in need of temperance, required deference, don't mention it.

So, I guess what I'm trying to say with my latest rhyme is that some of you can't handle my heat, and that's on you. I make no apologies. And maybe you should sit with that rather than invalidating me. Coz you know. Haters gonna hate. But I refuse to water myself down. So, all you haters out there, just so you know, your hate is actually a love language. The true language of hate is indifference. You all be too jealous to support me, but too nosey to delete me. If you really all hated me you would mute or ignore me, not obsess over every move I make. I see you. Not fooled. You're a sea of basic Brontës when I'm Anaïs Nin [*can be replaced with names of other poets appropriate to the context*].

Laila walks and talks as she delivers her vlog, until she's right behind Misha. She points at Misha's phone, startling her.

Laila: Oh look! That view was from you!

Misha jumps.

Laila: You know, if you were curious about how I was, you could have just asked. I was trying to catch you all day.

Misha: It just...came up in my feed.

Laila: I read on Reddit that if your friend group suddenly goes cold on you, you should try and talk to the person most likely to be sympathetic to you one on one.

Misha: I don't know what you're talking about.

Laila: You left me on read last night.

Misha: I had an assignment due.

Laila: And then all today you all sat somewhere different and then told me class was in the library. I had to send a frantic message to Miss Stratford to explain.

Misha: That must have been a mistake. We're all just busy.

Laila: You're my closest friend, Misha. I think I deserve an explanation.

Misha: If I'm your closest friend then you're really in trouble.

Laila: Oh, I know. So, you are avoiding me?

Misha: We don't even have anything in common, other than study habits.

Laila: It's not my fault this dingy library that's never even upgraded to a digital borrowing system is the only place my family let me go that's not school.

Misha: There you go.

Laila: What?

Misha: Blaming your family for everything.

Laila: My family are messed up! You know that.

Misha: They are, but - you never take any responsibility for how you aggravate things.

Laila: Like how?

Misha: Like these videos. They're embarrassing. You're not Little Simz, Laila. What would your parents think?

Laila: They don't know about any of my accounts. That's why I post under 'Luscious Laila.'

Misha: Ugh, calling yourself 'luscious.' And the posing and the duck faced selfies. So cringe.

Laila: It's weird you're so obsessed with something you think is cringe.

Misha: I told you. It just came up.

Laila: Uh huh. Sure it did.

Misha is visibly uncomfortable and tries to change the subject.

Misha: Hey um, have you done your English oral assessment?

Laila: Oh there we go. You're so embarrassed by me you can't bear to be seen with me at school but here at the library you still want my study tips.

Misha: We got our marks back today. I got 19 out of 20.

Laila: That's amazing, congrats.

Misha: Don't condescend to me.

Laila: What do you mean?

Misha: I got 19 but came second which means you must've come first and gotten full marks.

Laila: I genuinely love writing, what can I say.

Misha: Which poem are you doing?

Laila is happy just to be asked and revered.

Laila: I'm doing 'Gitanjali 84' by Rabindranath Tagore.

She pulls out a book from her bag and puts it on the table.

Misha: What?

Laila: Rabindranath Tagore. The great poet of the Bengali renaissance, and the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for literature.

Laila starts reciting. It is full of passion and expert delivery, just like her own poetry.

Laila:

It is the pang of separation that spreads
throughout the world and gives birth
to shapes innumerable in the infinite sky.

It is this sorrow of separation that
gazes in silence all night from star to
star and becomes lyric among rustling
leaves in rainy darkness of July.

It is this overspreading pain that
deepens into loves and desires, into
sufferings and joys in human homes;
and this it is that ever melts and flows
in songs through my poet's heart.

Misha is moved. But she quickly hides it.

Misha: So, wait, you're presenting a translation?

Laila: Yeah. Why not? It's not as if it would make sense if I presented it in Bengali.

Misha: It's English, Laila. We need to do a poem in English.

Laila: That's a bit of a literal definition. What are you doing?

Misha: 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' by Keats.

Laila: Keats? You're doing Keats?

Misha: I love that poem!

Laila: Sure, if you like wimpy English dudes fangirling over the Greek empire, the OG colonisers.

Misha: Well at least I'm doing an English poem, for English!

Laila: You and probably half the class. Pick a poem that actually speaks to you. It'll be much easier to speak about it with conviction.

Misha: Well, I have nothing to worry about then. Beauty is truth, truth beauty.

Laila smirks, knowingly.

Laila: It is lovely to be on speaking terms again, Misha. You had me worried

She turns. As she leaves, she accidentally drops her book. Misha speaks after her.

Misha: Don't mistake a bit of healthy competition for friendship.

Misha is thrown. She grabs Laila's book and studies it intently. She sits back at the table and looks at what she's written for her assignment, despairing, her eyes darting between Laila's book at hers.

Scene 4 – English class

Misha and Farah walk with linked arms. The classroom is empty except for them.

Farah: How are you feeling, Captain? Ready to slay?

Misha: Hopefully. I changed my idea at the last minute. Hey, can you do me a favour and sit with Laila at the back.

Farah: (rolls eyes) I'd rather not. I thought we were moving her off the close friends list.

Misha: We are.

Farah: She'll get all clingy and think we're besties.

Misha: Can confirm. But please. For me. I just need to make sure she's sitting at the back of the class.

Farah: Good thing I love you.

The bell rings. Misha stays at the front of the classroom while Farah takes up a post in the back. Students start to trickle in - including Jamila, Alex and Sam, who sit up the front. Laila dawdles in last. Farah jumps on the opportunity.

Farah: Hey, Luscious Laila!

Laila stops in her tracks, a bit thrown by such a direct address. Her eyes dart between Misha in the front and Farah in the back.

Farah: Come sit!

Laila tries to hide her relief to be asked and cautiously starts to wander over to where Farah is sitting.

Farah: Can you show me how you did that thing in your story where the emojis came up while you were talking.

Laila leaps at the chance to help.

Laila: Oh yeah, that's easy. You just go into settings...

The teacher, Miss Stratford's, voice booms, off -stage.

Miss Stratford (off-stage) Alright! Let's get straight into this. Fairest way is to just go around the room. Alex?

Alex, from the front of the classroom, gets up and begins.

Alex: Good morning, Miss Stratford and fellow students. The poem I will be presenting today is 'Sonnet 18', by William Shakespeare. It is one of the most famous poems of Shakespeare's enduring body of work and is known for its use of metaphor and his signature use of iambic pentameter.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
 Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Everyone claps, a little listlessly.

Miss Stratford (off-stage): Thank you Alex. Well done. Misha?

From the back row Laila smirks while Farah smiles encouragingly. Misha gets up and begins.

Misha: Good morning, Miss Stratford and fellow students. The poem I am presenting for today's viva voce is 'Gitanjali 84' by Rabindranath Tagore, one of the most famous poets in the world, and the first non-European to win the Nobel Peace Prize for literature. The choice to present a translation from a non-English text might initially be seen as controversial, however it is not without precedent, as translations are increasingly understood to be an art form in their own right, and their inclusion in the study of poetry is essential in decolonising the English canon.

From the back row, Laila is on her feet, livid.

Laila: Are you serious?

Farah: Oh my god, Laila.

Laila: That's my poem! You literally stole my poem and my idea!

Miss Stratford (off-stage): Sit down, Laila. Interrupting another student's assessment can automatically result in you getting a zero.

Laila: But this is a total dog move!

Farah: Did you just call Misha a dog? Miss, that's so offensive.

Laila is distraught, panicked.

Laila: But...I'm serious! She knows we're getting marked on originality of our choice of poem and then she plagiarises mine!

The class is silent, awkward.

Laila: I have 100,000 followers who have watched me do a whole series on translated poems on my account!

Sam: Oh, here we go. Any excuse to bring that up.

Alex: You're being so rude to Misha.

Laila: But it's true!

Miss Stratford (off-stage): We will discuss this later, Laila. Please sit down.

Laila is devastated. She looks around the classroom, desperate for someone to stick up for her. But everyone is silent. She runs out.

Miss Stratford: (off-stage): Misha, I'm so sorry about that. I'll deal with Laila later. Please go on.

Misha takes a second, a little shaken, but then continues.

Misha: The poem was first published in English in 1913...

Scene 5 – The School Grounds

Misha, Farah, Jamila, Alex and Sam loiter on the school grounds.

Jamila: Anyone heard from Laila? That was extreme.

Farah: If you're a no-show it's an automatic zero.

Sam: Ouch.

Alex: Wonder how that's going to go down with her crazy strict parents.

Misha whips out her phone. She searches for something, then frowns.

Misha: Huh, that's weird.

Farah: What?

Misha: I can't message her. She's not coming up.

Everyone grabs their phones and starts trying.

Alex: She's not coming up for me either?

Sam: Has she blocked us all?

Jamila: Or maybe she deleted her account?

Farah: No way. She's too much of an attention-seeker.

Misha: Maybe her family finally discovered all her secret accounts.

Sam: Let me log out and try from another account.

Sam types some things into her phone.

Sam: Here - she's tagged in a public post...from the Police.

Misha: What?

Sam: (reading) Police are appealing to the public for any information regarding the disappearance of Laila [*insert authentic surname suitable for casting*]...that's her school picture...she was last seen running out of her school...Oh my god...

Miss Stratford (via Intercom): All Year 12 students to the Seniors' Common Room immediately for some urgent information. Misha, please report to the office.

Misha is shocked. She trudges the walk of shame to the office while her shocked classmates watch after her. Light changes to indicate the passing of time.

Later.

Jamila: It looks like they're interviewing us one by one.

Alex: Don't we need lawyers or something?

Farah: Or at least our parents.

Sam: Not unless we're being accused.

Alex: What's that supposed to mean?

Farah: Misha's been in there for ages. Wait-

She sees something in the distance.

Farah: She's coming back!

Misha returns to her friends. She is visibly shaken.

Jamila: What's happening?

Misha: Just lots of questions.

Jamila: Where do they think she is?

Misha: They don't know. Her family thought she was in class.

Sam: What kind of questions did they ask?

Misha: Had she been herself lately. Was it out of character for her to run out of class?

Farah: Extremely.

Misha: Was she popular?

Farah: Not even a little.

Misha: Did she have a boyfriend?

Farah: She wishes.

Jamila has had enough of Farah's nastiness.

Jamila: (screaming) Do you mind?

Farah: Sorry, I—

Alex: Yeah Farah, do you have to be so mean all the time?

Farah: I'm just saying—

Jamila: Seriously, she could be lying dead somewhere and you're not missing a chance to go stacks on behind her back.

Sam: So, they think she's run away?

Misha: I guess. I told them that running away for anything more than dramatic effect wasn't Laila's style. She hates being alone. And it sounds ironic, but if she ran away, her parents would kill her.

Sam: This is someone who can't blow her nose without posting about it. If she was anywhere remotely interesting, she'd be shouting it from rooftops.

Jamila: So...they suspect foul play?

Farah: Let's face it. It was only a matter of time before she annoyed the wrong person.

Alex: How does anyone even go missing in this day and age? Can't they track her phone?

Misha: I don't know. I was wondering that too.

Alex: Well maybe there are clues on her social media.

Misha: They're looking into all that.

Alex: Yeah, but what do they know? Unless someone under the age of 18 is investigating this there's no way they'll pick up on everything.

Sam: Alex is right. My older sister is 20 - literally three years older than me, and she's always saying she can't understand the humour in the videos I post.

Farah: I'm my family's designated emoji translator.

Alex: Tik Tok curator!

Jamila: Meme archaeologist!

Misha: You're right! They'd be completely out of their depth investigating the old-fashioned way. And someone who posted as much as Laila - there's probably all kinds of subtle clues that are going way over their heads.

Jamila: We should form a task force.

Misha: Yes!

Alex: No way. We all know that in group assignments one person ends up doing all the work.

Sam: This assignment is to doom scroll social media. As if we don't all do that anyway. She had multiple accounts. Not just the main one we follow.

Alex: 'Lucious Laila'. 'Lilting Laila'. 'LailaWailer'. 'SLAYLa'. Here we go, this could be another one... 'Lily'?

Misha: Laila would sometimes tell people her name was Lily!

Farah: Catfishing? Or...white...fishing!

Jamila: You can only have 'blackfishing.' When you pretend to be white it's 'whitewashing.'

Alex: This 'Lily' account is definitely her.

Misha: What's in it?

Alex: All these...selfies...

Sam: And look at all the replies.

Misha: Whoa, I hope her parents never saw this.

Misha: Oh no...

Farah: Maybe they did and freaked!

Alex: Yes - don't they usually say in missing person's cases the suspect is usually from the family?

Misha: Let's see what her family are saying about this.

She types something into her phone. She comes across something that makes her blood run cold.

Misha: Laila's mum posted.

Alex: What's it say?

Jamila: It's in another language.

Misha: (translating as she speaks) Friends and family...please ignore everything you are seeing on Facebook and online about Laila...she is home safe with us. Don't listen to fake news.

Farah: So, she's home safe after all?

Misha: No, don't you see? The police are still reporting her missing. When they find someone, they say 'found' in big letters. Her parents don't want people looking for her!

The disembodied voice of Laila's Dad reverberates across the stage. Only Misha hears him.

Laila's dad (off-stage): I'm warning you, Laila.

Sam: What kind of parents wouldn't want every possible set of eyes trying to find their daughter?

Jamila: You don't understand ethnic parents.

Misha: Particularly when it comes to girls.

Farah: They'd rather have a missing daughter than one who brings them shame.

Farah's words trigger a flashback to Misha's own parents. Only Misha hears them.

Misha's mum (off-stage): How will I ever show my face again?

Misha's dad (off-stage): You are a disgrace!

Misha's had enough. She is taking a stand.

Misha: I hate this! This is all our stupid, backward, strict parents' faults.

Alex: What do you mean?

Misha gets up on a chair.

Misha: These are supposed to be the best years of our lives! The time when we don't have jobs, bills to pay, children to feed. And instead, we're all anxious and stressed and so terrified of getting a bad mark in school that we are driven to crazy things.

Students: Yeah!

Misha: If Laila wasn't so fragile the thought of doing badly in one assessment wouldn't have driven her to run out like that!

Students: Yeah!

Misha: What kinds of parents drive their daughters to think school marks are a life and death situation!

Students: Yeah!

Misha: What kind of parents wouldn't prioritise the wellbeing of their daughter over what other people will think of them!

Misha is intoxicated by the response she's getting from her friends. She looks into the distance, as though having a supernatural vision. The sky opens. Laila's tormented face and words haunt her. Misha is frozen in horror.

Laila: It is this sorrow of separation that gazes in silence all night from star to star and becomes lyric among the rustling leaves in rainy darkness of July.

Misha's eyes go wide. The penny drops.

Misha: What kind of parents would kill their own daughter?

Everyone looks at her, shocked.

Alex: Wait, what?

Misha: Laila's spirit spoke to me. Farah - you're right! Saying someone's name can summon them!

Farah: I told you!

Misha: As school captain, it is my duty to speak up against the murderous tyranny of our elders!

Farah: Poetic genius! And this is why we know you'll always top English.

Misha: Justice for Laila! Justice for all students! A pox on all adults perpetuating this injustice.

ALL: Justice for Laila! Justice for students! Justice for Laila! Justice for students!

The students are in a frenzy. Their pent-up anxiety and frustration finally has an outlet.

Scene 6 – Laila's Candlelight vigil

Misha, Farah, Jamila, Alex and Sam are all holding candles and photos of Laila.

Misha: We are here to honour the life of our dear friend, Laila, and to demand a proper investigation into her disappearance.

Farah: Wait, should we livestream?

Sam: Good idea!

Alex: For awareness!

Misha: Oh yeah!

Farah whips out her phone and starts filming.

Misha: We are here to honour the life of our dear friend, Laila, and to demand a proper investigation into her disappearance, and to raise awareness about the root cause - overly intense insane ethnic parents, or OIIEP. I have formed OIIEP in my dual capacity as School Captain, prospective dux, and as our dear friend Laila's best friend, who is missing her more than you can imagine.

Misha chokes up.

Misha: Laila was one of a kind. Brilliant. Soulful. Academically gifted. A social butterfly. Helpful. Caring. Laila, like many of us, was caught between two worlds. She was raised to be obedient to her parents, but her thriving intellect and ferocious spirit was not one that was meant to be contained. Wherever you are, my darling, I hope you are finally free.

All the students start to choke up.

Misha: Does anyone else want to say a few words?

Jamila: I will.

Jamila takes the stand.

Jamila: Laila, I know we had our ups and downs, but I'm so glad I got to know you. You always made me think. And I feel so guilty now, because...to be honest, I kinda believed you when you said you came up with the poem first, but I was too chicken to say anything at the time...

Jamila notices the icy reception from everyone around her and starts to backpedal.

Jamila: but uh, that's irrelevant obviously because we all know that you should never have been under that much pressure to begin with. And I hope wherever you are now, you are at peace.

Tepid, confused applause. Sam gets up.

Sam: Laila, thank you for always raising the bar. It's been real.

Sam gets down awkwardly. Alex gets up:

Alex: Um, yeah. What Sam said.

Alex gets down. Farah is the last to get up. She has been steadily consumed by guilt and sadness this whole time. Shaking and teary, she takes the podium. She unexpectedly starts wailing.

Farah: Oh Laila. What have we done? I can't believe I'll never see you again. I'll never forget all the good times we had together. I'll never be able to hear a poem ever again without imagining your voice. I... I brought this poem to read but I don't think I can get through it.

Farah collapses into hysterical sobbing. Her friends are shocked. Then a second later they all begin wailing too. Amidst her tears, Misha summons the strength to take the handwritten poem from Farah's hand. She takes a breath and begins to deliver Farah's rap, but in maudlin, eulogistic, prissy prefect style.

Misha: Some people can't handle their spice. Fragrant, pungent, tongue-twisting delights. For a price, brown bodies subjugation, sun-kissed rice, whole nations absorbed by an empire, our plight. From being plundered for our earthly zest, the best, from the breast of mother nature, to now, deemed too much, too smelly, too hot, in need of temperance, required deference, don't mention it.

Farah: Laila! We use your words and our light to summon your spirit! If you are here, please give us a sign!

Thunder. Lightning. The Earth opening. Lights flashing. Everyone starts screaming.

Misha: Oh Laila! We're so sorry! Can you ever forgive me?

And suddenly, Laila is there! There is a shocked hush from her peers.

Laila: You know Misha, the thing that actually offends me the most with your fakeness is just how bad your delivery is. You're a bad actor. In every sense.

Jamila: Laila!

Farah: You're alive!

Alex: And sassy as ever!

Sam: What happened?

Laila: I ran away, for a good few days. Deleted all my social media. Came home once I calmed down. My parents read me the riot act but were also glad to see me. Once the relief wore off, they

did the typical ethnic parents' PR damage control and grounded me - I mean, more than the way I'm always kind of grounded. And then I saw the livestream and thought that was a better reason than ever to break curfew.

Misha: I'm just so glad you're ok!

Laila: Why, so you can steal my work and pass it off as your own again?

Jamila: Did you see? I always believed you!

Alex: Me too!

Laila: None of you acted like you believed me when it counted.

Sam: Well, uh, we didn't want to be rude to Misha while she was talking.

Jamila: I mean, obviously we believe you but...do you have any proof?

Laila thinks for a second, before snatching Misha's backpack and pulling out a copy of 'Gitanjali 84'.

Laila: Look at the stamps in the front page.

Jamila opens the front page and inspects it.

Jamila: Last checked out three weeks ago by...Laila.

Laila: I knew our ancient library with the old school card system was good for something.

Misha: I swear, it's all just a coincidence!

Everyone starts to turn on Misha.

Jamila: Misha, everyone knows Laila is the one who's always talking about translated poetry.

Alex: It was a pretty blatant lie.

Misha: You don't know what it's like! My parents are so hard on me!

Laila: Um, so are mine. Still not an excuse to cheat and lie.

Farah: You disgust me.

Misha: Please! Don't tell anyone.

Farah's phone has been recording this whole time. She picks it up.

Farah: Already on its way to Miss Stratford and the whole school board.

Misha: No, no!

Misha is run off the stage by the angry mob.

Scene 7 – Epilogue

Laila is recording a VLOG in her living room.

Laila:

I could not sleep with the blue light from my phone haunting my head.

I thought I heard—here, there, everywhere—

disembodied voices calling me names.

Helplessly I cried 'Can't a girl catch a break!' to the phantom air!

Does this sound like you?

If it does, this is what you must do.

Step 1 – you need to target the weakest link in the clique.

You need to strike when her anxiety is peak.

Tempt her – it won't be hard, believe me.

My weapon of choice? An old book of poetry, 'Gitanjali.'

Make sure she offends you for all to see.

You'll need witnesses. Sorry to be so grubby.

Then abscond. Run away. Go 'technically missing',

And stay gone and uncontactable 'til everyone's stressing.

You'll know you've done it right, when the views and shares soar,

Checkered blue and white logos, concerned police reports.

Now they're the ones haunted by your disembodied voice,

Their choice, wracked with guilt, 'til it crescendos to noise.

When you finally return, in the midst of their grief,

Your parent's fury will turn to relief.

They'll ask for the first time if you're happy.

And you'll tell them the truth, 'How could I be?'

That's when you'll convince them to let you drop out of school.

Remind them, if you need to, that it's going to be you,

Who decides their fate when they're elderly,

And dependent on you in their frailty.

'Hey Parentals, better be nice to me!'

So that's how you convince them to let you be free.

And to all you 'best friends' left behind at your school—

That place really is the best place...for you.

End.

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