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## *A Magic Pencil*

By the time I was eight years old, my father had more than eight hundred students and three campuses—an elementary division and two high schools, one for boys and one for girls—so our family finally had enough money to buy a TV. That's when I became obsessed with owning a magic pencil. I got the idea from *Shaka Laka Boom Boom*, the show Safina and I watched after school. It was about a boy named Sanju, who could make anything real by drawing it. If he was hungry, he drew a bowl of curry, and it appeared. If he was in danger, he drew a policeman. He was a little hero, always protecting people who were in danger.

At night I would pray, *God, please give me Sanju's pencil. I won't tell anyone. Just leave it in my cupboard. I will use it to make everyone happy.* As soon as I finished praying, I would check the drawer. But the pencil was never there.

One afternoon the boys weren't home and my mother asked me to throw away some potato peels and eggshells. I walked to the dump, just a block or so from our house, wrinkling my nose as I got close, swatting away flies, and making sure I didn't step on anything in my nice shoes. If only I had Sanju's magic pencil. I would erase it all: the smell, the rats, the giant mountain of rotting food. As I tossed our rubbish onto the heap, I saw something move. I jumped.

It was a girl my age. Her hair was matted and her skin was covered in sores. She was sorting rubbish into piles, one for cans, one for bottles. Nearby, boys were fishing in the pile for metal using magnets on strings. I wanted to talk to them, but I was scared.

Later that day, when my father returned home, I told him about the children at the dump and dragged him to see them. He spoke gently to the children, but they ran away. I asked him why they weren't in school. He told me that these children were supporting their families, selling whatever they found for a few rupees; if they went to school, their families would go hungry. As we walked back home, I saw tears on his cheek.

I believe there is something good for every evil, that every time there's a bad person, God sends a good one. So I decided it was time to talk to God about this problem. *Dear God*, I wrote in a letter. *Did you know there are children who are forced to work in the rubbish heap?* I stopped. Of course he knew! Then I realized that it was his will that *I* had seen them. He

was showing me what my life might be like if I couldn't go to school.

Until then, I had believed a magic pencil could change the world. Now I knew *I* would have to do something. I didn't know what it was. But I asked God for *the strength and courage to make the world a better place*. I signed my letter, rolled it up, tied it to a piece of wood, placed a dandelion on top, and floated it in a stream that flows into the Swat River. Surely God would find it there.

As much as I wanted to help the children from the dump, my mother wanted to help everyone. She had started putting bread crusts in a bowl on the kitchen windowsill. Nearby was an extra pot of rice and chicken. The bread was for the birds; the food was for a poor family in our neighborhood.

I asked her once why she always gave food away. "We have known what it is like to be hungry, *pisho*," she said. "We must never forget to share what we have."

So we shared *everything* we had. We even shared our home with a family of seven who had fallen on hard times. They were supposed to pay my father rent, but more often than not, he ended up lending them money. And although my father's school wasn't really making a profit, he gave away more than a hundred free places to poor children. He wished he could have given away more. My mother, meanwhile, started serving a few girls breakfast at our house each day. "How can they learn," she said, "if their stomachs are empty?"

## I AM MALALA

One day I noticed that some of our longtime students had not returned. I asked my father where they were. “Oh, *jani*,” he said, “some of the richer parents took their children out of school when they found out they were sharing classrooms with the sons and daughters of people who cleaned their houses or washed their clothes.”

I was young, but I was old enough to feel that wasn't right and to understand that if too many paying students left, it would mean hard times for the school and for our family. What I didn't know was that a bigger threat was looming—not just for our family and our school, but for all of Pakistan.