



August 2, 2008

Dear River,

I cannot tell from your name if you are a boy or a girl so I will just write to you like you are a human being.

You are the first American I know whose name means something, so I think maybe you are not from this country. My brother says you are. He says all people in Kentucky are Americans—not like in New York City, where most people are from everywhere in the world.

My brother is seventeen years old. He has a big smile and strong legs because he is a bike messenger. All the girls love him, which makes him very conceited. Personally, I don't think the girls would love him anymore if they had to pick his smelly socks up off the floor, like I do.

When I first came here, I didn't like NY, but my brother helped me find appreciation by telling me

interesting things. For example, did you know there's a curse on the Brooklyn Bridge? When my brother looks at something, he sees how it works. He is like that about things like skyscrapers and subways. Next year, he will be a student at CUNY. He wants to make a great invention so he can go to MIT for free. He may have smelly feet, but he is still my favorite human being. I say human being because I have a favorite dog (his name is Cuba) and a favorite parakeet (her name is Xie-Xie).

You know what goes with rivers? Fish. My name is Meena and that means "fish." Everyone in my family calls me Mee-Mee. I am twelve years old. I like to run up and down the stairs of our building, and I can go all five flights without stopping. I like to feed pigeons, even though it's against the law, and I like to read books from the Seward Park Library, which is eight blocks from here. This week, I borrowed A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, a novel by Betty Smith. I am on page 92, and it is sad and very exciting.

I think you're like me and don't have a computer, since your name was on the snail mail list. I could go to the library and send you an e-mail from my brother's Yahoo, but the line is always long and you only get a half

hour and I type very slow like a turtle. Kiku (that is what we call my brother, but his real name is Karan) has a computer, but he always keeps it with him in his backpack. Anyway, I am used to writing letters, because my grandmother doesn't have a phone. And I am reading in my book about a girl named Francie who lived in 1912 when there were no computers. I have decided that I want to be like her.

I wonder what you look like. I am short and skinny. This is a good thing for squeezing on the subway. But I would rather be like Kiku's secret girlfriend, Ana Maria, who is so pretty she stops traffic. I do think my hair is nice. It is long and black like Ana Maria's, but hers is curly and mine is straight.

I guess I should tell you more about myself. I was born in India, in a town called Mussoorie, in the youngest and highest mountains in the world. Mussoorie is the most beautiful place I have ever seen. Everywhere you look, there is mountain and sky, and some days we are lost in the clouds. The trees are always full of birds with clear voices and monkeys with long tails and bad tempers.

When I was nine years old, Dadi (my grandmother) brought me to New Delhi (the capital of India) on the train. It took eight hours to get there. Then we went to the airport and I flew to America by myself. That took twenty-two hours, with a stopover in Germany. I felt cold and sick in my stomach the whole entire time. I think if human beings were meant to fly around in the sky, we would have been born with wings.

Mum and Daddy and Kiku have been in America nine years. They got here two years before 9/11. They left Mussoorie when I was three years old. It took them a long time to save enough money to bring me over, and I did not recognize them at the airport. It was strange to look into all the faces and not know if any of the people were my mother or father.

I came here on the H-4 visa. That means I can't work but I can go to school. Daddy says I should always tell Americans about my visa so they don't think I'm illegal. This year, my parents will apply for naturalization. They just got their I-551 Alien Registration Cards in the mail, so in about a year, maybe, maybe, they will be citizens. You should see the amount of papers and phone calls it

takes to become an American. Mum says it is like having another job. I think it's funny that we have Alien Cards — as if we come from outer space! I promise, I don't have any antennae on my head. I am 100% Homo sapiens.

Daddy says soon we can bring Dadi over to this side. I do not think she will come. I do not think she could wake up in the mornings if the mountains were not there. In New York, the buildings are like mountains in some ways, but they are only alive because of the people living in them. Real mountains are alive all over.

Have you ever been to New York City? It is hot and smelly in the summertime. Our street smells like dog pee and garbage. Everything bakes on the pavement, and there are so many tourists you can't take a step without someone asking you for directions.

I love to walk around and look at everything and everyone. I love to ride the subway, especially the 7 train because it pops above ground in Queens. We live in Chinatown, on the corner of Orchard and Hester. The F train on Delancey is very nearby. Every Friday afternoon, I take the laundry to the Suds-o-Rama in my neighbor Mrs. Lau's little red cart. She gives me quarters for the

machine, and in trade I do her laundry with ours. She is seventy-two years old and has hard times getting up and down the stairs.

My mum takes care of two little children, one boy, one girl, on the Upper West Side. She is their nanny. Our family doesn't have a nanny or a maid, so I do our laundry. I hate dragging the big bag up and down the stairs, but if I didn't do it, none of us would have clean clothes. This is what I tell myself every Friday. I do the laundry on Friday afternoons before Mum comes home so that we have time for fun on the weekend when she does not have to go away.

Daddy works at a big restaurant in New Jersey. It is thirty miles away from here, but in NY it takes two hours to go thirty miles because of all the traffic. Daddy rides a bus home one weekend a month, and even then he is tired but he tries to pretend that he isn't and he takes us out someplace nice to have a good time. Mum always cries when he packs. And when it is time for him to go, he has to pull her fingers away from his arm and rush out the door.

Even though we live on the corner, it's quiet on the fifth floor because we are high above the street. We live in a one-bedroom apartment with rent control. We have five windows, and two of them have a view onto Orchard Street. The other three windows face shaftways where there are piles of stinky garbage. It's dark in the apartment except in the bedroom, where the sun reaches. Since it is summer, the sun goes across the bed from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. Mum says Orchard Street is depressing. She says India is better for her and Daddy, but here is better for me and Kiku.

When Daddy comes home, I sleep on the couch and Kiku sleeps on the cot. When Daddy is away, Mum and I share the bed and Kiku sleeps on the couch. I want to get a job and help like Kiku does, but Mum says not till I am older. I want to make a lot of money so I can always keep my family together, and so I can get them a dishwasher and an air conditioner.

Right now I am sitting on the fire escape, where I can see the street and all the cars and the tops of people's heads and a little square of blue sky between

the buildings. It is so hot today that the delis on Delancey have brought their flowers inside. Mrs. Lau, who has the NY1 channel, says there is a smog alert.

If I lean over the railing, I can see the pagoda trees. There are four on our side of the street. I know they are pagoda trees because the middle one has a tiny sign nailed to the trunk that says, PAGODA TREE.

This morning all of these trees let go of their flowers. Pagoda flowers look white on the tree, but when they fall on the pavement, they look yellowy green. Just a few hours ago, I helped Mrs. Lau down the stairs, and we swept up the yellow petals in front of our building. *Swish swish* went our brooms, up and down the street.

Cuba sat on the stoop and watched. He is old now, and when I walk him, I don't have to use a leash. He stays close to me, and if he gets ahead, he stops and waits at the corner. Cuba is black except for the white star on his chest. He gets very hot in the sun in his thick fur. Today, he lay on the steps, panting, with his tongue hanging to the pavement and his body going fast, up and down, up and down.

When the ice-cream man drove by, Mrs. Lau flagged

him down by waving her handkerchief, and she bought me a raspberry ice. The man also gave us a little bowl of water for Cuba, and when I put it in front of him, he wagged his tail to say thank you. He has the prettiest brown eyes and very good manners. I gave him the last bit of my ice because he looked at me like he wanted to taste it. I guess maybe he hypnotized me. You know how dogs can do that? Kiku calls it “canine mind control.”

After sweeping, we sat on the stoop and watched all the people walking by, and Mrs. Lau told stories. One story she told was about how Cuba got his name. Guess how! OK, since this is a letter, I’ll just tell you. She named him after the country her best lover came from!!!! She said he’s been dead for thirty years but she still misses him. Isn’t that funny and kind of sweet?

Mrs. Lau has been in America twice as long as she was ever in Hong Kong. She has lived in her apartment for fifty-five years. She says NY Chinatown is home. In six years, I will have been in America for the same number of years as India. I still miss the mountains every day.

By the way, I used to speak English more like a British person, because that is how we do it in India. But

when I came to the States, Kiku taught me how to talk like an American.

I wonder how you got your name.

Here is a picture I drew of Mrs. Lau and Cuba on the stoop:



I don't usually talk this much unless I've had a Coca-Cola. Usually I am quiet. But you're easy to talk to, River. My hand really hurts, and I bet, if you're still reading, that your eyes are hurting. My brother is looking over my shoulder now and saying I wrote too much and you

probably won't write me back because you will think I am a crazy person. But he is a big dummy and smelly, too, which is not surprising because he is wearing his OBAMA FOR PRESIDENT T-shirt for the *third* day in a row. (He is completely obsessed with the election and goes around quoting Obama all the time, like a lunatic.)

I hope you do not think I am a crazy person. It is very nice to meet you, River. I hope you are having lots of good fun in Kentucky, and I hope you will write and tell me about yourself.

Your (hopefully) pen pal,
Meena Joshi

P.S. My brother says there was a famous movie star who died a long time ago with your name. Is this true?

P.P.S. We live five blocks away from the East River in New York City. Do you live near a river, too? Also, what kind of music do you like?

10 August 2008

Dear Meena,

I am real pleased to meet you. I am going to just get right at it and answer your questions and tell you everything I can think of, as I have been wanting to write you ever since receiving your letter, which I have read four times now.

Well, I am a boy. My mother named me River because she loved growing up on the Cumberland River and because her and my father's first date was at this restaurant down on the Powell River. We have all kinds of rivers and creeks here. Did you know that Kentucky has more waterways than any other state except Alaska? I always thought that was real interesting. I like knowing things like that, although nobody else I know really cares.

I have never met anybody from New York City before. I've always heard that people from up there are real rude and will not hold the door for you, and you'll get mugged if you walk down the street. Is this true? My mamaw says it is probably a stereotype, which I looked up in the dictionary and it means "an oversimplified

opinion.” She also said to remember the Golden Rule, which she says a lot. She is real big on the Golden Rule, which is from the Bible, I guess. I don’t have time to look it up right now. Do you believe in the Bible? Since you are an Indian, I don’t really know.

Mom used to make me go to church with her every Sunday, but she doesn’t go anymore, because she’s sick. It wasn’t too bad, I guess, but I didn’t much like going to Sunday school, where it always smelled like chalk and they only had grape Kool-Aid, which I despise. Mamaw quit going to church a long time ago because the preacher said something about women’s rights that made her mad, and she never did go back. But every Sunday she reads to us from the Bible and she prays all the time, loud.

My mother and I live with Mamaw now. We used to have our own good house up on Free Creek, but now we live over here right outside the town of Black Banks, in the house my daddy grew up in. Daddy used to be a coal miner who went waaaaay back in the mountain to work, but the underground miners are all losing their jobs, so he had to go down to Biloxi, Mississippi, to find work. He is having to live down there while they rebuild Biloxi from

where Hurricane Katrina ruined everything. My mother used to work in the school lunchroom, but now she has the blues all the time. She also gets sick headaches and has to take to bed. Sometimes I hold a wet washrag to her forehead and tell her all about my day, but usually I am with Mamaw most of the time.

You said your brother was your favorite human. Well, mine is Mamaw. Almost every day we climb the path up the mountain and she tells me the names of all the trees, or we go along very quiet and watch the ground for treasures. We have a nature collection that has things in it like feathers from blue jays and redbirds, chips of quartz, buckeyes, acorns, hickory nuts, and lots more. My other favorite thing to do with her is when we go fishing together in Lost Creek, which is full of bluegill (my father and I used to go fishing all the time, before he left). Mamaw and I clean them together and then she dips them in milk, and then meal and flour, and fries them. They're delicious. Mamaw is the best cook in the world. This evening she is making my favorite meal: pork chops, biscuit and gravy, fried potatoes, and fried apples. I can't

wait. What's your favorite meal? I guess my second favorite meal is fish, hush puppies, and fried potatoes.

The reason I'm not on the e-mail list is because I thought it'd be cooler to write letters to somebody, since I can write e-mails to anybody. Lots of my friends just play Nintendo or get on the Internet all the time, but I have never been much for that. I only like to get online if I'm looking up something, not to play games or check e-mail. I don't know why. I think it's boring.

I'm weird I guess. I mean, none of my friends really wants to spend that much time with their grandmothers. Or at least they don't admit it. Mamaw says it is all right to be weird and that if the end of the world came I'd know how to survive, and the rest of the people my age would only sit in front of their dead computers and not know what to do. I believe Mamaw likes being on the computer better than I do. She is on there all the time researching stuff, because she is what is called an activist.

Anyway, that's why when Ms. Stidham put out the sign-up sheet for pen pals that I only put down my mailing address and not my e-mail address (I have one, but I

just don't check it much). Mamaw was real proud of me because of this. She says that everyone used to write long letters all the time and it is a lost art form. I don't see what's so arty about it, but I like to do it. Sometimes I think I'd like to be a newspaper reporter.

I can't tell any of my friends at school these things because they'd make fun of me too bad. I am real good at basketball, so that's all I talk about with them. Let's say right now that we can tell each other our secrets and we won't make fun of each other. Don't take this the wrong way, but you sound weird, too. I am glad of it, because I can be my own true self with you. Maybe it's because of your loooooong letter. Nobody ever wrote me that much, ever. I'm glad it was long, though. And maybe because our names go together so good.

Why did you pick me to write to?

I've never read A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, but I looked at it in the library and it's pretty thick. It looks kind of girly. Is it? When I was little I was obsessed with the Spiderwick Chronicles and Beverly Cleary, especially Dear Mr. Henshaw and Strider. But my favorite author ever is S. E. Hinton, especially The Outsiders. That book

has characters in it who are their own true selves, only with each other, too, and I guess it's my favorite of all time. S. E. Hinton (who is a GIRL if you can believe it!) was only four years older than me when she wrote it. That blows my mind. I don't get to read as much as I used to because of basketball practice. If you're wondering why I underlined the titles it's because you're supposed to, to be grammatically correct. Ms. Stidham is real strict about stuff like that. She says that since people all over the world think we're stupid here in Kentucky, we have to make sure we have good grammar skills. She says that we can have accents and talk any way we want to as long as we're speaking correctly. So I try to have real good grammar. She's the only teacher I know who makes us all want to learn and doesn't tell lame jokes.

I would die if I had to do the laundry. That's like the worst possible thing I can think of. What are you some kind of saint or something? LOL.

I liked your drawing of Mrs. Lau and the dog. Did you REALLY draw that? It's REALLY, REALLY good. You should think about becoming an artist. You have good handwriting, too. I don't see how you wrote all of that

looooooong letter by hand. I would have been worn out. Once I had to write “I will not talk during arithmetic class” 500 times for my teacher, and I thought I was going to fall over dead before I got finished. I put two pencils together, one on top of the other one, so that I could write it twice at one time. Have you ever tried doing that? It works pretty good, but better if you’re doing it on college-lined paper, because the lines are closer together. Just a little trick in case you ever get in trouble for talking in school.

I better go. Time for basketball practice.

Take it easy, Cheesy (ha!),
River Dean Justice