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FORMULA FOR FALLING: $D = \frac{1}{2}GT^2$

I HIT THE ground with a dull thud, like I tripped, my feet tangling with each other. My headache is gone.

A pair of chestnut-brown Uggs lie on some dirty snow. Ugg-ly, is more like it.

My knee hurts, and I pull it toward me to rub it. The eyesore Uggs move closer to my body . . . what the? They're on *my* feet? Me, *I'm* wearing platform Uggs?

I panic, my heart banging against my ribs like a bird trapped in a cage. It's not only my weird footwear choice that's scaring me. Sweat beads up on my upper lip. This has to be a nightmare. I blacked out. And . . . oh my God. My mom. The car crash. I whip my head around but can't see her.

Breathe, Aria. Breathe.

I gulp in oxygen, hoping to wake up, but a chill hits me. I'm freezing. I instinctively lift a mittened hand to move

my too-long black bangs off my face. Why am I wearing mittens? When the hell did I get bangs? Bangs!

"Beta, why are you on the ground?"

I look up, blinking against the bright, cold sun. "Mom?"

I sigh, relief flooding me. She's okay. She's fine. She's—

She's wearing a white ski jacket with lift tags still attached. She steps closer to me and reaches down with her gloved hand to help me up. Oh no. She's wearing matching Uggs. And embarrassingly tight jeans. And since when does she ski? This is *not* my mom.

I'm dreaming about my mom wearing skinny jeans? What kind of messed-up, freaky nightmare is this?

"Why are you staring at me like I'm a stranger, beta? Is it because of the boots? I promise not to get out of the car when I drop you at school. Your old ummi won't embarrass you," she says with a dazzling, blindingly white smile.

I stare blankly at this woman who looks like my mom but more athletic and with way more makeup. There's a serious kajal situation going on and... wait... is that blue eye shadow?

"C'mon, beta," the woman who looks like a slightly younger version of my mom says. "Don't want to be late," she singsongs. "The early bird catches the worm!"

I grab her hand and slowly come to standing, my boots still foreign on my feet. I take in the world around me. There's snow piled up everywhere, including traces on the butt of my jeans. I brush it off as I spin around to look at the house. My house? I'm standing in front of a large suburban-looking house. White with black shutters. Newish. Two stories. No. No. Our house is an old Chicago Victorian, three

stories, rickety wooden stairs, painted shades of gray and blue. Is this the suburbs? Why is there snow when it was sixty-five degrees yesterday? I'm losing my mind.

"Aria Patel." The familiar *Hello, Earth to Aria* tone of my mom's voice snaps me to attention. At least that's the same in my dream. Nightmare? Delusion? *God*. What if I hit my head when I blacked out and now I'm seeing things? Wait. Am I dead? They say your brain still has energy pulsing through it after your "death." That there's a chance your consciousness is aware that your body is dead. Is my brain trying to ease me into death? For the record, the fashion horror boots, my mom's millennial skinny jeans, and this winter-white wool coat are not helping me go gentle into that good night. Maybe our last seconds on Earth are aspirational, like I believe I wouldn't have a million stains on a white coat. Like I have a clean slate. If I'm dead, why am I not freaking out more? Maybe there is peace in death like all those stories you hear about people seeing this bright, welcoming light. But how the hell would furry platform boots bring me peace? No. Never. Impossible.

I walk toward our car. Our fancy, expensive, shiny car that my real mom would never even dream of buying, and get in. My "mom" has the engine started and heat blasting through the vents. My seat is warm from the seat heaters my mom also wouldn't splurge on because as she likes to say, "We're from Chicago. Weather is scared of us, not the other way around."

"Buckle up, Aria. You don't seem yourself. Are you having an episode?"

"An episode?" I ask. Maybe there is an explanation after all.

"You know, one of your headaches." She whispers *headaches* like it's a word that might offend me.

This illusion is because of my headaches? They really are getting worse. "Yeah. I had a really bad one right before you got in the car."

"What? When? Yesterday? Your dad drove you home, not me. Do you not remember that?" she says with worry in her voice, but I completely ignore her. *My dad?* She said my dad gave me a ride.

"Dad?" I whisper. "Dad's here?" My syllables stick in my throat.

My sporty dream mom scrunches her eyebrows at me and reaches over with one hand to touch my forehead, checking if I have a fever. "Honey. He's not here. You know that. He's heading to the airport. Remember? His work trip? I thought I heard you talking to him this morning?"

I. Talked. To. My. Dead. Dad. This. Morning. The realization comes together slowly in my head. That's obviously impossible. I pull off my mittens and rub my eyes with my palms. I never dream about my dad, at least not that I can remember. I mean, maybe in a way he's always on my mind—like in the back of my head, but no, he's never been in my dreams. Why is my subconscious going here now?

"I'm going to give Dr. Razvi a call," my mom says. "This episode seems more extreme. Maybe you're stressed about auditions?"

Record scratch. Auditions? It's like I can hear the

words coming out of my mom's mouth, but I don't understand how any of them apply to my life.

Sporty Mom continues. "Don't worry. I think you're a shoo-in for the lead, but I know you always get nervous on the day cast lists are announced."

Oh God. In this dream, I do theater.

I nod. And mostly let singsongy Sporty Mom talk. Maybe I'll wake up. Maybe my brain will realize it's actually dead and release me from this weird synaptic purgatory. She pulls up to a gleaming new building that's all glass and chrome. It looks like a hi-tech company. But students filing in and a discreet sign near the entrance tell me differently: HENDERSON HIGH SCHOOL, COLORADO SPRINGS, CO.

I'm in Colorado?!

I'm startled by a rapping on my window. A girl I sort of recognize is grinning widely; her vivid pink curls are topped by a bright blue knit beret and frame her heart-shaped, golden-brown face. My window rolls down and Sporty Mom leans across the front seat.

"Good morning, Dilnaz! Aria is a bit sleepy and dream-logged this morning. You two should grab a latte from the cafeteria or maybe a hot cocoa before heading to choir."

This is Dilnaz? The school has lattes? I'm in choir? What on earth—

"Will do, auntie!" Dilnaz sings. Literally sings. "I'll see you at the mosque this weekend to coordinate the neighborhood shoveling volunteers!"

"I'm bringing the samosas!" Sporty Mom sings back. I never thought of *samosas* as a lyrical word, but their

deliciousness definitely inspires my taste buds to sing. Oh no. I'm telling corny jokes in this dream where I wear fuzzy boots. *Help.*

I step out of the car, mumbling a goodbye to Sporty Mom. This all has to end eventually. Dilnaz grabs my hand and makes me run up the ramp to the school doors. As we do, a sea of students simultaneously parts into two lines, creating something like a runway. We burst through the bright red school doors. Bollywood dance music spills out of the hall's loudspeakers. Dilnaz pulls off her beret and throws it into the air as she grabs the hands of a cute desi boy from the crowd. A gust of wind, somehow swirling *inside* the building, ruffles the boy's long bangs that sweep over his deep brown eyes.

The music on the loudspeakers swells. A rhythmic drumbeat draws my attention—it's loud, and it's not coming from the speakers. I turn around to find an actual drumline marching down the hallway toward the crowd—a bunch of students with dhols strapped across their chests like we're in an Indian wedding parade.

Then there's singing.

Not absent-minded, I'm-in-the-shower singing. Full-on coordinated and rehearsed showstopper, musical-dance-number singing. Like I'm walking through the set of a Bollywood musical.

As I back away, the crowd encircles Dilnaz and Cute Boy with Bangs. Two concentric circles of students start to dance around them, moving counterclockwise to each other, clapping their hands, in unison, to the side of their

heads and then again on the diagonal by their hips. The drummers keep the beat. Dilnaz and the boy have their hands clasped and are singing a swoony love song from inside the circle. If this is my afterlife, kill me now.

I look toward the other end of the hallway and see an adult with dark skin and a short shock of gray hair walking toward me. Ms. Jameson? I make my way toward her but a cold tingling slithers up the base of my neck. My body feels weighed down. I lumber over to the water fountain and take a sip as a sharp pain splits my skull. Every muscle in my body tenses as I grip the cool metal sides of the fountain.

Ms. Jameson calls out my name and hurries over to me. I stumble toward the wall so it can hold me up. She's nearly in front of me, but a twirling dancer bumps into her, sending the stack of papers she's holding spilling across the floor. One lands near my feet.

It's the poem from physics class.

The air right in front of me starts to shimmer in vertical waves, like folds of a drape undulating in front of me. Through the disturbed air, I see the students dancing and singing. Ms. Jameson picking up her papers. Can no one else see the air, like, flickering?

A piercing ray of light flashes before me. My brain feels like it could crack in two. Dilnaz's voice rings out clear as a bell, like all sound is muted except her new song, a ballad, a solo:

*Where are your roots planted?
Where did your wings take you?*

That's...that's the...poem...I don't understand...
it's the words—

My head droops. It's too heavy—I can't stay up. The
glimmery mirage shines. The waves part in front of me,
calling out to me. I reach for them with my fingers and
start falling forward, the lines from the poem trapped,
like an echo: *Where are your roots planted? Where did your
wings take you?*

I know—

The world fades to black as the air swallows me.