

# Mariam at the End of Time

By Sarah Gibson Yates

To Whoever Reads This Note,

My name is Mariam and there is something you need to know.

Last night humans were nearly done for. I mean all of us. Completely. Forever. I'm not joking. I know it sounds impossible or at the very least highly unlikely but it's true. Because I'm the one who saved us. (You're welcome). It's also true that I'm 11. Perhaps now you won't believe me, but you need to trust me. Like I'm trusting you, now, with this information.

If you go to the far side of Hok Low City, where the landfill meets the mountains, you'll find an ancient split oak tree and a place so unlikely, so beyond anything you've ever considered. A place called The Sorting House. But you won't see anything, you'll need a Quantum Converter to see that which you won't have, because there is only one in the whole Wonder and Professor Pinkington has that safely locked away, but if you step three long strides to the left of that oak you will feel the air temperature drop. You might even shiver. Then you'll know you've stepped into The Sorting House. Then you'll know — if you have any sense at all — how close we came to extinction.

Oh, and one more thing — please, tell my parents that they were wrong about not trusting people. Sometimes life brings you people you can trust— like you, reader— and even though it's scary and risky and you can never be entirely sure you can trust a person until you put your life in their hands, I've learnt that trust requires leaps. Leaps of faith, leaps into the unknown and sometimes, even, leaps in time.

I'm trusting you to tell them.

It may be the only way back.

## Chapter 1 | Secrets Uncovered

Have you noticed how, when you're waiting for something important to happen, like your birthday or Christmas or the end of school, time moves really slowly? Mariam Sugarbright had. In fact, she was thinking it now, as she looked up as the minute hand of the classroom clock edged microscopically down to three. The doodle she was working on to distract herself had started as a rectangle but now looked more like a large building, with high square windows tucked under the roof gutter and dark shading on every panel. And every dragging moment made Mariam fill the shading in darker, as she waited for three o'clock to arrive. She tried to ignore the cartwheels in her stomach. She just needed to make it to the exit before Cory and his idiots saw her.

She absolutely and 100 percent didn't have time for that today.

Mariam sat back, straightened her headscarf and examined what she had drawn. Where did that come from? She thought, bemused, but as the minute hand perched solidly at fourteen minutes past three, her mind turned back to the very important and slightly criminal thing she had planned to do after school that day. She flipped the page and took one final look at the plan.

Ok so really, perhaps it wasn't possible to classify break into your house as criminal. The breaking in bit sounded bad but it was her house. What was criminal, in her opinion, were the secrets her parents were keeping from. Like she wasn't old enough to know everything they knew. How ridiculous! She niffed. Her neighbour a sad looking boy with pink cheeks looked up from his book. She pretended to pick up hers and read. But quickly and subtly pulled the plan over the page. The plan was fine. She was going to do it – her and Lol - once and for all find out the secret her parents

The bell rang.

Like a pack of hyena released from the zoo, everyone scraped back chairs, grabbed books and bags and bundled to the exit in a roar of excited chatter.

At the water fountain an angry, tall boy with ruby red lips and a large quiff of orange hair blocked her path. Mariam's toes curled involuntarily.

'Better hurry home, Mariam. Don't want to get into any trouble now, do you?'

‘Better hurry up yourself.’ She ducked under his legs and ran down the corridor. She spotted Lol on the steps ahead, waiting for her, a clear line through the crowded corridor between them. Mariam jumped on her skateboard. Cory left gawping at the place where she was.

‘No Skateboarding on school grounds Mariam Sugarbright!’ boomed Head Smithson. But she had reached the steps. She scooped Lol up into her backpack and glided away down the access ramp.

As she turned the corner, hopeful she had achieved her goal of escaping school without the usual confrontation she rolled full pelt into Bell, Marvin, Darley and Fem. four of Cory’s cronies.

‘What you’ve got under there? A rat? A blob? NO hair?! Cory sneered, pointing at Mariam’s headscarf.

Ever since day one of Mariam’s first year Cory had been on Mariam’s back. Everyone seemed to know about her parents book *The Truth Timer Tales* banned 4 years ago for claiming humans were an experiment that was about to end. Discredited in all the papers.

Wrestling her to the ground. Cory pinned her arms to the floor while Fem, kicked legs, holding down her arms nearly succeeded in pulling it off completely.

Suddenly, Miss Gethlyn stepped in dragging them apart, ‘What do you think you are doing?!’ she glared at and sending all three to Head Smithson. Mariam wishes Cory hadn’t taken an instant dislike to her but there was nothing she can do it about it. Besides,

Mariam was a Sugarbright and Sugarbright’s were used to being misunderstood.

‘Why don’t you find a new hobby, Cory.’ Mariam scoffed as she straightened her scarf.

‘You and your so-called Truth-Timer conspiracies! You’re bonkers like your parents.’ Cory shot a final blow, before Miss Glethlyn usherd them away.

A small boy wearing dark brown cords approach gingerly. ‘Are you alright?’ It was Alban. The only one in school who ever spoke to her.

‘Yeah fine. I’ve got to go.’ Mariam hurried away. Skating through the city, some roads smoother than others. How she loved the flow, how life seemed full of obstacles. When she was skating she felt free. Felt she could flow through anything.

in a quiet leafy suburb,

Click, click, click. Mariam snapped her fingers three times. Lol jumped onto the windowsill of a small open window at the back of their house and dropped down inside. Mariam looked about her nervously. She didn't want to be seen by the neighbours. It wouldn't do at all to get caught breaking in — even if the house was her own. Awkward questions would be asked. And Mariam had had more than enough of awkward questions.

The time has come for answers.

The sky oozed a dreary glow like it was about to rain. It was 4 pm, two days before Midwinter and darkness had already fallen like a blanket over the City.

Suddenly there was a loud crash from inside. Mariam's heart leaped into her mouth, and she froze. A few seconds later Lol's head popped up. She tilted her head apologetically.

'What was that?' Mariam whispered, trying to slow her heart rate while listening for signs they'd been rumbled. Lol stared at her hard.

'Be careful!' Mariam scolded. Lol jumped out of the way and let Mariam follow inside, squeezing through the narrow window.

She dropped down silently on to the closed toilet seat. Statue still, she listened again as the early evening sounds of the one-hundred-year-old house creaked and moaned. upstairs the heating pump, gurgled hot water through pipes to the many radiators dotted around the house. She could hear the soft voice of her parents wafting in from the library.

Mariam turned to Lol. 'They should have gone by now. What's keeping them?' She listened harder.

'It's done.' Jane declared, her voice louder than before and clearer.

'Good. We'll go through things with Grace and Lionel one last time. Then we can deliver it.'

Jane's chair scraped back from her desk and a floorboard creaked, the one between the desk and the window that they had been meaning to replace for years.

Jane and Ivo grabbed their coats and walked past the toilet. Mariam held her breath, overhears them talking.

'Are we doing the right thing?' Jane asked, pulling on her coat.

'What else we can do?'

Mariam listened as they unlocked the front door and closed it firmly behind them. Once she felt sure they were gone she gently unlatched the toilet door and hurried down the corridor to the library. Unlocked Jane's computer and read the last document she had been working on but couldn't find anything new. She tried Ivo's. Nothing.

Mariam spotted a strange contraption. Looking closer she recognised it as a camera, from history lessons. she pressed a button and a door opened with a strange winding noise. Inside was a large black plastic box, she pulled it and read the words 'VHS ultramodern' on the side. Weird, she thought, I didn't know they had one of these, and put it back.

Mariam saw a handwritten envelope tucked inside a folder on Jane's desk. The name on the front was, Professor Pinkington. Mariam knew Professor from her popular daily show, Pinkington's Perfect Science.

'Look lol, it's address to PP. I didn't know they knew Pinkington.' Mariam loved this show so much she had set an alarm on her Omni<sup>1</sup> so she would never miss a live broadcast.

Mariam turned the envelop over in her hand. It wasn't sealed. She could pull the letter out and return it without anyone finding out. Mariam suddenly felt nervous. Butterflies turned cartwheels in her stomach.

'Why would Jane<sup>2</sup> be writing a letter to Professor Pinkington?'

Lol didn't know.

There was only one way to find out.

Mariam carefully extracted the letter from its envelope and read.

Dear Virginia,

I hope you will forgive me for contacting you out of the blue. As you know the GPC have tracks on all our digital communications so we prefer more traditional old-fashioned methods. They are the only way we can contact you securely. You may have heard of the secret work my husband and I have been involved with searching for evidence to prove our theories around the Truth Timer Tales. It has been publicly ridiculed and officially dismissed but finally we think we have found evidence to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Omni' is short for OMNI DEVICE XZL. It is a bit like our smartphones but much more powerful. +

<sup>2</sup> She always called her parents by their first names. Some people said it was odd, pretentious even, but she didn't care. She had always called them that. It didn't mean she loved them any less.

prove its truth. we are taking an enormous risk telling you what we know but you have something we desperately need to prove our suspicions. This is why we have taken the risk.

Some friends of ours work on 'physics' have detected an anomaly just above the mountains and for a few brief moments gained insight to an amazing phenomenon the likes of which no one has seen before. It was a huge room, without end, a massive archive of discoveries and inventions; from furniture to fashion, engineering to

We're not yet sure who is gathering this collection or indeed why but we have heard you are developing a device that converts quantum data and think this might be a route back to this mysterious archive as all our investigations have so far failed. We are asking that you might share this work with us as we have shared ours in the hope we may arrive at a clearer picture of the truth.

Yours sincerely,

Professors Jane and Ivo Sugarbright

(find out later that they saw this at the autumn equinox)

Mariam finished reading the letter and stood for some minutes turning the words over in her head. 'contact you securely', 'finally found evidence' 'mysterious archive' 'a device that converts quantum data'. What did this mean? Were her parents going to get in trouble again? Or had they really found proof that their theory about humans was correct?

Three years Mariam's parents published the Truth Timer Tales, a collection of folk tales gathered from lots of different cultures around the world which they said proved that humans were coming to an end soon. That as animals and habitats died so would we. But their idea was mocked and ridiculed by the GPC, the book was banned, their funding was cut and they'd been living on very little ever since.

She didn't mind that so much but she hated to see her parents so deflated and ignored. No wonder they'd been seeming more positive lately. And so busy.

They had evidence.

Now it was time for everyone to know they'd been right all along.

Right now, though, she had to get over to Gampa and Goma's where her parents thought she was.

She had her excuse all worked out.

End of extract - SGY