



CHITRA SOUNDAR

Chitra Soundar is an Indian-born British writer, storyteller and author of over twenty children's books. As a kid, she danced in a Bollywood movie, performed on stage and disliked maths because it never added up. In the UK, Chitra is published by Walker Books and Otter-Barry Books. Her next two picture books with Lantana Publishing will be out in 2018. She is represented by Abigail Sparrow at SP Agency.

About Tara's Theorem of Friendship

Aswini Tara Iyengar, barely ten, brilliant at maths, besotted with Bollywood dancing, is new to London. All she wants, is to find the One Mutual Friend as per the Theorem of Friendship, and an opportunity to dance on stage without her grandmother Janu, professor of mathematics, finding out.

Tara switches team to maths-hating, animal-crazy Millie Mehta; cheats on maths homework; and picks a fight with the studious lot – and Millie's old friends, so she can dance a Bollywood number on stage. But things go horribly wrong when the music gets mixed up and Grandma Janu turns up in the audience. However, when Tara eventually figures out who the One Mutual Friend is, her new life in London falls into place.

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TARA'S THEOREM OF FRIENDSHIP

Chapter One

The Friendship Theorem

Tara sat up in bed long before her alarm sang the latest Bollywood song. It was the first day of school in a new city, in a new country, without her best friend Farida, for the first time in all her life.

'This time you're going for good?' Farida had asked her when Tara broke the news about moving to London. 'Not just for a holiday?'

'For good' couldn't be a good thing. But would move her far away from Grandma Janu, Appa's mother and a professor of mathematics, whose ambition focussed on making Tara a Cambridge mathematician.

When Tara wanted something badly, she wished on the peacock feather. Often Tara would touch her peacock plume and wish, 'Please get us away from Grandma Janu.' Her wish had come true. But like Amma often said, she had to be careful what she wished for. Grandma Janu lived far away but Tara had to go to a new school with no friends because they had moved.

Tara loved maths; she trusted maths. But she didn't want maths to be her entire life like it had become for Grandma Janu. Tara wanted to become a professional Bollywood dancer and actress one day, just like her mum was when she was little.

Unfortunately, Grandma Janu had banned Tara from watching Bollywood TV or practising Bollywood dancing and, worse, performing on stage when she was in Chennai. In London, since they arrived three months ago, at the start of summer, Tara had used every opportunity to practise her dancing.

Now all Tara needed was a stage performance so she can show off her practice. She was determined to find a way soon.

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The alarm blasted out the latest song from the movie Pukka Dost, reminding Tara to get ready for school. Farida was her *pukka dost*, her best friend. She had never gone to school without Farida – not even to kindergarten.

‘You’ll find a friend soon,’ Farida had said, last weekend during their video chat. ‘Do you remember the three girls with French plaits from Manickam Street? I go to school with them now. They’re not so bad.’

In Chennai, school had started in June and Farida already had three friends. But Tara didn’t know anyone in the neighbourhood or her new school in London. She needed maths, not luck, to find friends here.

Maths had theorems to predict how numbers worked with each other. Tara planned to use a theorem to find a friend too. And she knew exactly the theorem she needed – the fifth one in the Beginner’s Book of Theorems.

THE FRIENDSHIP THEOREM would show her how to choose a friend.

The Friendship Theorem: *If every pair of people in a class shares exactly ONE MUTUAL FRIEND, then someone is a friend of everyone present.*

If each pair had a person who was a friend with someone, then someone in the class would be connected to all the pairs. The trick would be to find that someone, the ONE MUTUAL FRIEND who connected all of them.

Once Tara figured out who the ONE MUTUAL FRIEND was, she could then become their friend and she would be connected with the rest of the class. But until then, she would be alone in a classroom full of people who already had friends, groups, gangs, secret jokes and secret handshakes. Tara’s stomach churned like Amma’s spice blender.

Theorems can help with calculations, but they were no good for churning stomachs. Only dance can cure her funny tummy.

Tara flicked the remote and her favourite song from the movie Delhi Damaka came on. Tara leapt out of bed in one perfect step for the first routine.

5-6-7-8 -

NACHE-NACHE-MERA DIL. (Dance, dance, my heart).

Tara had made up a dance sequence of her own.

Swing from the bed, move to the left, make a heart with both your hands,

swing your right hand, turn around, make a heart with both your hands, move to the right and jump twice! Repeat!

She had executed that perfectly. The tiny bubbles in her tummy settled down a little.

‘Tara!’ Amma called from downstairs. ‘Get ready for school, princess. You can dance in the evening.’

She still needed to finish the steps to the chorus beats at the end.

5-6-7-8 – Tara waited for the chorus beats.

Tap-tap, move backwards, raise your hands high, do a big sweep, swirl and jump twice.

‘Tara!’ Amma pushed the door open and came in. She should really knock. But if she pointed that out, Amma would say, ‘Deal with it; I didn’t even have a room as a child. I travelled in a makeup trailer with four other girls.’

Amma looked like a Bollywood actress in a Hollywood movie, in her yellow Indian-style kurta on top of skinny jeans.

Tara stopped dancing as the song faded. Amma still stood there with a little smile. ‘Grandma Janu wants to talk to you before you leave for school.’

Tara groaned. She knew what Grandma Janu wanted to talk about. It would be all about academics, maths competitions and winning medals. ‘Medals will get you everywhere,’ Grandma Janu often said. By everywhere though, she meant only Cambridge.

Tara dragged herself to the wardrobe to pull out her uniform. It was going to be one long day.

Chapter Two

Today is the First Day of the Rest of your life.

‘This school uniform is hideous,’ said Tara, coming down the stairs. ‘Who wears this dirty green colour nowadays? This year’s Bollywood colour is burnt orange with a hint of rose.’

Appa looked up from his newspaper. ‘I wore khaki uniform,’ he said. ‘Did me no harm.’

'It harmed you badly,' said Tara. His sense of colour competed with his awkward dancing. Sometimes Tara couldn't believe that he was her dad.

Amma chuckled as she pointed at the TV and asked, 'Ready for the call with Grandma?'

Tara shrugged. Might as well get it over with.

Amma double-clicked the video icon on the TV and the familiar ring of the video call echoed through the house.

'Hello Tara, my protege,' Grandma Janu said. Her face filled the big screen. Why couldn't they use a regular telephone like normal people? She'd rather not sit straight and watch Grandma Janu's nose hair twitch.

'Good morning, Pattima,' said Tara.

'Pattima is for old, shuffling women,' said Grandma Janu. 'Call me Professor.'

Amma hid in the kitchen and Dad waved to his mother from the breakfast table. 'Good morning Professor,' he managed, and she said, 'Don't talk with your mouth full, Raghunath.'

Tara fidgeted on the sofa.

'Tara, my dear,' started Grandma Janu. 'Today is the first day of the rest of your life.'

Tara nodded.

'Focus on your studies. Don't get distracted.'

By that she meant: *Do maths; don't even dream about Bollywood dancing.* Tara nodded again.

'Choose your friends carefully,' she said. 'You need to be friends with children who have ambitions and excel in academics.'

Maybe she should tell Grandma about the Friendship Theorem. But she decided against it. The less Grandma knew the better. So, she opted for another big nod.

Dad whispered, 'Stop nodding and say Yes or No, sweetie.'

Tara nodded to that too.

'Tara, are you listening to me?' she asked. 'Raghunath, stop whispering to her and get ready for work.'

'Do your best,' she continued before anyone could get a word in. 'But if the school there is not good enough, which I doubt it is, Professor Bala will admit you in his boarding school anytime.'

Tara gasped and started to say, 'No, Grandma ...'

‘Raghunath, I will send you the forms just in case,’ said Grandma Janu. ‘If you ask me, you could have at least chosen a private school with maths coaching. A local school can’t cope with her needs.’

Appa turned to smile, swallowed his toast and said, ‘Sure, mother, send me the forms.’ Tara’s stomach churned even more. How could her own father let her go away?

Professor Bala’s Maths Academy made their students study for sixteen hours a day: maths, maths, maths, some English and some science. But mostly maths. Everyone carried a Book of Theorems and mumbled formulae in their sleep.

The screen bulged with Grandma Janu’s face as she moved closer to the camera. ‘Best of luck, Tara,’ said Grandma. ‘Remember not to have too many distractions. Focus on the academics.’

‘OK Pattima!’ said Tara, deliberately.

‘Bye!’ said Grandma Janu and BOING! The screen swallowed her (sadly not for real) and Tara collapsed on the sofa dramatically. Not even her enemy’s first day of a new school deserved to start like this.

‘She gave me a lecture longer than that when I joined kindergarten,’ said Appa, chuckling.

‘I’m your child, not hers, right?’ said Tara. ‘You can’t send me to that stupid academy.’

‘Language, Tara,’ Amma warned her, as she came out of the kitchen with Tara’s breakfast. ‘Appa will always do what’s best for you.’

‘I want Tara to become a well-rounded person,’ said Appa sitting down next to Tara, bending to tie his shoelaces.

‘You should tell the professor that,’ said Amma.

‘Having said that, I studied in that boarding school for a year and I learnt a lot.’

‘I’m not going back to Chennai,’ said Tara, sitting up. ‘You can’t make me.’

‘We’ll cross the bridge when we come to it.’

‘I don’t even want the bridge to exist,’ said Tara.

‘Have a wonderful first day, sweetie.’ Appa pulled her into a hug and kissed her on the forehead. ‘And I want to hear all about it in the evening.’

‘Time!’ said Amma, pointing at the clock.

‘Remember, today is the first day of the rest of your life,’ said Appa, as he shut the door behind him.

Tara stuck her tongue out at him. But he was gone.

‘Finish your breakfast and let’s get going,’ said Amma.

‘But I don’t want breakfast,’ whispered Tara.

‘Why?’ Amma whispered back.

‘I don’t want to become well rounded,’ said Tara. ‘Bollywood stars are slim and graceful.’

Amma laughed. ‘That’s not what your Appa meant, sweetie,’ she said. ‘Appa wanted you to be a normal kid in a normal school.’

‘Oh!’

‘And dancers should eat well, so they need energy,’ said Amma. ‘Remember, dancing is not about how you look, it’s about how you move.’

Amma sat opposite Tara at the table. ‘Are you nervous?’ she asked.

Tara nodded.

‘I know that a new school in 5th standard is tough.’

‘Year 5, Amma,’ Tara reminded her. ‘They don’t call it 5th standard here.’

‘Yes, Year 5,’ she said. ‘You’ve met Mr Gently already. So it should be a bit easier, OK?’

Just after they had come to London, when Amma had arranged for them to meet her teacher, Mr Mike Gently, and the headteacher and they had shown her around the school.

‘Earth to Tara!’ Amma said, tapping the table.

‘All I need to do is to find the OMF,’ said Tara.

‘What is OMF?’

‘Not what, who,’ said Tara.

‘Who then?’

‘I don’t know,’ Tara said. ‘That’s what I need to find out.’

‘Please find something relaxing to think about,’ said Amma. ‘That usually helps me.’

‘Number 5,’ said Tara. ‘I’m going to think about Number 5.’ Numbers calmed her, just like dancing did.

Amma shook her head as if she could never comprehend how numbers could calm anyone down. ‘Bring your bag down and let’s get going,’ she said. ‘Like Appa and Grandma said, today is the first day of the rest of your life.’

Tara giggled as she ran up the stairs. ‘Not you too!’

Here is a fun fact about 5: it is the only prime number that is the sum of two consecutive prime numbers. $2 + 3 = 5$. And of course, 5 is the only prime number that ends in 5. Obviously! All other numbers that end with 5 are divisible by 5, so they are not prime at all.