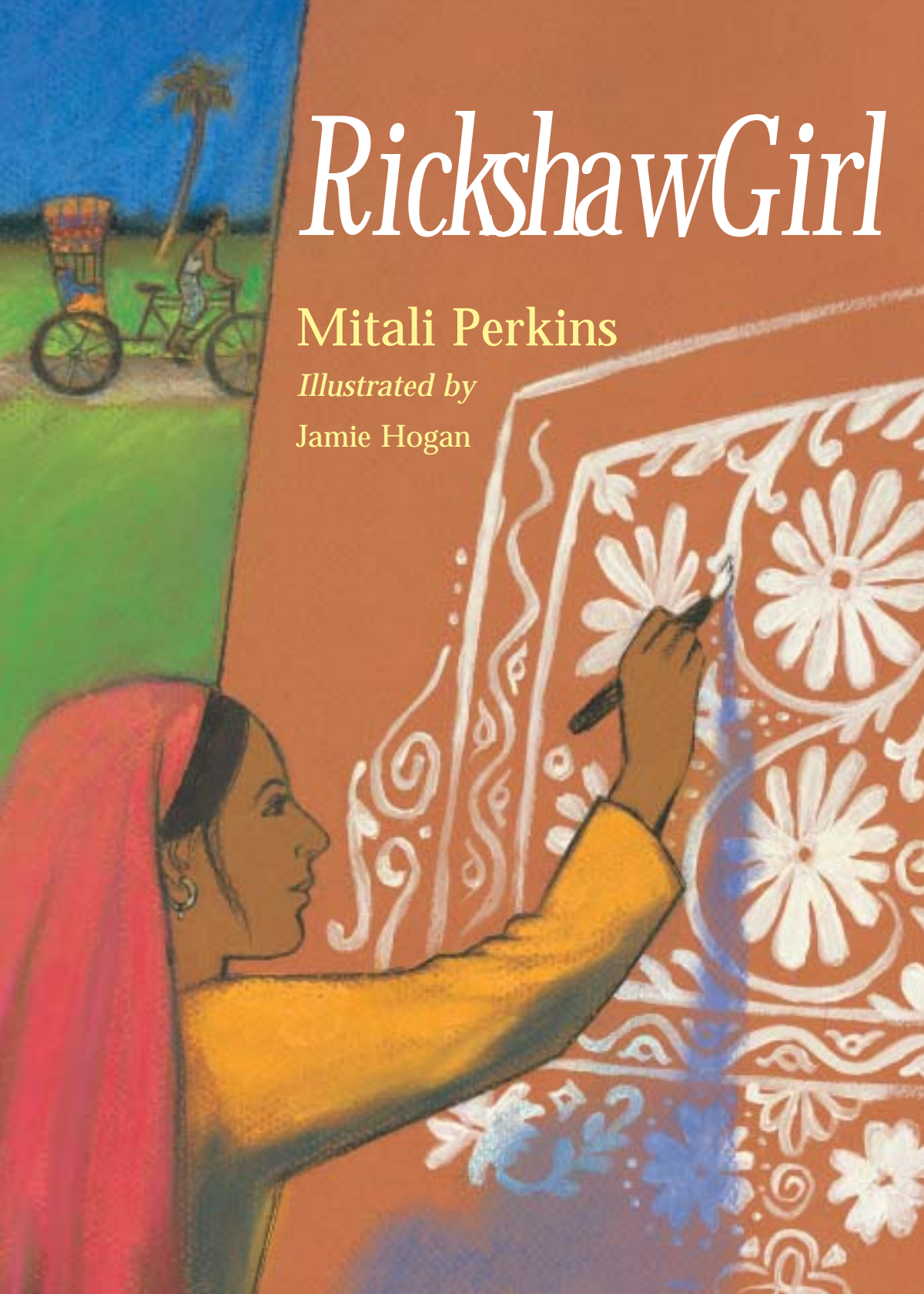


Rickshaw Girl

Mitali Perkins

Illustrated by
Jamie Hogan



For Rob, with love—M. P.

For Daisy and Nirmala and precious daughters
everywhere—J. H.

Text copyright © 2007 by Mitali Perkins

Illustrations copyright © 2007 by Jamie Hogan

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form. Charlesbridge and colophon are registered trademarks of Charlesbridge Publishing, Inc.

Published by Charlesbridge

85 Main Street

Watertown, MA 02472

(617) 926-0329

www.charlesbridge.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Perkins, Mitali.

Rickshaw girl / Mitali Perkins ; illustrated by Jamie Hogan.

p. cm.

Summary: In her Bangladesh village, ten-year-old Naimi excels at painting designs called alpanas, but to help her impoverished family financially she would have to be a boy—or disguise herself as one.

ISBN 978-1-58089-308-4 (reinforced for library use)

[1. Painting—Fiction. 2. Sex role—Fiction. 3. Rickshaws—Fiction. 4. Family life—Bangladesh—Fiction. 5. Bangladesh—Fiction.] I. Hogan, Jamie, ill. II. Title.

PZ7.P4315Ric 2007

[Fic]—dc22 2006009031

Printed in the United States of America

(hc) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Illustrations done in pastels on Canson paper

Display type set in Marigold and text type set in Sabon

Color separations by Chroma Graphics, Singapore

Printed and bound by Lake Book Manufacturing, Inc.

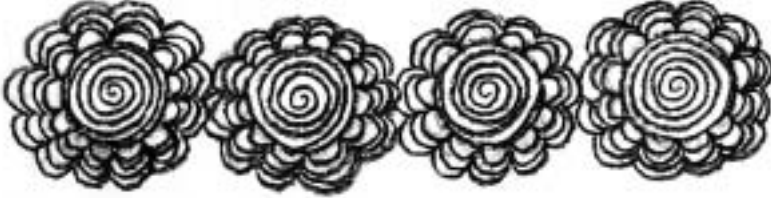
Production supervision by Brian G. Walker

Designed by Susan Mallory Sherman

Rickshaw Girl



One



NAIMA RACED THROUGH her morning chores, trying hard to be careful. She washed the laundry in the river, making sure she didn't break any buttons this time. The other girls lazily sloshed clothes around, giggling and gossiping, but today Naima didn't stop to chat. She pumped four pails of water at the well, just as Mother had asked, and hauled them back one by one. She sliced eggplant, chili peppers, and onions in tiny, even cubes the way Mother liked them, instead of chopping them quickly into thick chunks the way she usually did.

"I've already wiped four banana leaf plates," Naima announced.

“Without tearing them?” Mother asked, her eyebrows rising like crows’ wings.

“Not a rip in sight.”

Mother smiled. “Well done, Naima. You may wait outside for Father.”

Naima went quickly to the flat, wide stone just outside the doorway of their hut. Most of the homes in the village looked the same, with smooth clay walls, thatched roofs, dirt paths, and large stone thresholds. They only looked different on holidays, when girls decorated their family’s paths and thresholds with painted patterns called *alpanas*, just as their ancestors had done for generations. In Naima’s village, on International Mother Language Day, when the whole country celebrated the beauty of their Bangla language, the leaders gave a prize to the girl who painted the best *alpanas*.

Humming under her breath Naima carefully mixed up a batch of rice-powder paint. She’d invented a new pattern of curves, lines, and squares in her mind while doing her chores. Before she started painting she had to wipe off

her last practice design. “Stop and *think* before you act,” Mother often reminded her. But she never needed to warn Naima to be thoughtful when it came to painting *alpanas*.



Naima's sister Rashida came home from school. She started combing out her rag doll's hair and watched Naima erase the stone. "You're going to win again this year, Sister," she said.

"I hope so," Naima said. "We need another box of paints."

"And a new pad of paper," Rashida added.

Naima had made the prize last for months. She'd mixed colors from the paint box to create new ones. She and Rashida had discussed how to use each precious piece of fresh paper. Should Naima paint a crocodile slinking through lily pads? Or a monkey clutching a coconut as it swung from branch to branch? They picked the best paintings to brighten the dark clay walls inside their one-room hut.

The ring of a rickshaw bell made Naima look up. Saleem, their next-door neighbor, was pulling a passenger in his father's rickshaw. Naima watched his skinny legs turn the pedals as he puffed up the hill. The cycle was attached to a brightly painted tin cart with a leather bench and a decorated canopy that shaded customers from the sun.

“Why don’t you and Saleem play together any more, Sister?” Rashida asked.

Naima dabbed her brush into the paint. She started a border of small circles that would go all the way around the big stone rectangle. “When you get older, Mother and the aunts will tell you not to talk to boys, too. They’ll say it’s not proper.”

“I like playing with everybody at school,” Rashida said. “Girls *and* boys.”

You’ll probably stop going soon anyway, Naima thought. Only Saleem knew how much she’d wanted to keep going to school. But Naima knew her parents couldn’t afford to pay fees for two girls. Naima had studied for three years. Now it was Rashida’s turn.

“You have to do more chores when you’re ten,” she said, sighing. “Saleem and I are both too busy to play these days.”

Naima didn’t tell her sister about the signal she and Saleem used when they wanted to meet. Saleem tucked a white handkerchief into his pocket. Naima tied a white bow on her braid. Once they’d finished their chores and eaten lunch in

their own homes, they'd slip away to talk or play cards together behind the leafy banana trees. These days they only risked the signal for important meetings.

"You are getting old, Sister," Rashida said. "You probably won't be able to wear a *salwar kameez* much longer." Both sisters were dressed in cotton pants under long-sleeved tunics that came to their knees.

Naima made a face. "I know," she said. "And I can't move fast in a *saree*. Yards and yards of cloth that you have to wrap around yourself! They look pretty, but I feel as if I'm wearing a big bandage."

"Mother moves fast in her *saree*," Rashida said.

Naima knew her sister was trying to comfort her. "I suppose I will, too, once I get used to wearing one every day."

"I think it's hard to grow up," Rashida said, holding her rag doll close.

Naima didn't answer, but sometimes she felt the same way.



Two



FATHER WAS COMING DOWNHILL. The wheels of his rickshaw stirred up a flurry of dust. He raised a hand to greet the men who were playing cards in the shade of a mango tree. Their rickshaws all waited idly in the lane, and Father had to steer through a tangle of tin and tires. He parked in front of the hut.

Naima looked up from her *alpanas* to admire Father's gleaming new rickshaw. The tassels dangling from the handlebars were still swaying. The side panels were adorned with painted peacock feathers, green and gold and purple, the same color as the tassels. The bright blue of the lake

that was painted on the rear panel matched the blue leather seat. White lotus flowers floated on the lake.

It was Rashida's turn to greet Father with a pail of river water. Father washed his face and hands, and gave her a kiss. "The marigolds need water, too, little one. They look as thirsty as I am."

Rashida headed for the small patch of flowers behind the hut. She leaned away from the heavy pail to keep her balance.

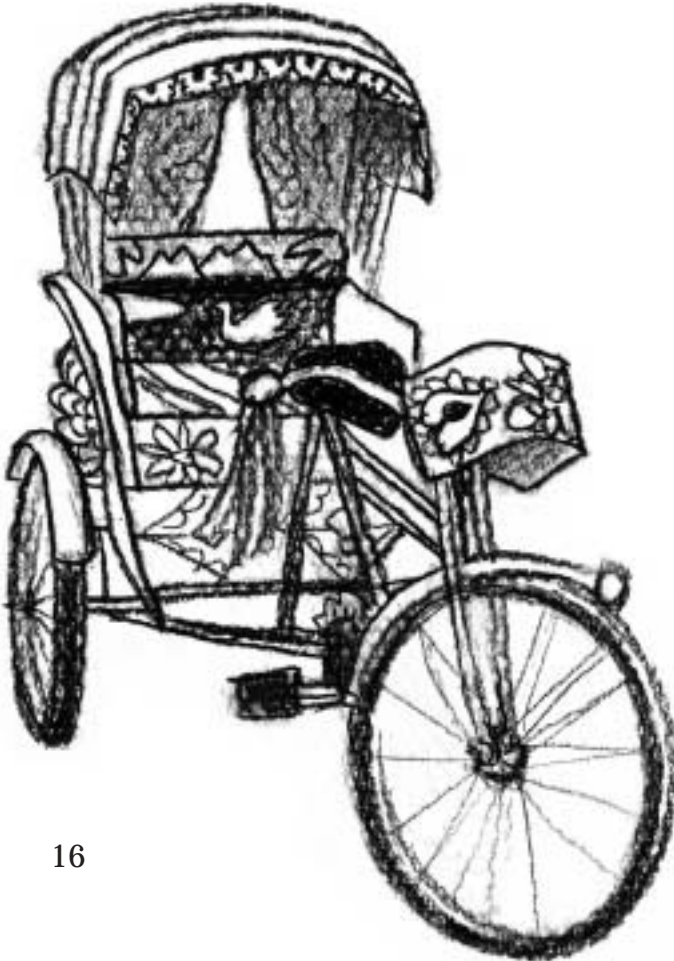
Naima was glad she'd pumped plenty of fresh drinking water from the well. Father could drink as much as he wanted inside the hut. He'd been out since dawn, hauling people and packages from place to place. Right after lunch he would head out again until midnight. She wished he could rest inside the cool clay hut. He needed to stay out of the hot sun like everybody else. But they had borrowed a lot of money to buy the rickshaw. If they didn't pay it back soon, they might lose the rickshaw. And then how would Father earn money?

“Your *alpanas* get better every day, Daughter,” Father said, studying the design she was creating on the threshold.

“This one is not even halfway done yet,” Naima answered. “I’ve only just started.”

“Really? It looks so good already!”

“I’m going to paint a star in the middle,” Naima told him.



Father stepped over the threshold. He turned to take one last look at the rickshaw before going inside. “Will you clean it for me, Naima?” he asked. “Nobody gets it as bright as you do.”

“Of course, Father,” Naima said. The unfinished *alpana* on the stone called out to her, but she jumped up and found a wet rag.

Even though she rushed through her other chores, Naima took her time cleaning Father’s rickshaw. Rich people sometimes paid extra money to ride in a clean rickshaw. After scrubbing away most of the grime, she put the rag over one finger, held it in place with the other hand, and traced the outlines of the paintings. She polished the lotus flowers until they gleamed like ivory. The blue tin lake sparkled in the midday sunshine. Father’s rickshaw was so new that these decorations were the original ones. Each time Naima cleaned the rickshaw, she imagined scenes the rickshaw painter might invent once these panels faded. Maybe a waterfall cascading down the snowy Himalayan mountains. Or a tiger, eyes blazing, peering through a leafy jungle.

Mother's worried voice drifted through the open door: "How much did you earn this morning, Husband?"

Naima tried not to listen, but she couldn't help it. She was glad Rashida was stooping over the marigolds in the back, too far away to hear.

"Not enough," Father replied.

Mother's sigh sounded like air leaking from a tire. Naima counted to five. She braced herself for words she'd overheard before. "If only *one* of our girls had been a boy!" Mother said.

Father gave his usual quick answer. "I have two wonderful daughters. They're just as good as boys."

"But you look so tired! Saleem takes his father's rickshaw out every afternoon so his father can rest. Our girls can't do that for you."

"Isn't Naima the best *alpana* painter in the village?" Father asked. "Doesn't she take care of her sister like a tiger guarding a cub? And Rashida is the best student in school!"

"Yes, but *alpanas* can't put rice on the table. And what use is it if Rashida is smart? We can't

afford her school fees next year unless we pay off that rickshaw loan.”

Rashida was coming back. Naima dunked the rag in the half-empty pail of water her sister was carrying. Fiercely, she scrubbed out her *alpana* design until no traces of the rice powder remained on the threshold.

“What are you doing, Sister?” Rashida asked. “You weren’t finished! That was the best one yet!”

Naima didn’t answer. Mother was right. All that a girl could do was cook, clean, wash clothes, and decorate; she wasn’t allowed to do any work that brought in money. Painting *alpanas* wouldn’t help Father get rest. Or add to their earnings. It was a waste of time.

“Rash-ee-da! Na-ee-ma! Come inside! Your father is hungry.”

Saleem drove by again. This time a plump passenger sat on the bench of the rickshaw. He was a rich-looking passenger, juicy with money. Naima scowled and followed her sister into the hut.