



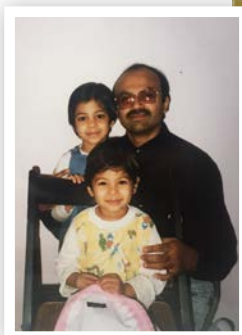
Meera Lee Patel

'I learned that being different was something to be celebrated'

**AFTER YEARS IN A DIFFERENT CAREER, MEERA LEE PATEL IS NOW AN
ILLUSTRATOR AND AUTHOR WHO WRITES ABOUT ACCESSING YOUR
INNER CREATIVITY AND EMOTIONS. SHE BELIEVES THAT EMBRACING
THE UNKNOWN WAS THE KEY TO LEADING A MORE FULFILLING LIFE.**



Me, my sister,
and my dad



Me, age 2

One of my first paintings. Seashells!



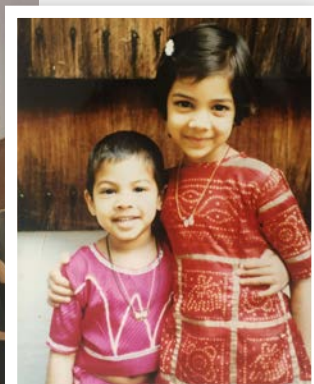
Me and my maternal grandpa.
We always celebrated our
birthdays together



My mom and dad on
their wedding day



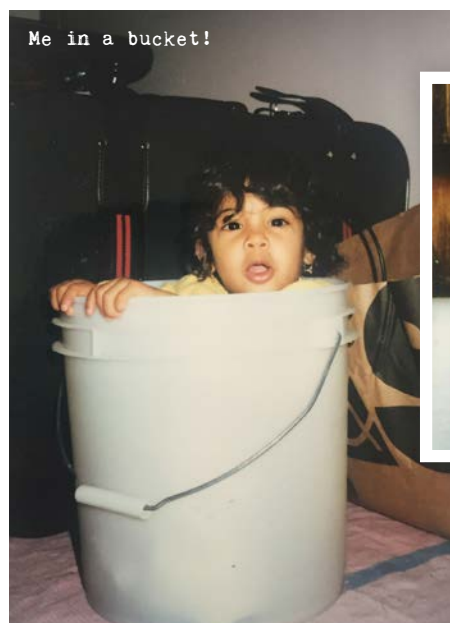
Me and my older
sister, 0



My paternal grandma, who lived
with us for years and always
helped take care of me



Me and
my true
love, cake



Me in a bucket!



NAME: Meera Lee Patel
BORN: New Jersey, US, 1987
CAREER: Inspired by nature,
quiet stories of everyday
life, and her parents' native
India, Meera Lee Patel took
up drawing and writing in her
teens. Her colorful artwork
has been commissioned by
clients ranging from Amnesty
International to Estée
Lauder. In her latest book,
'My Friend Fear', Meera
explores how fear can be used
to drive us to make positive
changes in our lives. She
lives with her partner in
Nashville, Tennessee, US.

PAST

**'I GREW UP IN AN EXTREMELY WHITE,
AFFLUENT TOWN, AND I WANTED TO FIT IN, BUT
BEING INDIAN DID NOT ALLOW ME TO DO SO'**

I grew up by the coast in New Jersey in the US, in a suburban town called Little Silver, close to New York. It's an idyllic, beautiful town, full of trees and animals.

My parents left India for the US when they were in their late twenties and had just married. Both had grown up with very little and wanted to build a better life for themselves and their future family—me and my older sister. Starting over with nothing, and with no one but each other, was difficult, and I can only imagine, extremely frightening.

My childhood was full of Indian influences. My mom decorated our home with nostalgic and practical pieces of India—we had chilies drying from the ceiling like little red chandeliers and when they were ready, she would crush them into chutneys and pastes. She hung bold, patterned tapestries on the walls and filled our home with elephants, which symbolize luck and a peaceful journey. Plants were everywhere too. Those plants—jade, ferns, holy basil, mint, cacti—and elephants play an important part in the work I make today.

When I was younger, though, that heritage was something I pushed away. I only came back to it as I got older. I grew up in an extremely white, affluent town, and I wanted to fit in, but being Indian did not allow me to do so. I've always felt like I've straddled many worlds: my Indian world, which has a lot of emotional influence over me, and my modern, Western world, which informs many of the decisions I've made.

Growing up Indian in the US wasn't always easy. I wasn't Indian, and I wasn't American. I was, and am, somewhere in-between. For instance, we grew up eating the Gujarati

food my mom made at home every day, but as a child I preferred the tastes and convenience of American food.

First- and second-generation children of immigrants are caught in this incredible suspension—we carry with us the hardships and emotional weight of our families while attempting to carve out our own identities and future, without feeling like we are abandoning our culture and heritage. All the while, we are searching for a sense of belonging. As a child, I was always asking myself, 'Where is your place in the world, who are you, and can you be more than one person?' Those were thoughts I wrestled from a young age, which I couldn't quite put into words.

I was introverted because I didn't feel like I fit in, and I didn't feel confident in who I was, which meant I didn't feel comfortable sharing myself with others, or letting people see who I was. I didn't feel understood by others—often by my parents, who taught me certain values and lessons that I didn't agree or identify with—and by my surrounding peers, who weren't caught between two separate worlds. I was a very emotional, moody teenager. **I felt like an outsider for many years, until I learned that my difference was something that was beautiful and to be celebrated, not ignored or erased.**

I grew up painting just for fun. It wasn't until later, in high school, that I started to draw and paint more seriously. Even then, as a teenager, I didn't think making it as an artist was remotely possible. The idea of being creative for a living felt like a faraway, idyllic dream. I really wanted to go to art

school, but my parents were like, 'What are you going to do after?' and I didn't really have an answer. So I decided to study journalism and English at college, because it seemed more practical than pursuing creative writing or art. >

PRESENT

'MY SISTER HELPED ME REALIZE THAT THE FRUSTRATION I OFTEN FELT WAS JUSTIFIED, BUT THAT IT SHOULDN'T DETERMINE WHAT MY NEXT ACTION WOULD BE'

Once I got to college, I really lost my creativity. I was so focused on having a career and being able to support myself that I wasn't writing poetry or stories, and I wasn't experimenting. Writing changed into an academic obligation and a path toward getting a job; that's all it was. I felt desperate to be able to get a job and find stability. Six months after I graduated, I still had no job, and I was panicking. I was thinking, 'I graduated, I'm supposed to be working right now. Everybody else has a job. I'm never gonna find one'.

I eventually got an internship at a company that publishes technical papers by electrical engineers. I lived at home with my parents and commuted to work in New York City, and after about a year of this I felt really empty, like a shell of the person I used to be. The internship had turned into a part-time position, then a full-time role. I had a routine: wake up, go to work, come home exhausted. **I thought, 'I've got to do something to feel like myself again', and that's when I picked up a brush again and started painting.**

I joined Etsy so I had a shop where I could sell my illustrations, and I started doing craft fairs. I would watch the other people who were selling their art at the fairs, and saw they were not 22-year-old girls like me; they had families, they had husbands and wives, and sometimes their kids came along, too. I realized they were able to have a whole, full life, even though they were living creatively. That was when I decided, okay, maybe it's possible: maybe you can be an artist and make a decent living. From then on, my only goal was to quit my job and paint full-time.

I wanted to be able to live off my work, which is every artist's dream. However, I was raised to be pragmatic and responsible, and independent. We were taught, my sister and I, to never be dependent on anybody else. I had no interest in being a starving artist. There was no romance in that for me.

It took seven years to achieve my goal, and for those seven years I did not have a life. I moved to Brooklyn and was working my day job and then working on my painting, writing and illustrating at night. **I was so driven, almost blindly so: I didn't make efforts with romantic relationships, and I didn't take much time for friendships and family. It was really difficult emotionally.** I felt lonely a lot of the time, because I wrote alone and I painted alone. I spent 80 hours each week working because I wanted it so badly.

I burned out often, but never for long. In times of frustration and difficulty, I always faced the same decision: I could quit and stop doing the hard work if I felt that was what would make me happy. And each time, I continued to choose the work, the more difficult path.

My sister and parents were really supportive of the decision I had made. My sister was empathetic in times of sadness and loneliness, and she has always encouraged me to keep going. She helped me realize the frustration I often felt was justified, but that it shouldn't determine what my next action would be.

I wrote my first book, *Start Where You Are*, during this time. I got the idea after I realized there were a lot of inspirational quotes from philosophers and writers online.

People were pinning these quotes on Pinterest, sharing them on Instagram; people couldn't get enough of having little phrases in their lives that could motivate and inspire them. But the effect was fleeting—you would read the quote, feel inspired and then the feeling would fade—and there would be no real change left behind.

I wanted people to dissect these words further, and apply the sentiment fully so they could change their lives.

I wanted to create an illustrated journal of these quotes, designed to help readers work long-term on their creativity, self-motivation and mindfulness. So after researching on the Internet what a book proposal should look like, I put one together and sent it to an editor I was introduced to through a friend. I was really lucky that this editor was open to my idea, and she made me an offer for a book deal. >

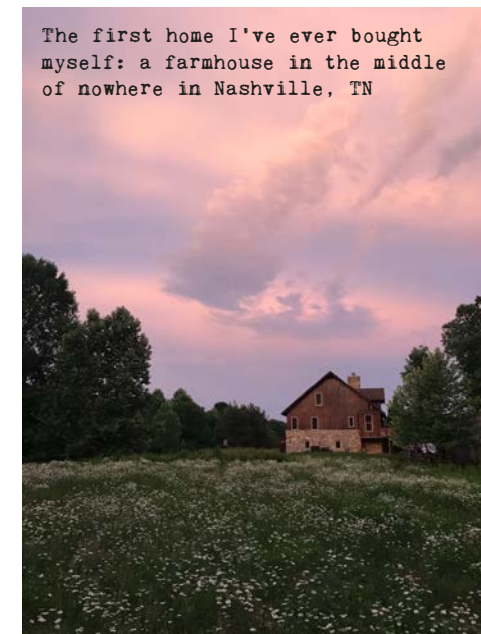
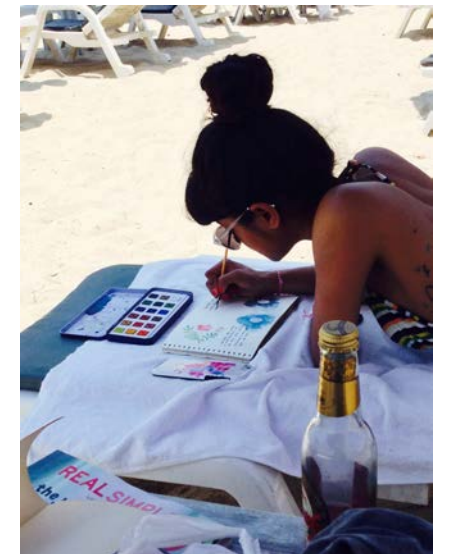
A recent career highlight: a book-reading of 'My Friend Fear' at Barnes & Noble in LA



My second love, pizza



Painting on the beach in Thailand



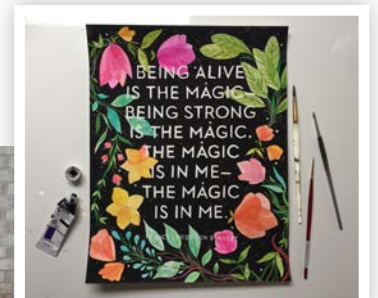
The first home I've ever bought myself: a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere in Nashville, TN



Me and my partner, T



A portrait I painted of my mom



I have begun to love creating contrast in my work, bright washes against a dark void



O, K and me



Me and my nephew, S

FUTURE

'WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT TO ME IS HAVING A FULL AND BALANCED LIFE, WHICH INCLUDES DEVOTING TIME AND EFFORT INTO RELATIONSHIPS THAT SUSTAIN ME'

In February last year, I finally quit my editing job to become a full-time author and artist.

I thought after seven years, I would hand in my notice at work to my boss and then I'd just be floating out of the office. Instead, I came home and I burst into tears. I was questioning myself, thinking, 'Am I making a mistake, what am I doing?' I felt so overwhelmed.

I knew that I wanted to have a big change. I didn't want to keep working, alone, in my Brooklyn apartment after finally reaching such a pivotal goal. So, I packed up or sold all my things, sublet my apartment and traveled alone for seven months throughout the US and Canada. I came to Nashville for a month and worked from The Warren, an all-women art studio, and I immediately fell in love with the space and all of the people I met.

Nashville is quieter, smaller and more accessible than Brooklyn. The buildings are less impressive and there aren't a million people, doing a million different things. It's less dense, which is something I miss about Brooklyn. I love density, buildings on top of buildings, people fingertips apart. In Brooklyn, I people-watched a lot. But Nashville is different in that I can be part of what's happening, not simply a spectator. I feel like I can make anything happen here—and that feeling is daunting, exhilarating, and most of all, extremely inspiring.

That said, after I quit my job, it probably took six months for me to feel like it was the right decision, to think, 'Okay, you're doing well'. I've learned that career growth is incremental. When I was younger, I wanted so badly to just 'blow up' overnight, to be

able to quit my job and be put on the map, and it never happened. And it still hasn't happened. It's just slow and steady progress.

I've spent a lot of time building new friendships over the last year, and I'm incredibly happy with the new friendships that have entered my life through The Warren. My dear friend and illustrator Rebecca Green and I are planning on traveling to Spain together this fall, and I'm working with my beautiful friend Emily Arrow, who is a singer and author, on a children's book that I hope we'll share with the world someday.

I also met my partner in Nashville. That relationship, along with my friendships, is something I prioritize over my work now—not because my work is less important, but because I've realized that being a full-time artist is not what is most important to me. What's most important to me is having a full and balanced life, which includes devoting time and effort into relationships that sustain me and help me be who I am. When I am most myself, I make the most honest and genuine work.

I don't know if there's a word for why I feel like I finally belong here. I feel at home, and it's not because of the place or the weather or my apartment. It's because of the people I've found here. They are truly special and I feel more connected to them than many people I've known my entire life.

I feel way more interested and engaged with Indian culture now, too. My aversion to my culture as a child came from a very simple desire to fit in—to be the same as the people around me. Now that I'm older and more

comfortable in my skin, I love embracing my culture and the country that made me. I'm also more comfortable having a foot in each world—my Indian heritage and my Western heritage—and connecting to each one in the way that feels right to me.

I recently bought my first home in the northern-most tip of Nashville, a beautiful farmhouse with land where I can hopefully, eventually, build my own studio space. My dream is to one day have that separate home studio that I can work from, along with a sustainable garden and a few small animals: a home outside of the city with my family.

The past year as a whole was such a year of change, and it was really proof of what can happen when you are open to the world. My life is so different now from what it was a year ago. I'm really happy that I've begun cultivating my dreams, simply by being more open—both to people, and to the world that surrounds me. ●

TEXT: OLIVIA GAGAN PHOTOS: OPENING PAGE AND OPPOSITE PAGE: PARIKHA MEHTA, OTHER IMAGES PROVIDED BY THE INTERVIEWEE ILLUSTRATIONS: SHUTTERSTOCK

